



Impact of Armed Conflicts on Children

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ABSTRACT

Owing to their tender age, limited physical strength, emotional vulnerability, and dependence on adults for the fulfillment of their basic needs, children are often the most susceptible targets of various forms of exploitation. Such exploitation is prevalent even during times of peace—when institutions like the police, judiciary, and legal frameworks are actively functioning to safeguard citizens' rights. In contrast, during periods of armed conflict or civil unrest, when these protective mechanisms collapse or become ineffective, the plight of children becomes unimaginably dire. If children remain unsafe even in stable environments, their suffering during war is far more devastating. The aim of the paper is to analyze the different challenges that children encounter during situations of war and instability in society. The study adopts a qualitative research approach and relies primarily on secondary sources to explore the issue in depth

Introduction

Children face many problems during their life time that ruin their growth, development and personality. It is often very difficult to determine the reasons of child problems. However, there are three main causes of child suffering, (1) war, (2) poverty and (3) social disruption.¹ Beside these, many other child problems may arise from a variety of root causes including, migration, gender discrimination, criminality and social-cultural disparities.²

The adverse impacts of armed warfare on children have significantly increased in the last several years. By 2023, nearly one in five children worldwide were either living in or had fled from conflict zones.



Moreover, children constituted 40% of all forcibly displaced persons during 2022 and 2023. This alarming trend coincides with a global increase in the number of armed conflicts, reversing the relative decline seen in the 1990s and early 2000s. Currently, over 120 active armed conflicts are reported across the globe, significantly heightening the risk of violence and displacement for children. Violence against children during war and civil war is increasing rapidly that is threatening for the survival of future generations across the world. In this regard, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, presenting alarming statistics in June 2024, said that the number of children dying in 2023 has tripled compared to the previous year.³

During war, all the rights of a child are violated, such as the right to life, right to live with dignity, the right to live with one's family and community, the right to education, right to health protection and upbringing. The impact of wars and armed conflicts on children's lives is invisible and indirect. Because even though children are often not targeted, they are still the ones who are most affected. War affects the lives of children in many ways, including many aspects of a child's life, like education, health, separation from parents or family, sexual abuse, and more. The problems created for children due to war can be divided into two parts. One part consists of the problems that lead children to death, disability, becoming armed soldiers, and physical and sexual abuse. These types of problems are obvious and can be seen. Other types of problems include detention, death or separation of a family member, and psychological trauma caused by migration. This includes poverty, poor living conditions, poor nutrition, poor healthcare, poor education, disruption of normal life, loss of family life, entertainment, security, discrimination or religion, ethnic grounds and exploitation as child laborers and child prostitutes.⁴

Children are not just silent spectators during wars and civil wars, but also take part in armed conflict as soldiers. The participation of children in armed conflict as soldiers is a widespread exploitation that is one of the most horrific features of contemporary armed conflicts. A child soldier means any boy or girl under the age of 18 who is conscripted, forced or voluntarily by armed forces, paramilitaries, civil defense units or other armed groups or used in hostilities.⁵ Child soldiers are loaded with guns, used as human mine detectors and they serve in suicide missions, carry materials, serve as spies and messengers and even as objects of sexual pleasure. Children are used by dissident groups, ethnic separatist groups, paramilitary groups and guerilla fighters alongside with states because they are very good soldiers because they take orders and are ready to do risky missions.

Child soldiers are recruited in different ways. Some are forced into service, some are press gang and some hoodwinked and some made to take charge of arms to defend families. In many situations the recruits are just picked randomly through messages or even in school or orphanages.⁷



The economic factor is one of the simplest reasons through which children join armed groups. Parents might be motivated by hunger and poverty to send their children to the army. Some kids even feel that they should fight as soldiers in case they might need protection because they fear being scared of violence and chaos around them, it makes them become safer when they have guns in their hands.⁸ Along with boys, armies also recruit girl child for prepare food, attend to wounded, wash clothes and as sexual servants for soldiers.⁹

During armed conflicts children flee and evacuate from conflict place to other places with their parents. These people became either refugee or internally displaced persons. Who flee in their own countries is called internally displaced and who have crossed national borders called refugee.¹⁰ In the process of displacement, children lose their parents, and a loved one, a country and culture, which may have an impact on both physical and mental health of children.¹¹ Displacement creates lasting physical, emotional, and developmental effects on children which further put them at an enhanced risk of exploitation. A great number of children died during the first days and weeks of displacement as a result of malnutrition and diseases caused primarily by measles and diarrheal diseases, respiratory infection and malaria. Displaced children are also most likely to be raped, tortured, murdered or recruited as child soldier. Female population is always under threat of sexual violence and harassment.¹²

