*International Journal of Children’s Rights,* 2016, 24, 915-23. Taylor & Francis

**Review essay: children’s rights and violence**

Priscilla Alderson

Omolo, A. (2015) *Violence against Children in Kenya: An Ecological Model of Risk Factors and Consequences, Responses and Projects.* Munster/ New York: Waxman. ISBN 9783830931720, $24.95 paperback.

Bourke, J. (2014) *Wounding the World: How Military Violence and War-Play Invade our Lives.* London:Virago. ISBN 9780349004327, £20.00 hardback.

Willow, C. (2015) *Children Behind Bars: Why the Abuse of Child Imprisonment Must End.* Bristol: Policy. ISBN 9781447321538, £12.99 paperback.

These three books have widely different settings and main concerns, but they all illustrate endemic forms of violence that attack children and their rights.

Alphonce Omolo’s two decades of work with children who live and work on the streets of Kenya led him to study children’s rights. Unlike most reports, which document street children’s current problems, Omolo searched back to discover risks and causes that lead children to leave their family. Overwhelmingly, his PhD research found violations of children’s rights through violence, which drive so many Kenyan children away from their family, and these are reported in this important and deeply moving book. Far from being simply a biological stage, vulnerable childhood is understood by Omolo as socially institutionalised in laws, policies and practices through intergenerational relations, as well as being a social space where children learn and practise their agency.

Each Kenyan childhood is unique but also has features that are shared widely across sub-Saharan Africa, and these individual-general interactions connect with the local-universal relevance of the UN 1989 *Convention of the Rights of the Child* and the 1990 *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.* Violence too is understood as a complex, interacting entity, both socially constructed but also intensely physical and emotional so that definitions of violence, its nature, causes and effects, have to be informed by children’s direct experiences and accounts. Otherwise, powerful adult groups such as the police, judiciary and teachers’ unions define violence against children vaguely in ways that can favour the adults’ behaviours and interests and assist in perpetuating the atrocities. Kenyan children are beaten, raped, burned and tortured with horrifying frequency, and one depressing finding of the book is that violence against children appears to be increasing.

Types of intentional violence are carefully documented and organised into Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems. They are analysed as self-directed, interpersonal or collective violence, as well as physical, sexual and emotional violence and the violence of severe neglect. The social structure that is childhood can be a multiple trap when children have extra needs through being physically, socially and economically vulnerable, but most children in Kenya are accorded such low value and moral worth that many adults assume they can and maybe should ignore children’s needs and suffering and pleas for help. Formal government inquiries tend to stress sexual violence and to overlook emotional violence, which from national to personal levels is the most invisible, including in the children’s accounts. Thirty children aged from 5 to 17 years, and 48 adults were interviewed in three cities, and the children’s experiences of extreme violence are summarised in one dire table (pp 104-106).

Many risk factors are analysed starting with personal factors: the child’s lower age, poor mental health, special needs, being a girl, and being an orphan. At the meso family level, risks arise from family conflicts and separation, poor parenting, being the child of a single parent and of a sex worker, being in a large family, or living with a relative or guardian. Large families and children living with a relative are strong traditions in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet now that so many families and communities are disintegrating and migrating, and with customs of neighbourly care for all the local children breaking down, the traditions increasingly expose children to uncontrolled violence from adults within their households and neighbourhoods. Many children face multiple risks and these are exacerbated at the exo level of the community with the lack of friendly neighbours who used to protect children, with traditional practices such as FGM, the myth that having sex with a young virgin can cure HIV/AIDS, and enforced child marriage. At the macro level there is growing relative and absolute poverty, while drug and alcohol abuse increase family poverty and child abuse. Many more broken families mean many more step children who are likely to endure far more violence and neglect than their favoured half-siblings. And the child protection law is weak, tardy and corrupt. Those who violate children and can afford to bribe the authorities continue their life style unimpeded.

