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Children Of War

By: Samantha Gina Young, WIFP Staff

The things that children do when they are young remain with them for their entire lives. It shapes them into the person they become when they get older. When kids fall off their bikes for the first time, they learn the simple lesson of not falling off and how to balance themselves properly. When they sneak a piece of cake from the refrigerator and get caught, they learn the small lesson that taking without asking first is wrong. All these

seemingly insignificant memories of childhood is what gives grown adults their character. So, now I ask you, what about the children whose memories revolve around holding a gun and shooting their own families? Or those who were plucked from their parents and thrown into the rebel armies of their country during civil wars? What do those children learn?

In *War Child: A Child Soldier's Story*, Emmanuel Jal, now a

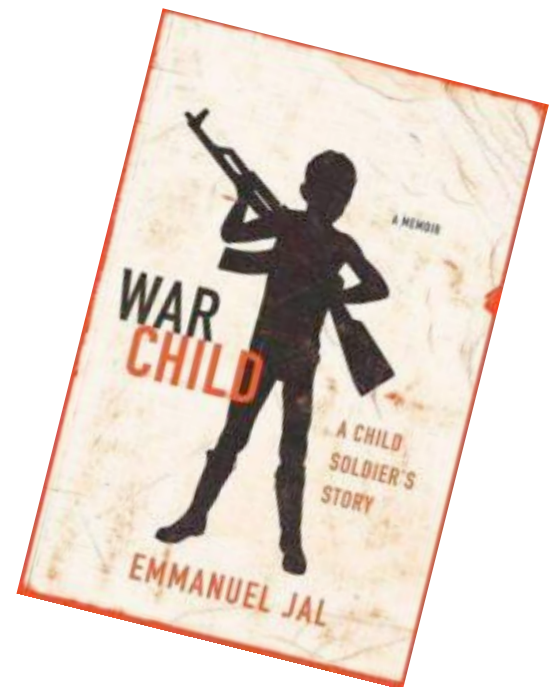
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renowned international rapper, explains his long journey from being a refugee in Sudan to becoming a famous rap star. He starts his book with the event of his family running away from village to village, trying to escape the civil war and the rebels who keep destroying their villages and killing their people. Jal is told to go to school in order to become part of Sudan's future, but he is taught at school by the SPLA (Sudan People Liberation Army). This type of schooling leads him to become a child soldier in the army. He describes what he sees; brutal killings, rape, blood and gore. Jal, himself, is forced to do some of the killing. He describes how he's not the best at shooting a gun, but he manages to pull the trigger and let the bullet hit someone, whether they are far or near. With the unbearable fighting, Jal and a few other children runaway from the army. After 3 months of running, with many of the boys dying on the way, they settle in Waat. Jal meets a British Aid Worker, Emma McCune and is soon adopted. He starts a spiritual and emotional healing process which becomes very successful for him. His book concludes with him and his now famous career as a Christian rapper. Many of his songs reflect what he went through as a boy soldier.

There are no exact figures of children under 18 years of age who are forced to become soldiers, but it is estimated to be over 10,000 children, from as young as the age of 8.

Children were actively involved in armed conflict in government forces or non-state armed groups in 19 countries or territories between April 2004 and October 2007. These were:

Afghanistan, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, the DRC, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Myanmar, Nepal, Philippines, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Thailand and Uganda. (Child Soldiers Global Report 2008)



Ishmael Beah is another child soldier from Sierra Leone. In his heartbreaking autobiography, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Ishmael details the events of his childhood during Sierra Leone's civil war. At first, his memories reveal a happy and comfortable childhood, with Ishmael being close to his mother and grandmother, as well as hip-hop dancing with his friends