As a measure to avoid the risk of being killed, tortured, forcefully recruited, raped, and abducted or starved, children enters to camps. Refugee and internal displaced persons Camps should be safe havens, however, women and girls living in camps are coerced to trade sex to obtain food or security, and camps can also frequently be highly militarized, and children are especially vulnerable to recruitment into armies or other militant groups.¹³ Tents, residential houses or orphanages will never be able to address emotional and developmental needs of children properly. The refugee and internally displaced children became deprived of an opportunity to get an education, good nutrition and medical treatment. The other problem experienced by refugee children is that of statelessness.¹⁴

The families reaching at the border remain highly vulnerable at border and young girls and women losing the connection with their family are highly susceptible to exploitation and abuse by the border guards and other community members.¹⁵

Rape is always a threat to the women and girls in the armed conflict, and the same is the other form of gender based violence such as prostitutions, sexual humiliation and mutilation, trafficking and domestic violence. Although the practice of murder and torture in war has over the years been condemned as a war crime, rape has been treated as an unavoidable horrible by-product of war. Gender-



based violence, especially rape, committed in the course of armed conflicts is also a breach of the international humanitarian law.¹⁶

Mass rapes of women and girls are used as deliberate war strategy, during armed conflicts which pose a constant threat to women and adolescent girls.¹⁷ War time violence against women is the mirror of violence against women in peace time. During war time, girls are at more risk of being sexually exploited since they cannot get the protection of their community due to traversing in dangerous places. When they arrive in refugee camps, it becomes inevitable that women will be forced to or be subjected to violence, and this is largely attributed to the fact women are dependent on guards, immigration personnel and national inhabitants. Poverty, hunger and desperation can drive women and girls into prostitution, either because they will provide sex in exchange for food and shelter, safe passage through the war zone or they need to secure paper or other privileges that they and their families. Children have been sent to other nations to work in nearby brothels under force of weapons. In other instances, parents coerced their children to become prostitutes.¹⁸

Sexual exploitation impacts the women physically, psychologically and socially. Unsafe and unwanted sex leads to sexually transmitted diseases, damages and traumas of the reproductive tract, unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortions, depression and suicide. All these have not only impacts on immediate health of child, they also have impacts on future sexual and reproductive health and morality.¹⁹

Millions of children who have been exposed to armed conflict have suffered in immeasurable ways due to the proliferation of all manner of light weapons. The effects of many of these weapons are so devastating both during the conflict as well as, decades later, landmines and unexploded ordnance are perhaps the most insidious and lasting threat. Since the Second World War, landmines and unexploded ordnances had been used in most of the conflicts, especially the international ones.²⁰ Unlike the adults, children are particularly exposed to the risk of landmines and unexploded ordnances due to their vulnerability not to recognize warning signs or be unable to read poorly constructed warning signs.²¹ Children work as scavengers and collect scrap metal which they sell. The moment they took it to market and weighed it on a scale the metal burst and killed children.²²

A child will suffer more body damage than an adult in the event of mine explosion. The mines are not created to kill, but to maim the person, however, even that single explosion of the tiniest mine can kill a child. Minors affected by mines and unexploded ordnance are killed by the injuries. In the case of the child who is survived, the medical issues surrounding the amputations are usually intense as the limb of a growing child grows quicker than the tissue surrounding it and needs to be amputated repeatedly.



Children also require new prostheses periodically as they grow up. This may result in a new prosthesis in every six months in case of young children. Mine injuries are very costly to the society and the families of the victims due to the extended medical treatment and psychosocial care required.²³ Though the victims are not necessarily the children, it is overbearing on the lives of children in case of landmine and other unexploded ordnance. The mine incidents can financially destroy people and families living on the edge of survival.²⁴

Thousands of children are directly killed annually due to fighting through the use of knife, bullets bombs and landmines, although many more die due to malnutrition augmented by armed conflicts. Disruption of food supplies, destruction of food crops and agricultural infrastructures, fragmentation of families and communities, displacement of populations, destruction of health services and programmes and water/sanitation systems, are all devastating to children. Most of them perish due to decreased food ingestion, which leads to acute and severe resistance to common childhood diseases and infections.²⁵

Health facilities were attacked during wars. A big aspect of health service of any country is diverted towards the demand of military casualties. Focus on military needs also implies that children hurt during warfare will not receive beneficial therapy or recovery.²⁶

Breakdown of the health services and the blood transfusion services do not possess the capacity to screen the HIV/ AIDS that causes children to reach out to the communicable diseases such as the HIV/AIDS. The risk of increased transmission of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS becomes extremely high in times of conflicts. Movement of population, rape, sexual violence and loss of established social values all became a predisposing factor to unprotected sexual activity and high number of sexual partners. Adolescents are especially more susceptible to compromised access to reproductive health services, including education. Diarrheal diseases, acute respiratory infections, measles and infection diseases such as malaria are the major killers of children both during the times of war and peace.²⁷