Omolo then turns to the consequences of violence. Children may be severely damaged by rape or deliberate burns, and those who survive may have lifelong injuries and illness, besides overwhelming feelings of fear and sorrow, powerlessness and devastation. ‘I used to feel very bad. I still feel very bad when I remember what they did to me’, said 10 year-old ‘Lemaron’, though many children could not express their feelings and there is a dearth of psychological help for them. At the meso level, the violence increases family conflicts and splits, stigma and scandal. Families may have to bribe violent relatives and neighbours to try to stop their violence or to get their kidnapped child released, and they may be unable to pay for much-needed medical treatment. The exosystem of the community involves informal ‘justice negotiators’ who bypass legal authorities and due process of law, while communities tend to remain silent, refuse to witness, and may even acquiesce in the violence in a climate of insecurity and rising crime. The macrosystem of society reflects and reinforces all these ills through corrupt inefficient legal systems, with national customs of sharing and selling children, and with cultural practices that inflame violence against them. While being cautious about generalising from his 30 young interviewees, Omolo found that most of them immediately left school after being violated, with tragic effects for their own lives and, collectively, for the whole nation.

*Violence against Children in Kenya* concludes with clear practical recommendations for greater respect for children’s rights, and for urgent attention to the causes and means of preventing the violence in Kenyan families that drives so many children onto the streets. The book should be required reading for all practitioners and policy makers who work with and for children, not only in Kenya but in all countries for two reasons. First, the problems in Kenya occur everywhere, in more or less severe forms, as the third book in this review which is about England illustrates. The second reason is that as citizens we may support or challenge policies, such as conditions set in our name by international aid or loan agencies, which can affect all the human rights connected to levels of stress, anger, fear and violence in African children’s daily lives, and the violence they are likely to transfer on to later generations.

Among these international policies that affect children’s rights, predominant decisions concern whether to wage war or to promote peace. Joanna Bourke’s *Wounding the World* shows the endemic violence in Britain and the USA that pervades all our lives. This review concentrates on the British examples.

We glamorise war when royalty and celebrities attend commemorations. The splendid ceremonies belie the atrocities they celebrate. The mass media promote sentimental images, such as sad little boys in military uniform attending their soldier father’s funeral. Critics of war are then treated as disloyal and ungrateful if not treasonous. How can they question soldiers’ courage and patriotism or add to the suffering of bereaved families? From childhood onwards we are indoctrinated into subconsciously assuming war-based values. The ‘war on childhood obesity’ is one of countless examples of toxic commonplace phrases and attitudes. Bourke analyses how Orwellian word games anaesthetise war, make it appear to be moral peacemaking, abstract it from dirty politics and profit-making, ignore crucial realities, and seem to cleanse war by making the weapons instead of the combatants appear to be the agents.

We believe that we are not at war, while we have an enormous ‘defence’ budget and arms industry, a highly subsidised and corrupt arms trade, and active campaigns in several countries. Bourke argues that, willingly or not, British tax payers are war-mongers by paying £billions to support the fourth largest military-industrial expenditure in the world, which employs 100,000s people directly or indirectly. Half of all scientific research has links to ‘defence’, and universities rely heavily on the related tax-subsidised grants. Over a trillion dollars is spent on the military worldwide, much of this by governments who violate human rights, violently repress their citizens, and divert funding away from life-enhancing health and education services into the deadly trade. India has the highest child mortality rates in the world and the highest spending on arms.

One in eight of the weapons sold each year goes missing so that, in many countries, fighting between government and rebel forces may be armed on both sides by British weapons. Drones further blur boundaries between war and peace, and they break international law by attacking areas where we have not formally declared war. War zones have moved from remote 19th century battle fields to being now mainly in urban areas, where 90 per cent of casualties are civilians, women and children. The deaths and destruction sow the seeds of future wars in two main ways. They increase hatred and the duty or desire to revenge. And they destroy peaceful societies and children’s hopes of education, healthcare, clean water, electricity and of future employment. For many, the only hope of paid work is to join armed forces. Warfare also expands when military technologies are increasingly used to control civilians everywhere, and when fear of terrorism is used to justify ever more widely used militant surveillance and police control techniques.

War has always been waged mainly by middle-aged to older politicians who send young adults and youths to fight. Britain is the only EU state to recruit 16 and 17 year olds into the armed forces. Every year Britain spends around £94 million on persuading children to enlist, including the website *Camouflage*. Many young recruits report being amazed to learn, too late, that they cannot leave, and that the work is not fun and adventure but instead it involves terrifying, murderous experiences and rigid routines. Post traumatic stress, drug and alcohol addiction, violence, homelessness, depression and suicide are common among young soldiers and ex-soldiers, wrecking havoc on their family life and their own children.