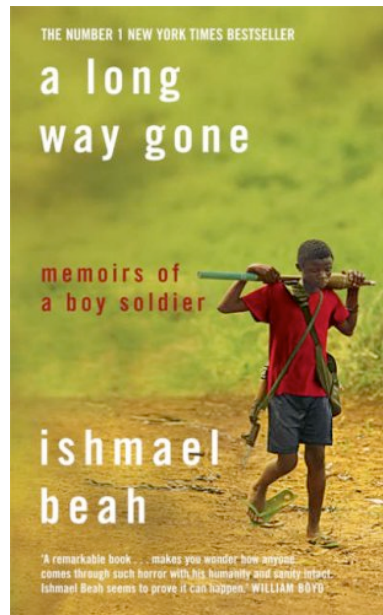
at the local villages' talent competitions. It is during one of these trips to the competition that changes his life forever. While away from his own village and family, he finds out that his village was attacked by the rebels. After the attack, Ishmael and his friends try to return and find their families. He wanders from village to village avoiding the rebel army, with little food and no safe place to stay.

He finally settles down in a village where there is food, water, and the country's army protecting them. However, after an attack by the rebel army on the village, Ishmael's life quickly turns as he becomes one of the young boys killing off other people's families. As he fights for the government's army, he's forced to take drugs and kill whomever they tell him to kill. In his "high" state, he is no longer sure of what

he's fighting for or who the "good guys" really are. What saves Ishmael is a nurse, who gives him the nurturing that a child needs. Later, a young mother takes Ishmael away from the war and brings him to New York, where he tells his story. Currently, Ishmael Beah works for the Human Rights Watch and speaks out against child abuse during war time.

Many organizations have been working to help these children. One particular group is UNICEF. They have been working to demobilize many of the children with other groups such as the Red Cross and Save the Children, and the LTTE.

In southern Sudan, more than
3,500 child soldiers were



demobilized in phase one of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process, which began in February 2001. These children are receiving reintegration support through community centres. The Sudan People's Liberation

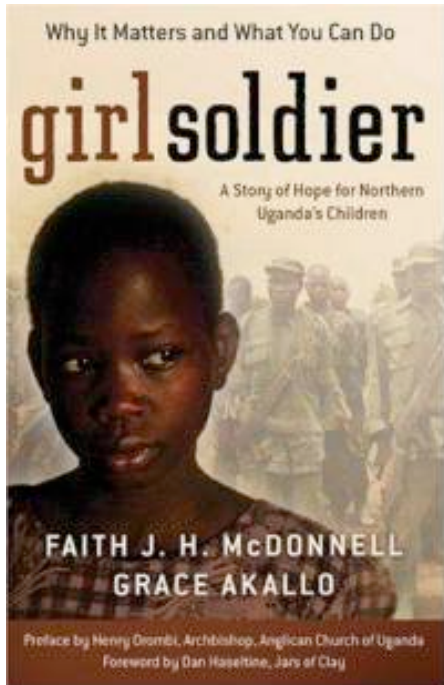
Movement/Army has continued to demobilize child soldiers, with UNICEF assistance, since October 2001. (unicef.org)

The child soldiers were not only male children. In *Girl Soldier: A Story of Hope for Northern Uganda's Children*, Grace Akallo tells her story of being a child soldier in the Lord's Resistance Army of Uganda. With the help of Faith J. H. McDonnell, she's able to tell her full story with historical background from McDonnell. Grace was kidnapped from an all girls' high school at the age

of 15 and forced to join the rebel army. She has to fight, invade villages for basic necessities of food and water, and try to stay alive for as long as she could. She describes how the army made the girls into either soldiers or wives of the older male soldiers. She explains how if anyone tried to escape the army, the other children were forced to beat them until they were dead. Grace even describes how she was once buried alive because they thought she was dead. She clawed her way out of the shallow grave and survived, making her story a story of hope.

There are tens of thousands of children, who were forced to join armies during the wars in their countries. Not all of them are as lucky as Emmanuel and

Ishmael. These children have lost the idea of childhood and the meaning of being a child. Although efforts are being made to help these children, there are so many of them that not all can be helped.