The armed conflicts are associated with many health problems, which are connected to malnutrition. All children are vulnerable to malnutrition although it leads to maximum death and illness in the young children particularly those below the age of three. Very young children are most prone to waste or acute malnutrition in emergencies which make children weak to combat infections of the regular childhood illnesses and the trend and the advancement of the diseases become more serious and more commonly deadly in malnourished children. Malnutrition also harms the learning in children. Along with all these dietary risks, there is a massive exposure to the environmental risks under the situation of



warfare. The vicious circle of malnutrition and infection is worsened by door waste disposal, poor or dirty water provisions.²⁸

Mothers can be hungry, exhausted, and traumatized during conflicts and thus less capable of caring their children. Loss of confidence in the ability of the mother to produce milk may pose a threat to Breast feeding. Mothers with mild malnutrition are able to feed their children adequately through breastfeeding even when they are under severe stress. Besides this, the overall disturbance may isolate the mothers with their children in a very long term. The absence of fresh fruits, and vegetables as good sources of vitamins and minerals also impacts on the health and growth of children.²⁹

There are severe effect of economic sanctions on children. Economic sanctions have been witnessed in recent years as a less violent much cheaper alternative of warfare. Sanctions are war, it is the most brutal kind of war as it is done against an entire population with the children in mind. Most sanctions are nowadays a weapon of mass destruction.³⁰

Theoretically, the vast majority of the regimes of sanctions provide exceptions to the general embargo of critical humanitarian supplies. In practical terms, so far sanctions have been a blunt instrument. Humanitarian exemptions are subjective and are arbitrarily applied and inconsistently they usually lead into resource scarcity, interfere with the provision of food, pharmaceuticals and sanitation material and degrade the ability of the health system within the population to deliver quality of food, water and air and medication. Resource shortages come as a result of delays and denying requests to import essential humanitarian goods. Although these impacts may appear to occur uniformly among the target population, inevitable they will fall hardest on the poor and children.³¹

In addition, nutrition and health issues could be caused by many problems which are not only related to the military war but represent the outcomes of economic warfare. A lack of essential resources exported after the impositions of sanction causes the malnutrition of children and women. Malnutrition of children particularly of the poor and vulnerable is an inalienable result of economic sanctions. High proportion of low weight births and high mortality was caused due to malnutrition of women. Children get more prone to severe illnesses and mortalities due to measles, diarrhea and respiratory infection, among others.³²

Most of the aspects of child development- physical, mental and emotional -are influenced by armed conflict and effective assistance must address each of these. There are various factors, which will influence the response of children to the stress of armed conflict (there are individual factors i.e. age, sex, personality type, personal and family history and cultural background) which will determine how children will be responding to the stress of armed conflict. Other factors will be associated with the



content of the traumatic events such as frequency and duration of exposure. The list of symptoms is wide and includes enhanced separation anxiety and developmental delay, sleep and nightmare problems, loss of appetite, withdrawal, and loss of interest in play, and learning difficulties in younger children. Stress reactions in older children and adolescents may involve anxious or aggressive behaviour and depression.³³

Children witness several traumatic incidents of killing, rape, torture, bombings or dead bodies and injury, hunger or homelessness and may also lose touch with their families and undergo the loss of their parents, siblings and friends during the war. Such types of loose influence all the areas of child development such as physical, mental and emotional.³⁴

Through education, child personalities, skills, mental and physical abilities are made the best as possible. Education also performs much wider roles such as, it gives shape and structure to lives of children and can indeed inculcate community values, justice and human rights and also it increases access to peace, stability and interdependence but access to schooling is diminished by destruction of schools and displacement of teachers in times of wars.³⁵ Uncontrolled/Inconsistent/slow provision of materials or non-availability of funds caused decimation of education service. One of the biggest developmental losses by a nation, involved in a conflict, is the level of destruction of educational infrastructures.³⁶

Schools may offer a secure escape to children, where skills will be taught that will enable them to defend themselves, and escape the psychological effects of war-time which is caused by the social upheaval and handling persons to move to safer locations.³⁷ Schools as well teachers are the first target during war. Schools are transformed to military or refugee camps and teachers are subjected to political pressure. Moreover, such kind of fears and interruptions leads to the inability to create an atmosphere where learning can proceed and there is tendency of the morals of the teachers and pupils to be poor.³⁸

Such traumatic experiences can make these minors psychologically instable and needy of special care. There is no doubt and it can be easily analyzed that children's interests are too often jeopardized.

Conclusion

Despite the international community's formal commitment to human rights and the protection of children—evident through frameworks such as the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and its *Optional Protocols*—the persistent and escalating violations against children in conflict zones raise serious concerns about the effectiveness and sincerity of these commitments. The continued emergence of grave issues, including attacks on schools and hospitals, the recruitment and use of child soldiers, widespread sexual violence, and the lack of adequate humanitarian support, underscores a troubling gap between



policy and practice. Meaningful implementation of the United Nations' child protection mechanisms requires not only institutional effort but also a collective moral responsibility from all states. Only through genuine commitment and coordinated action can the international community hope to prevent these atrocities and ensure the rehabilitation and protection of children affected by war.

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