

## The resilient child: an alternative approach to suffering child icons

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Can the image of the resilient child permanently counterbalance that of the suffering child? This is the hope the author shares with us, based on her fieldwork in Uganda. To support her argument, she refers to the experiences of NGOs and international organisations that have not only changed their image policy but also enabled children to emerge from their situation as victims.

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Some scholars have argued that “suffering has a social use”<sup>1</sup> in everyday life. In the humanitarian and development contexts, images and narratives of suffering mainly function to appeal to the affective sensibilities of donors and the public in efforts to solicit funds or to bring attention to particular issues affecting children. Although depictions of child icons include suffering children around the globe, in this article I focus on the African child in particular. A person unfamiliar with Africa as a whole could be forgiven for perceiving it through a one-dimensional lens – as a continent riddled with “hunger, sickness and early mortality”.<sup>2</sup> None of this denies the existence of famine, disease and premature deaths that trouble people in displacement. Rather the point is to call for diverse representations that capture a nuanced reality of children’s experiences in humanitarian contexts. This entails including images that capture or use strategies that foster children’s resilience. I address the appropriation of suffering in a humanitarian context, particularly its focus on representations of the suffering child and argue for an alternative approach that avoids reifying stereotypical representations of children in displacement or post-conflict settings. This is important since some scholars argue that impoverished and powerless populations in developed and underdeveloped nations both experience suffering.<sup>3</sup> Although suffering is an inherent part of human experience,<sup>4</sup> the focus on child icons has been due to its success in fundraising campaigns, the perceived innocence of children and thus their deservingness of protection. This paper contributes to existing scholarship by providing an alternative representation of childhood in African humanitarian contexts. My argument is to show how ethnography can contribute to problematising singular depictions of certain experiences to the exclusion of others. My reasons for focusing on education as an alternative approach and examining it in refugee settlements in Uganda are discussed in the methodology section.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret M. Lock, “Introduction”, in Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret M. Lock (eds.), *Social Suffering*, University of California Press, 1997, pp. IX–XXVII (p. XI).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. XXI.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. IX.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, “The appeal of experience; the dismay of images: cultural appropriations of suffering in our times”, in Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret M. Lock (eds.), *Social Suffering, op. cit.*, pp. 1-20 (p. 1).

### Humanitarian iconography

Humanitarians have long used child iconography to raise funds and direct public attention to human suffering.<sup>5</sup> According to Andrew C. Rajca, aesthetically appealing images of “children, women and racial and ethnic minorities” are presented as innocent victims of barbaric acts committed by some wicked entity and are presented for consumption to an audience that is usually from an “educated and economically secure background”.<sup>6</sup> The images are meant to call out to an audience that is far removed from the root of this suffering and compel them to act in ways that will remedy a specific injustice.<sup>7</sup> Human rights activism through “mobilisation of shame”<sup>8</sup> is criticised for its role presenting some people as “helpless victims” that need saving while exonerating those who uphold the “very economic, political and social structures that produce human suffering”.<sup>9</sup>

Miriam Ticktin argues that children are the quintessential images of innocence.<sup>10</sup> Kate Manzo states that through “innocence-based solidarity”<sup>11</sup> aid and development organisations mobilise childhood visuals as conduits through which they “produce themselves as rights-based organisations”.<sup>12</sup> Laura Suski argues that childhood innocence functions to legitimate humanitarianism.<sup>13</sup> A body of scholarship opines that Western notions of childhood mirror broader “cultural attitudes, values and assumptions”.<sup>14</sup> Despite arguments that visual portrayal of “subjects of human rights as ‘helpless victims’ that need to be saved”<sup>15</sup> do not always achieve the intended goals, images of suffering children continue to be effective for political and economic reasons. Kevin Carter’s photo in *The New York Times*, which depicted a malnourished southern Sudanese child on the verge of death, was used to raise awareness of a neglected famine and was effective in raising funds in food campaigns for refugees.<sup>16</sup> Then there was the image of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler who washed up on a beach, which brought a humane angle to the politically contentious issue of irregular migration to Europe. These images reveal the diverse humanitarian and political ends to which child iconography is put to use. The contradiction, however, is that using child iconography of distant and underdeveloped places risks reifying paternalism and “colonial visions of a superior global North and inferior South.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Heide Fehrenbach, “Children and other civilians: photography and the politics of humanitarian image-making”, in Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno (eds.), *Humanitarian Photography: A History*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 165–199 (p. 165).

<sup>6</sup> Andrew C. Rajca, “Cinematic aesthetics and the subject of human rights: on Eliane Caffé’s *Era o Hotel Cambridge*”, in Danielle Celermajer and Alexandre Lefebvre (eds.), *The Subject of Human Rights*, Stanford University Press, 2020, p. 173.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* On “passive suffering”, see Erica Burman, “Innocents abroad: Western fantasies of childhood and the iconography of emergencies”, *Disasters*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1994, pp. 238–253 (p. 241).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Keenan, “Mobilizing shame”, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 103, no. 2–3, 2004, pp. 435–449 (p. 435).