For more information, visit the following links:

<http://www.childsoldiersglobalreport.org/content/facts-and-figures-child-soldiers>

<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2008/12/03/facts-about-child-soldiers>

<http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/childsoldiers.pdf>

http://www.warchild.org/links_resources/childsoldiers/childsoldiers.html

Television Commercials and the Perpetuation of Traditional Gender Roles

By: Laura Caldas de Mesquita

Having been in the States for just under one month now, I have found myself feeling like an outsider looking in and at the same time strangely familiar with the local culture. We, the rest of the world, consume a lot of American culture. So while I may not know all the ins and outs of this land that to me is still very much foreign, characters from sitcoms I have watched over the years have shown me much of what I need to know in terms of local customs. And yes, I confess that I do watch television. Not an awful lot, due to lack of free time to just laze around. But mostly, since the rise of online streaming of pretty much anything ranging from the news to random little shows has made it possible for me to select my own programming, television has lost much of its appeal. I do still occasionally turn on the good old *telly*. That being said, commercials are perhaps my biggest source of annoyance with regards to TV.

The thing about commercials is that they try to sell people ideas I just have a hard time buying into. Generally speaking, advertising works as to entice potential consumers into becoming actual consumers of a large variety of products and services. The way this is done on television is usually by casting the actors most likely to make you identify with them, desire to be them, want to have what they have, do what they do and so on. Scripts are short and simple yet designed to convey a strong, memorable message. One particular message that has recently caught my attention in the context of the USA is the use of the word “family”. Usually, the “f-word” comes out of the mouth of young-looking, white-teethed, long-haired women and on occasion this is a woman whose mouth doesn't move, but a male voice-over that seems to read her thoughts does it for her. The family concept seems to be used to sell Americans just about anything.

The way I see it, reiterating the concept of family in relation to a balanced and happy young woman screams out prescriptions such as: be heterosexual, get married, have children, look after them and your household, even though you have a job and need to run out the door. The latter being precisely where the miracle-working product comes in and makes your busy life of mom/wife/cook/cleaning lady easier. One disposable-hand-towel-for-your-bathroom ad that circulates the television in the States today has a message than can roughly be translated to “be a good mother and buy this product, if you love your family and don't want them to carry deadly germs on their hands”. And while I am fully aware that advertising is a form of tactful persuasion that plays with mildly informative content making it come across as fact in order to create a slight panic, the overuse of the word “family”, along with the over-representation of women for household and health-related (read: drug-related), child-caring ads makes me ponder whether this is in fact the year 2011 we're in.

On a very small-scale observation I did over some 10 hours of daytime television for the purpose of illustrating what had impressed me so much about advertising in the USA, I found some interesting evidence. First, I found evidence that unlike

some of the studies carried out in the late 90s and early 2000s about television commercials, women are now depicted in commercials for technological products such as tablet computers and smartphones, and as medical experts for personal care products. This is great news, even if the process has been slow. A study conducted in the late 1980s, showed men were never portrayed with children without their spouses. By the 1990s, things had improved but men were not portrayed with children of the female sex without a spouse. Yet anno 2011, in this brief observation I saw two ads where a dad figure had a daughter with him and there was no mother to be seen, one of which showed a young girl using a smartphone to record footage of little boys playing ping-pong. Second, and perhaps more discouraging in a gender-parity-kind-of-sense, I found evidence to the fact that stereotyping of women as mothers, caregivers and cleaning gurus is something that still seems omnipresent in advertising.

And why is the stereotyping of women and of lifestyles as a whole in commercials relevant, you might ask? Don't we have bigger issues to worry about? A 1999 study conducted by sociologist Gayle Kaufman showed that in any one week Americans watch over 30 hours of television and are exposed to over 500 commercials, on average. Also, television is believed to have an actual influence on people's attitudes and behaviors, whereby depicting women in more traditional roles could have the effect of creating a very standardized perception about women's "rightful" role and place in society, even when that does not reflect reality. But exactly what force is behind this caricaturization of women? And at the risk of sounding like a mad conspiracy theorist: why?

In questioning the whos and the whys, we arrive at a pivotal point, whereby studies on this subject in the past have pointed to different factors that contribute to the state of publicity in the US as we know it today. One comparative study conducted in the USA, Mexico and Australia showed results that lead to a chicken-and-the-egg type of story. Or, as they call it, "Mirror versus Mold". Do commercials mirror what is already present in the society in which they are produced or do they mold citizens, as a sort of cultural artifact that creates and reproduces the status quo?

