



ECHOES OF WAR: THE SILENT SUFFERING OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN CONFLICT ZONES

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

War inflicts devastating consequences on civilian populations, with women and children disproportionately bearing the brunt. This article explores the multifaceted impacts of armed conflict on their physical, psychological, social, and economic well-being. It examines how war leads to displacement, gender-based violence, child soldier recruitment, disruption of education, and a collapse of essential healthcare services. Women face heightened risks of sexual violence and marginalization, while children often suffer from malnutrition, trauma, and loss of developmental opportunities. Drawing on global case studies from Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Sudan, the article emphasizes the urgent need for gender-sensitive humanitarian responses and post-conflict policies that prioritize protection, mental health support, and reintegration. It concludes by underscoring the necessity of international cooperation, legal accountability, and inclusive peace-building efforts to safeguard the rights and dignity of the most vulnerable populations affected by war.

Keywords: *Gender-based violence, child soldiers, displacement, post-conflict rehabilitation*

Introduction

War is an inseparable and painful phase in the history of the mentality, which is not limited to the military or political sphere, but its impact extends to every level of society. Although the impact of war falls on all classes of people, but its consequences for women and children are more profound, complex and long-lasting. The impact of war on women and children is not limited to immediate losses but takes the form of trauma, discrimination and helplessness that can be carried over generations. "Over 400 million children live in countries where there is war or other violent conflict. According to United Nation Children's Funds (UNICEF) the estimated casualties of children during the past decades were: 2 million killed, 4-5 million disabled 12 million left homeless more than 1 million orphaned or separated from their parents and some 10 million psychologically traumatized" (Shaney, B, 2024). "2024 was one of the worst years on record for children living in conflict zones in UNICEF's history" [1]. According to UNICEF, more than 473 million children worldwide, or more than one in six, now live in conflict-affected areas, up from around 10 percent in the 1990s to around 19 percent today. By almost every measure 2024 has been one of the worst years on record for children in conflict in UNICEF history – both in terms of the number of children affected and the level of impact on their lives said UNICEF executive director Catherine Russell. A child growing up in a conflict zone is more likely to be out of school malnourished or forced from their home- too often repeatedly – Compared to a child leaving in places of peace..." [2]. Women and children are often the victims of human rights violations in conflict zones. Rape, sexual assault, forced marriage, human trafficking, and sexual slavery are the brutal realities of their lives. In many cases, women's bodies are used as a second battlefield in war, where women's bodies are used as a tool to break the morale of the opponent. On the other hand, war also leaves a deep mark on the existence of children. Children's educational lives are disrupted. They grow up without food, medicine, and security. Sometimes children are forced to participate directly in the fighting – they are given weapons, which stunts their mental development. According to UNICEF reports, children in countries such as Sudan and Gaza have been out of school for a long time, with no hope of returning. The article will present a perspective of a just and humane discussion, centring on the voices of women and children's victims of war. Because, in order to build a sustainable and just world, it is essential to understand the true human cost of war, especially when that cost is measured in the tears of women and the silenced childhood of children.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the multidimensional impacts of war on women and children. This includes physical, psychological, social, and economic consequences that persist during and after conflict.
2. To explore the gender-specific vulnerabilities faced by women during armed conflict. Especially focusing on sexual and gender-based violence, displacement, and lack of legal protection.

Methodology of the Study

This study employs a descriptive research methodology to explore the multifaceted impact of war on women and children. The research design is based on secondary data analysis, using documented reports, academic articles, and case studies from credible international organizations and peer-reviewed journals.

Just as women and children fall victim during times of war, they also face various forms of discrimination in the post-war context. In war-torn societies, women often become the primary economic force by shouldering the responsibilities of male-absent households, yet they simultaneously endure social stigma, legal insecurity, and numerous other obstacles. For children, the destruction of schools, absence of teachers, and safety concerns render their education uncertain. Psychologically distressed children frequently exhibit symptoms of depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and behavioural disorders. Many also suffer long-term from the grief of losing or being separated from their parents who were either killed or went missing during the conflict. In addition, as refugees, women and children are forced to live in inhumane conditions in unfamiliar environments. Lack of food, clean water, healthcare and safe shelter cause them extreme suffering. Their problems are often ignored in political discussions, and their rehabilitation efforts are dominated by patriarchal perspectives. “According to international human rights organizations, the role of women is often invisible even in post-war peace agreements, resulting in the neglect of the experiences and needs of women and children” [4] [5].

This article will explore how war leaves deep scars on women’s bodies, minds, and social lives; how children fall victim to the brutal realities of conflict; and what measures have been taken – or need to be taken – by international organizations and at the state level to address these issues. The essay will present a justice-oriented and humane perspective, centring the voices of women and children affected by war. For building a sustainable and equitable world, it is essential to comprehend the true human cost of war – especially when that cost is measured in a woman’s tears and the silenced childhood of a child.

Displacement and Vulnerability

War and armed conflicts forcibly displace millions of civilians from their homes. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 70% of forcibly displaced populations in conflict-affected regions are women and children (UNHCR, 2022) [6]. These individuals are often compelled to reside in refugee camps, temporary shelters, or foreign territories under precarious, insecure, and unstable conditions.