‘Militainment’ presents war as gripping fun and adventure in highly popular films, drama, social media, toys and video games. The best-selling and free-download video games in the world for children and adults include USA army recruitment tools. Army recruiters visit around 40 per cent of British schools annually, in a £multimillion tax-funded programme. The Army Cadet Force (ACF) reports: ‘For action and adventure, fun and friendship, the ACF is hard to beat. With 41,000 cadets (aged 12-18) and 9,500 adults in over 1,600 locations in every corner of the United Kingdom, the ACF is one of the country’s largest voluntary youth organisations’ (https://armycadets.com/about-us/).

Chapters 3 to 5 analyse: arcane debates in law and ethics, which are twisted to support ‘humanitarian war’ and new weapons that increasingly torture and mutilate; practical and psychological effects of remote-controlled warfare, which extend and appear to sanitise combat; and ‘defence’ researchers’ moral justifications for their macabre inventions. Their general claim is that more lethal and horrifying weapons guarantee shorter and therefore more humane and ethical wars. Chapters 6 and 7 examine the $multi-billion war games and military toys industries, their seductive appeal to children and young people as well as to adults, and the childhood obsessions of leading war makers. Even Anna Freud during World War II was among the army of psychologists who promoted playing at war, death and destruction as therapeutic for children.

All this activity is supported by dominant and largely subconscious beliefs: that military ideology has to be integral to international politics and relations; that a powerful military presence will promote our security; that our kind-hearted heroes fight good wars to promote peace. Joanna Bourke provides ample evidence and analysis to refute these beliefs and to point to alternatives that genuinely promote human and children’s rights now and for the future. A historian, she reviews centuries of war and peace and optimistically concludes that peace is the usual state for human beings. Central to being human is the courage to resist oppressions, and to work together for the common good through small and large movements. Bourke is especially impressed by the rare soldiers who refuse to obey orders they believe are wrong. She maps a history of peace and protest movements, noting the importance of involving exuberant young people, humour and games, art, poetry, drama and film that are not sponsored by the military-industrial complex. It is also vital to commemorate the millions of victims, not only the soldiers. We have to point, for example, to the lunacy of killing so many and destroying so much in Iraq in the vain pursuit of a ‘better world’.

To change the present warmongering ideology involves challenging military dominance in the universities, and renewing peace studies in schools when students are encouraged to question not only their personal views but the underlying economic and political structural sources of violence. Bourke reviews a range of peace movements, religious, feminist and political. She notes lessons from the Greenham Common protest camp, where children were involved from the start. They emphasised human bodies, how they can be mutilated and destroyed by war but can also be active for peace and resistance. Bourke considers that awareness of our bodies connects to reviving a politics of rational fear of the terrible effects of war. To counter beguiling military propaganda with its illusion of serving our safety, fear and hope can be inventive and creative. *Wounding the World* offers many erudite and practical insights into ways to promote the United Nations’ vision that ‘recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world’.

Carolyn Willow has been monitoring and campaigning for children’s rights in England for decades. Like Alphonce Omolo and Joanna Bourke, she analyses endemic but seldom acknowledged violence. In *Children Behind Bars: Why the Abuse of Child Imprisonment Must End,* the detailed historical and current examples about imprisoned minors reveal seemingly inexorable repeated cycles of abuse, reviews and reports, muted public concern and promises of reform, followed again by more abuse.

In the foreword, the poet Benjamin Zephaniah wrote:

‘I was a child prisoner. It was terrifying. I put up a front and I survived, but I know many children that didn’t. This book tells out the truth. It speaks truth to power, and it speaks truth to all of us. The truth is that few people really understand the suffering of incarcerated children’ (p. xvii).

Zephaniah’s own success indicates the lost potential and wasted creativity of so many of his peers. The ‘front’ he mentioned can involve the double bind for children and young people who are forced into violent situations, when the only way to survive and ward off violence from adults and other children is to appear dangerous and intimidating. Yet this plunges them into further trouble with the punitive authorities.