As previously mentioned, commercials have been shown to influence behaviors and attitudes of spectators, and in particular those of young ones –you know, the people who are easily influenced, as they are still being socialized, and who could perhaps ensure a world free of patriarchy for women if the future? Yet advertisement studies have shown that society also influences commercials, as more patriarchal societies such as Mexico and the USA have more patriarchal representations of family life in their television ads. So I am forced to ask again: who is doing this and why? Does using gender stereotypes help particular products get sold? Would the men and women of the more patriarchal societies stop purchasing kitchen towels if the ad were to depict a single person who had friends over and one of them spilled a beer rather than a toddler-spills-milk-from-cereal-bowl type of scene? Or rather, is advertising on television just another instrument to coerce people into becoming double-income families with kids so that they have more disposable capital to spend on A-brands? I cannot help but wonder if that is what is actually happening right before our eyes.

Maybe the culture shock comes from the fact that ideal-type Dutch families are fairly balanced-out in terms of household tasks. Dutch women generally work part time and that is a whole other issue for another article, but cooking, vacuuming and the like are pretty much split between partners. I would be lying if I said the “family appeal” does not exist in Dutch ads, but you do see many examples of men cooking for the family –usually trying to impress the wife while actually having used a ready-made sauce of sorts– or serving their wives breakfast. Whether that is because the Netherlands belongs to the category of “less patriarchal countries”, I honestly doubt it. But the European parliament may have had something to do with it. A non-legislative resolution was passed by them in 2008 to combat sexist insults, objectifying and stereotyping of women in advertising. Whatever the reason as to why exactly American adverts are so shockingly stereotypical of female and male roles within the family, I propose not the abolition of all stereotyping in ads –as that would be a fairly difficult task given that the average ad has only seconds to get a message across. Instead, I say the focus should shift towards challenging established norms through the ascription of a few “good practices” in advertising.

These good practices could include basic formulas such as not playing on stereotypes from the 1950s about women and cleaning, but rather take a more realistic approach to the idea of household maintenance. This way, every ad that features an ideal-type family could also be made to have an alternative airing where a single person is depicted or where the father character is depicted doing some other kind of activity with the product. For instance, a washing detergent commercial where a young man is depicted is likely to depict a man who has no idea what he is doing and ends up with a load of pink laundry. But what if this hypothetical ad were to depict one of the many married and single men we all know who are perfectly capable of washing their own clothes? These are not exactly life-changing ideas but if what we know today about how media influences our behavior is to be taken seriously, then I say that the mirroring of lifestyles other than that of the patriarchal family could have a real impact on what the future may look like for our daughters –pun intended.

Upcoming Media Events

August 10 – 13, 2011 **Detroit, MI** **USA**

22nd Annual National Convention of Asian American Journalists Association

August 10 – 13, 2011 **St. Louis, MO** **USA**

AEJMC Conference

September 14 – 16, 2011 **Baltimore, MD** **USA**

National Sexual Assault Conference

September 15 – 16, 2011 **Auckland** **New Zealand**

Center for Journalism, Media and Democracy (JMD) Conference on Political Economy of Communication

September 10 – October 2, 2011 **Columbia, MO** **USA**

Citizen Jane Film Festival

October 8 – 9, 2011 **London** **UK**

Rebellious Media Conference

For more information on these and other media events, go to: <http://wifp.org/mediaeventsinternational.html>

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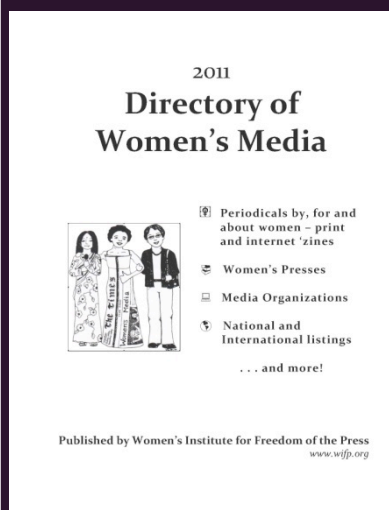
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