

Editorial

Wounds Beyond the Battlefield: The Hidden Toll of War on Children

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War, in all its brutality, spares no one, but it is the children, the least responsible, who bear its most devastating and enduring consequences. Across every corner of the globe where conflict unfolds, children suffer in silence, physically, emotionally, and psychologically. While headlines recount battles won and territories seized, the heartbreaking stories of the displaced, orphaned, injured, and traumatized children are too often overlooked, told without the urgency or compassion they demand.

Recently the UN released a statement on grave violations against children that have escalated with the recent wars around the globe. Nearly 41,370 grave violations against children were documented and verified by the United Nations, according to the Secretary-General's annual report on children in armed conflict in the year 2024. The violations have increased, with nearly 22,495 violations committed against children themselves, while the remaining targeted infrastructure, such as schools and humanitarian aid intended for and used by children, has been attacked. Innocent children who should be learning to read or play ball are instead forced to learn how to survive gunfire and bombings. (1)

Sri Lanka also saw a similar situation for four decades during its civil war, and children from the Northeast were part of the island's population that was most seriously affected by the war. Children from the Northeast have been particularly at risk from malnutrition, poor health care and education, displacement, shelling and aerial bombing, disappearance, torture, rape, mass arrest and prolonged detention.

Garbarino, et al (1996) explain that the role of family, especially, the role of the mother, is vital for a child's early development. If parents die in a war situation, or if parents experience stress or are displaced, the children will not be able to receive the parental love and protection that they needed. Such circumstance will

hamper the growth of the children, and even the mental development of children can be stunted. A child's death in war is not just a loss of life, a loss of potential, of dreams, and of the future.

Not only does war affect the children immediately but it has a long term effect too. A study was done in conflict affected areas of North and East of Sri Lanka to see the long term effects. Greater skinfold thickness and higher diastolic blood pressure were found in adolescents born in the conflict zone but no differences were found in height, head circumference, and waist circumference, or blood results, with the exception of serum insulin. Being born during conflict was associated with increased BMI and body fat during adolescent, which are associated with longer-term risk of noncommunicable disease. (2)

War fractures the minds of children who live through its horrors. The psychological impact of conflict on children is profound and long-lasting, often manifesting in altered behaviour, emotional distress, and developmental delays that persist long after the last gunshot is fired. For many, war also disrupts their sense of identity, security, and trust in adults and the world around them. Behaviourally, war-affected children may become withdrawn or overly aggressive show signs of regression like bedwetting, loss of speech, or clinging to caregivers while others adopt adult-like roles prematurely, forced to care for siblings or survive independently. In some contexts, prolonged exposure to violence normalizes aggression, making children more vulnerable to joining armed groups or engaging in antisocial behaviour. (3)

Global inaction and political apathy enable the continued exploitation and suffering of children in war. The international community must act with resolve, not just through humanitarian aid but through diplomacy, accountability, and peacebuilding. Armed conflict must never be an acceptable backdrop to childhood.

Despite the darkness, healing is possible. Children are resilient, especially when supported by safe environments, psychosocial support, love and consistent caregiving. Interventions such as trauma-informed therapy, safe spaces for play and learning, and community-based mental health care can help restore a sense of normalcy and hope. (4) Trauma-informed therapy is a therapeutic approach that acknowledges the impact of trauma on a person's life and helps them develop healthy coping mechanisms. In the current society nearly 15 years after the war we see adults and adolescents unable to cope with difficulties, having impaired daily function, increased risk of substance abuse and having health-related issues. This may be due to the fact that the trauma was not appropriately addressed during the immediate post-war period

Ultimately, healing children's minds must be as much a priority as rebuilding physical infrastructure. Without addressing the psychological scars of war, we risk raising generations burdened by invisible wounds—wounds that can shape the future of entire societies. Peace, therefore, must come not only with silence from the battlefield but with the voices of children heard, protected, and cared for.

"I wish children didn't die. I wish they would temporarily be elevated into the skies until the war ends. Then they

would return home safely, and when their parents asked them, "Where were you?" they'd say We were playing with the clouds."

Ghassan Fayiz Kanafani

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