Displacement not only entails the loss of physical security but also subjects women and children to a host of secondary crises, including overcrowding, food insecurity, lack of clean water, inadequate healthcare, and disrupted access to education. Women, in particular, face elevated risks of sexual violence, harassment, and human trafficking – especially when they lack male guardianship or institutional protection. Children, too, are at grave risk: many are separated from their families during flight, which can result in acute psychological trauma and long-term developmental consequences.

Displaced women and children thus experience a dual crisis – on one hand, they suffer from a lack of physical safety and essential services; on the other, they face systemic social exclusion and exploitation. In many instances, humanitarian assistance and legal protections remain insufficient or inaccessible, further exacerbating their vulnerability within both refugee and internally displaced communities.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV)

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) – particularly conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) – is one of the most devastating and underreported consequences of war. In many armed conflicts, rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, and other forms of sexual violence are not just by-products of war but are deliberately used as tactics of war to terrorize populations, ethnically cleanse communities, and destabilize social structures.

A striking example is the prolonged conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where rape has been systematically used by armed groups to assert power, sow fear, and disintegrate communal bonds. Victims of such violence are often left with lasting physical injuries, reproductive health complications, and severe psychological trauma. In addition, they face social stigma, ostracization, and in many cases, rejection from their families or communities – turning survivors into double victims [8] [9].

Access to justice and medical care for survivors remains severely limited in most war-affected areas. Legal systems are often dysfunctional or biased, and cultural taboos surrounding sexual violence prevent many survivors from reporting or seeking help. As a result, impunity for perpetrators is widespread.

While international frameworks – such as UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008) – have recognized sexual violence as a weapon of war and called for accountability, implementation remains uneven, particularly in regions with weak institutions or ongoing instability [7].

Economic Marginalization

Armed conflicts often lead to the disintegration of traditional economic structures, disproportionately affecting women. With the death, disappearance, or conscription of male family members, women are frequently thrust into the role of primary earners and caretakers. However, they often encounter legal, social, and institutional barriers that restrict their access to employment, land ownership, credit, and inheritance rights.

“According to UN Women (2020), in many humanitarian contexts – especially during compounded crises such as war and pandemics – women face heightened levels of economic marginalization. Displaced women, for instance, are less likely to have

access to formal employment or sustainable livelihoods, and their unpaid caregiving responsibilities increase substantially. Cultural norms and discriminatory laws in many societies further hinder women's ability to own property, obtain identification documents, or secure legal claims to assets" [10].

This economic vulnerability makes women more susceptible to exploitative labour, survival sex, and trafficking, particularly when humanitarian assistance is limited or absent. In the long term, the lack of economic empowerment not only deepens gender inequality but also undermines recovery and peacebuilding efforts in post-conflict societies.

Disruption of Education

Armed conflict and war have a devastating impact on children's education. Schools are often destroyed or used as military bases, making it impossible for students to continue their education safely. Girls are particularly affected; many are married off at an early age or are assigned to domestic responsibilities, disrupting their education.

"According to UNICEF, in 2017, around 27 million children at primary and lower secondary levels were out of school in 24 conflict-affected countries. This number has since increased; in 2022, around 78.2 million children were out of school in countries affected by humanitarian crises" [11] [12].

Children deprived of education not only suffer from a lack of knowledge, but are also at risk of exploitation, human trafficking, and recruitment into armed groups. Being out of school leaves them insecure and emotionally traumatized.

"In this context, UNICEF and other international organizations have launched initiatives such as "School-in-a-Box", which help to maintain the continuity of education in emergencies. However, in addition to such initiatives, it is crucial to ensure the safety of education in war-torn areas and provide psychological support to children" [13].

Child Soldiers: The Brutal Reality of Conflict

"The forced or induced recruitment of children into armed groups in armed conflict is a grave human rights violation. The UN's 2021 annual report states that more than 8,500 children were recruited into armed forces or groups around the world in 2020". [14]

Many of these children participate directly in the battlefield, while others work as messengers, cooks, watchmen, or are subjected to sexual abuse. This experience has a lasting impact on their mental, physical, and social lives.

- **Psychological and social impacts:**

Former child soldiers often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies. Many of them are unable to return to normal life due to nightmares, sleep problems, and horrific memories of the past. [15]

- **Rehabilitation and reintegration:**

The reintegration of child soldiers into society is a complex process. They are often subject to social stigma, distrust, and rejection. Girls in particular face additional social barriers due to their sexual violence. [16]

- **International response:**

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1261 (1999) takes a strong stand against the recruitment of child soldiers and calls on all parties concerned to respect international law. [17]

Psychological Trauma: The Invisible Wounds of War

Women and children suffer profound psychological trauma from war and armed conflict. Violence, displacement, the death of loved ones, and social isolation have long-lasting effects on their mental health.