<sup>9</sup> Andrew C. Rajca, “Cinematic aesthetics...”, *art. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>10</sup> Miriam Ticktin, “A world without innocence”, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 44, no. 4, November 2017, pp. 577–590 (p. 577).

<sup>11</sup> Kate Manzo, “Imaging humanitarianism: NGO identity and the iconography of childhood”, *Antipode*, vol. 40, no. 4, September 2008, pp. 632–657 (p. 633).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 632.

<sup>13</sup> Laura Suski, “Children, suffering and the humanitarian appeal”, in Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (eds.), *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 202, cited in Heide Fehrenbach, “Children and other civilians...”, *art. cit.*, p. 165.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 635.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew C. Rajca, “Cinematic aesthetics...”, *art. cit.*, p. 172.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, “The appeal of experience...”, *art. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Kate Manzo, “Imaging humanitarianism: NGO identity...”, *art. cit.*, p. 636.

### Methodology

I have been conducting ethnographic research in a refugee settlement in southwestern Uganda since 2017. The data on which this paper relies was collected under an ongoing project that seeks to understand how public servants and aid agencies cater to the protection needs of the most vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda. The research involved participant observations, in-depth interviews with different field officers working in international agencies that focus on child protection or education, aid workers, parents of refugee children and public servants working in the department of refugees in Uganda.

The settlement in which this study was conducted is inhabited by people from Rwanda, Eritrea, Ethiopia and, the largest population, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Recurring conflicts in countries in East Africa have led to the forced displacement of over 1,3 million refugees, making Uganda the third highest refugee host country worldwide.<sup>18</sup> Children make up more than 60% percent of this population.<sup>19</sup> At the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016, international actors in humanitarian and development aid together with private and public donors agreed to place education as a prerogative on the humanitarian agenda.<sup>20</sup> I use Uganda as a case study to show how education provides an alternative strategy to child icons, particular by showing how international aid agencies are using education programmes and resiliency to provide different representations of the suffering child.

Numerous field trips that I made to Nakivale refugee settlement in Uganda always revealed the resilience of children in this settlement. Irrespective of the circumstances that had led them to this settlement, children could be seen playing by the roadside in front of mud houses on hot days, happily swimming in the flooded swamp pools in the fields on a rainy day or doing chores such as fetching water or firewood. Some could be seen heading to classrooms or leaving school, depending on the time of day. Children went about their daily lives in the only way they knew how or had to in this settlement. Yet in their quest to get funding for programmes, these nuanced and multiple experiences of lived realities are rarely shown. The tendency has been towards sensationalising suffering, thereby inviting criticism for commodifying “trauma porn”.<sup>21</sup>

### Education and the resilient child

Education is proving to be effective in countering humanitarian’s established focus on representations of vulnerable children through its focus on fostering “the resilient child”. While it is itself a stereotype, it is one that seeks to counter previous representations of suffering children. The resilient child is one who thrives in spite of the hardships when given the right skills. Education is one such programme through which different agencies attempt to build or foster resilience. This approach is used by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in fundraising strategies that target educating future generations as a way to build resilience and, according to one respondent, has been very effective. As the UNHCR respondent explained, the agency aims to create a generation with skills and break the

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<sup>18</sup> Save the Children, *A global test: the refugee response in Uganda*, 2020, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Final+-+the+Uganda+refugee+response.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Education Cannot Wait, “Education Cannot Wait develops ground-breaking curriculum for crisis-affected adolescents, derived from Viktor Frankl’s seminal work ‘Man’s Search for Meaning’”, 29 June 2021, <https://www.educationcannotwait.org/logotherapy>

<sup>21</sup> Luma Makari, “Trauma porn and the commodification of Lebanon’s strategy”, *The New Humanitarian*, 25 January 2022, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/first-person/2022/1/25/trauma-porn-commodification-of-Lebanon-tragedy>

cycle of violence:<sup>22</sup> resilience is the end goal as other elements used by other aid agencies dehumanise children.

The UNHCR receives funds for education programmes through the Education Cannot Wait campaign (ECW) – a United Nations fund for education in emergencies.<sup>23</sup> ECW was initiated six years ago at the WHS with the aim of making education in humanitarian emergencies a priority.<sup>24</sup> The UNHCR respondent stated that through the ECW campaign, children are equipped with skills that they can take back to their countries of origin or use in the country of asylum. Critiquing the representations of suffering children, the respondent raised the ethical dilemma of using images of suffering children such as Kevin Carter’s aforementioned photo.