From her powerfully informed rights perspective, Willow records the systemic mistreatment of the most vulnerable children in our society, those who have been severely neglected and abused since their early years. Many have mental health problems and/or learning difficulties, and many have spent years moving around foster homes. The evidence is drawn from years of visiting the institutions, recent interviews with leading experts and with four mothers whose sons died in custody, official reports, parliamentary questions, and hundreds of freedom of information requests, mainly on the very neglected topics of child protection, children’s complaints and staff misconduct. ‘Children’ refers to everyone aged under 18 held either in young offender institutions run by the prison service, or secure training centres run by private companies, G4S and Serco. The latter often offer better services though they are tainted with violence and protected from proper inspections by commercial confidentiality. Less than one in ten of the children are in local authority secure children’s homes, which have the best outcomes.

The book documents degrading and vicious physical treatment, which includes strip searches that ‘feel like rape’, besides filthy gloomy buildings even the newly opened ones, cramped shared cells with poorly screened toilets, and the waste of young people’s lives when they are locked in cells almost all the time. If a system were deliberately designed to psych up injustice, anger, despair, failure and violence, it would hardly differ from the average present young offender institutions. To deal with the inevitable effects and protests, and to attempt to suppress them, staff use painful nose, rib and thumb ‘distractions’. Willow contends that the British public abhor child abuse and are outraged by cases such as ‘Baby P’. Yet they support cruelty, which would not be tolerated from parents, in extremely abusive state-funded institutions that warehouse the most disadvantaged children. ‘Baby P’ would have been likely to be detained there if he had survived that long. One inspector found Feltham young offender institution more disturbing than the USA death row she had recently visited.

Since 1990, 33 children have died behind bars and despite inquests uncovering appalling evidence there has never been an official inquiry into these deaths. There are high levels of self-harm and attempted suicide, and of hospital visits and complaints following near-lethal restraints by staff. These are reviewed in the chapters ‘I think it’s quite like rape’, ‘I can’t breathe’, ‘What gives them the right to hit a child in the nose?’ and ‘The violence is unbelievable’. ‘We should be able to hug our families’ is the chapter about children’s broken contact with their families, often in centres very far from their home, and so destructive of their present and future mental health and relationships. Children’s records, social worker care and future plans can become dangerously lost between their home local authority and the prison area one. Basic human rights such as family contact become privileges to be earned or lost. Prison officers who manage to be kind do so in spite of the system. The chapter ‘Every night I’m starving’ looks at the hunger which is now common, with the daily food allowance recently having been cut down to £1.96, although the state spends over £200 million a year on young prisoners.

High reoffending rates are among the evidence that the system does not work. The conclusion ‘They shouldn’t be there’ calls for a comprehensive inquiry to uncover hidden systems for public scrutiny. Many minor and urgently needed reforms are listed. Still more urgent is reform to deep beliefs about child offenders, about the causes and prevention of crime, about justice and about alternatives to prisons. They should only be used as a last resort when every other measure has failed. Yet in the last 11 years, courts in England and Wales passed immediate sentence of custody on a minor 49, 709 times. If, as in many other European countries, the very few who are a serious danger to others stayed in secure children’s homes, then more resources and expertise could be devoted to their remedial care. The homes have high success rates on raising education attainment and reducing reoffending.

Many young offenders need mental health care instead of the penal services, but cuts to the NHS especially reduce child and adolescent mental health services, which are being supplanted by the prison services. Pages 272-274 record the names and brief details of the boys who have died in prisons since 1990, such as Gareth. When he was 12 he found his brother hanged. Later he crashed a car in which his best friend died. All the boys listed look like victims not dangerous offenders.

Although there are now far fewer children behind bars, around 1,100, Britain is still one of the highest incarcerators in Europe. Sixteen European countries imprison fewer than ten children each, showing that better alternative are possible, effective and life-saving.

The UNCRC invests responsibility in ‘States Parties’, which can mean not only governments, their agencies and services, but also everyone who gives their taxes and votes to support government policies and services, from youth prisons, to the subsidised arms industry, to trade and aid contracts that shape African politics. Unless we protest and demand change, we inevitably endorse and perpetuate violence to children everywhere, whether in England or Kenya. Together, the three books urge electorates and governments to work far more to understand and promote peace and justice for children through whole political, economic, social, legal and penal systems.