A study by Theresa S. Betancourt and her colleagues found that "former child soldiers have significantly higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and behavioural problems. The study was based on 10 studies from 21 countries and found that abduction, level of violence, gender, and social stigma increased the risk of mental health problems. On the other hand, family and community support, education, and economic opportunities play a role in psychological recovery." [18]

Maternal and Child Health

Maternal and child health is severely affected by war and armed conflict. The destruction of health infrastructure, lack of medical equipment, and insecurity of health workers exacerbate this crisis. "The World Health Organization (WHO) reported in 2018 that attacks on health care in emergencies have profound impacts on public health, including increased maternal and child mortality, malnutrition, and the spread of infectious diseases. The report also states that emergency situations reduce the effectiveness of primary health care systems, leading to delays in disease detection, diagnosis, reporting, treatment and referral, which in turn poses challenges in preventing the spread of infectious diseases such as Ebola virus disease" [19]. "In this context, WHO and other organizations are working to ensure access to primary health care, immunization, nutrition, mental health, and sexual and reproductive health services in fragile and conflict-affected areas. However, lack of security and infrastructure constraints hinder these efforts" [20].

Reintegration Challenges

"Protracted, multiple deployments by the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) within and across national borders have had complex social, economic and psychological impacts on soldiers. This has created a generation of so-called "war-women" –

women with whom soldiers have intimate relationships during cross-border deployments – and street children, who then face institutional barriers and social stigma” [21]. “Girl soldiers are often thought of only as “sex slaves”, a term that glosses over the complex roles many play within armed groups and in some national armies. This thinking contributes to their subsequent invisibility in the demobilisation processes. In fact, girls are frequently the most challenging child soldiers to rehabilitate. During Nepal’s civil war, when Maoists conscripted “one member per house”, some parents offered their daughters to spare “sons whom they considered their life insurance. In the wake of Nepal’s 2006 ceasefire, during the cantonment of Maoists rebels and the subsequent reintegration process, girls and women were returned “to [the] very low position of women in traditional Nepalese feudal society. This is taboo in Nepali society and proved a major obstacle for reintegration of young girls back into society, especially when they have children, as many do. Many young girls were viewed with suspicion by their families, rejected by their new in-laws or ostracised by the community...” [22]. Sexual violence, torture, and captivity during abduction increase the risk of PTSD, anxiety, depression, and suicide among women. These psychological problems affect their family and social relationships and complicate the rehabilitation process.

“In the Acholi culture of northern Uganda, there is a belief called “Cen” that if someone kills someone during war or is involved in violence, the spirit of the deceased will haunt them and a curse will fall upon them. Many people believe that such a situation requires traditional purification rituals. Many girls who were abducted during the conflict in northern Uganda were forcibly married off to LRA commanders and made to bear children against their will. Many of these girls later returned to the community with their children, only to face rejection from their families and communities. Those who tried to remarry suffered additional abuse from their partners, and many were later abandoned. Many have resorted to raising their children single-handedly” [23].

Many rehabilitation programs typically focus on male child soldiers, thus neglecting the specific needs and problems of women. For example, adequate support for mental health support, social acceptance, and achieving economic self-reliance is often absent.

Legal Gaps and Gender Blind Peace Building

Despite progress in international policy on women, peace and security, the reality is that women are still largely excluded from peace processes. “According to 2020 data from UN Women, women made up an average of only 13% of negotiators, 6% of mediators and 6% of signatories in major peace processes between 1992 and 2019” [24]. “Kawkab Al-Thaibani is the co-founder of Women4Yemen, a network of women working in media, human rights and civil society, which mobilizes and empowers women to foster peace and achieve stability for Yemen, she says that ‘Yemeni women are the carriers of peace and have been instrumental in leading the country to a more stable and peaceful transition,’ she adds. ‘Yet, we don’t have full legitimacy to support peacemaking initiatives and be involved in the peace process in a meaningful way. More work needs to be done at the government and institutional levels to connect women’s grassroots movements with formal representatives who sit at the decision-making table” [25].

The reasons for this include social and cultural barriers to women’s participation in leadership roles, lack of sufficient initiatives by governments and international organizations to include women, and lack of adequate funding for women’s organizations in conflict-prone areas.

Conclusion

War is not just a struggle to seize a state or territory – it is a brutal process of destroying the bodies, minds, and futures of people. Women and children are the most affected in this process, who, even if they do not directly take up arms, feel all its cruelty and consequences most deeply. Displacement, sexual and gender-based violence, psychological distress, lack of health care and education, social oppression, and lack of legal protection – all of which put them in a multidimensional crisis.

This article discusses how war brings economic and social hardship to women’s lives, how children lose their childhood and sense of security, and how the international framework has still largely failed to address this crisis. Although various UN charters and resolutions have been adopted to address this problem, political will and structural weaknesses remain major obstacles to implementation.

Therefore, it is essential to bring the voices of women and children from the margins to the centre in post-war reconstruction. Any policy should be developed by assessing their experiences, needs, and potential. This sensitivity and equality are essential to building a humane, just, and sustainable world. Because the extent of a society’s civility can be measured by how its women and children are valued and protected during war.

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