Despite the importance given to education in emergencies (for instance in Article 22 of the 1951 refugee convention), the focus on education as a strategy to building resilience has been steady but gradual.<sup>25</sup> Since the WHS, many agencies seem to have included programmes with an education component. Positive images of children appear on War Child Canada’s website. Photographs of children using “tablet-based education”, smiling in a school playground or one with the caption “Children in Uganda are extremely resilient” are some examples.<sup>26</sup> These are more nuanced depictions of children’s experiences in refugee settings as they show the multiple experiences that children in situations of forced migration encounter in spite of the trauma or suffering they endure. War Child Canada has several links on its website with positive representations of children in classrooms, all the while promoting their Can’t Wait to Learn programme. By “positive”, I mean alternative representations of children depicted whilst going about everyday activities such as playing, laughing, smiling and learning. This in no way denies they experience suffering but rather acknowledges the varied states of childhood, even in refugee settlements. An interview conducted with War Child Canada revealed that its education programmes aim to ensure that children who have dropped out of formal education can rejoin school through accelerated learning programmes. The Child Friendly Spaces initiative provides child mothers with an environment conducive to receiving education in humanitarian settings whilst their children are being looked after. The respondent explained that War Child Canada aims to counter child marriages and other negative coping mechanisms that children would potentially encounter if they dropped out of school.<sup>27</sup> Save the Children and United Nations Children’s Fund are international agencies that also provide education programmes in refugee settlements in Uganda and also portray positive images of children on their websites.

When asked about the focus on education programmes, the UNHCR respondent explained that all the agency’s partners have to adhere to international principles of protection and that education was part of protection. Since education is the aim of the 2030 Agenda’s Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to provide inclusive quality education for all, he explained that the focus on education in humanitarian contexts is an aspect of realising this goal.

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with UNHCR, 12 January 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Education Cannot Wait, “Education Cannot Wait develops ground-breaking curriculum...”, *art. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Dryden-Peterson, *Refugee education: a global review*, The UN Refugee Agency, November 2011, pp. 13–15, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5142ee1c2.html>

<sup>26</sup> For positive representations of children, see <https://www.warchildholland.org/country-uganda>

<sup>27</sup> Interview with War Child Canada, 2020.

**Findings**

Interviews with some refugees who have grown up in Nakivale revealed the critical role that education and scholarships played in shaping their lives. One respondent whose family had fled from Burundi to Rwanda then Tanzania and had finally settled in Uganda explained that a scholarship from Windle International Uganda had given him the opportunity to study and get a job within the humanitarian offices in the settlement. People that had benefited from education scholarships had been living in protracted situations, having come to the settlement at the ages of 9 or 10 and were now adults with their own families.

In his essay on suffering and structural violence in Haiti, Paul Farmer argues that the life experience of those living in poverty “must be embedded in ethnography if their representativeness is to be understood. These local understandings are to be embedded, in turn, in the larger-scale historical systems of which the fieldwork site is a part”.<sup>28</sup> Embedding life experiences in ethnography reveals how suffering is experienced but also the structures that cause or perpetuate it. Ethnography can also reveal steps that can counter these structures (if only to a limited extent). In Uganda’s refugee settlement, political, social and economic conditions at the global level influence children’s lived experiences and it is in this broader context that alternative strategies should be conceptualised and situated. Not by using imagery of smiling children only but also through showcasing infrastructural challenges, use of statistics of the rising number of the child population and articulating the protection consequences. These strategies have yielded successful results for UNHCR which has secured donations by using them. Strategies that envision children as future leaders are likely to be more effective because they conceptualise enabling and empowering solutions.

If we are to accept Farmer’s invitation to engage in a “*historical deep*” analysis (emphasis in the source), we are reminded that unaccompanied minors and separated children who find themselves in refugee settlements in southwestern Uganda are forced migrants from countries that have endured decades of recurring conflict – particularly in the resource-rich areas of DRC. Others are descendants of forced migrants following the genocides in Rwanda and Burundi or ethnic violence. Ethical considerations permitting, an alternative strategy that allows children to tell their own experiences would show varied and nuanced experiences of children.

Ethnography plays a big role in revealing the complexity of children’s experiences in the context of displacement and can be useful in developing alternative representations. The suffering child icon has mainly endured due to fundraising strategies by humanitarian and development aid agencies that target moral or affective sensibilities. Moreover, humanitarian aid systems use vulnerability as a criterion for protecting or prioritising the most vulnerable. Nevertheless, there has been a move towards building resilience through education programmes, as one example. The emergence of the “resilient child” provides a better alternative to representations of suffering child icons because it allows for a conceptualisation of constructive strategies that foster resilient communities. Resilience is represented in images of children going about daily activities such as learning, playing and smiling, juxtaposed against backdrops that reveal their current locales in resource-challenged settings such as congested classrooms, mud houses and underdeveloped infrastructure. Possible avenues for creating alternative representations could focus on variegated representations that include storytelling by children in displacement as well as concepts that bolster the future of these children.

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Farmer, “On suffering and structural violence: a view from below”, in Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret M. Lock (eds.), *Social Suffering*, op. cit., p. 273.

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### Biography

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