

Forum: Special Conference on Conflict Realities

Issue: Supporting the physical and mental well-being of children affected by armed conflict

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INTRODUCTION

Children have been affected substantially by armed conflict for centuries and it has become an ongoing global social challenge, persistently presenting significant challenges for governments all around the world. According to new research by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), around 468¹ million children globally are living with the effects of war and conflict; this number represents the steady increase over time and doubling in the number since the mid 1990's. Many of those children feel obliged to leave their homes in desire of safety, and many of them stay away from home for an extended period of time or never go back - some are abandoned by their parents or other guardians.

Of course, these aforementioned life altering events affect the children's mental well-being due to the awful conditions they are forced to live in, witness or even leave behind. Research shows that individuals exposed to armed conflict are three times as likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, or major depression; children demonstrate increased vulnerability to these outcomes.² Unfortunately, children are not only affected mentally by armed conflict but also physically. Children make up more than half of the civilian casualties caused by landmines and explosive remnants of war - since 2010, there have been three times as many verified attacks on minors.³ The significance of supporting the children affected by armed conflict is extremely crucial since they have a whole life in front of them and they are the ones who will be able to bring peace into this anarchic world. This study guide will help you understand some of the effects that war can have on a child so that you are able to provide solutions to solve this global issue.

¹ "468 Children Affected by Armed Conflict." *Number of Children Affected by Conflict Doubles Since War Child's Inception*, War Child, 19 Feb. 2024, www.warchild.net/news/number-of-children-affected-by-conflict-doubles-since-war-childs-inception/#:~:text=468%20million%20children%20affected%20by%20armed%20conflict&text=That's%20more%20than%20one%20in,inception%20in%20the%20mid%2D1990s Accessed 13 July 2024.

² "Scars Unseen: The Enduring Effects of War on Children's Mental Health." *Psychiatry Advisor*, 16 Feb. 2024, www.psychiatryadvisor.com/features/psychological-effects-of-war-on-children/

³ "Children in War and Conflict." *UNICEF USA*, www.unicefusa.org/what-unicef-does/emergency-response/conflict/#:~:text=Over%20400%20million%20children%20live ,

Children affected by conflict

1 in 6 children were living in conflict areas in 2016

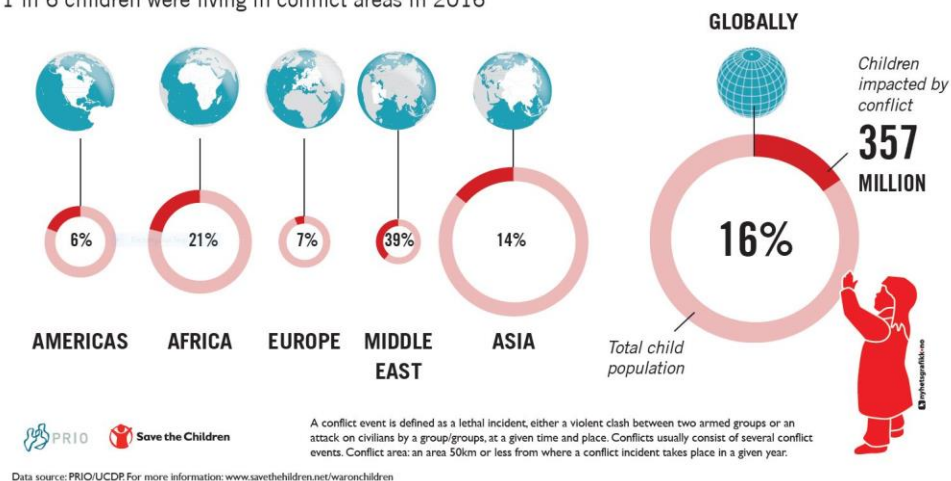


Figure 1- Highlights the percentage of children that are impacted by conflict either in the total population or different groups of countries.⁴

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Child soldier

The official term is “a child associated with an armed force or armed group”. It refers to any boy or girl who is under the age of 18; there are many ways for it to happen. It could be voluntarily or forced through abductions.⁵

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

"A disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event."⁶ In this case, children experience PTSD due to the effects of armed conflict.

⁴ "New Mapping of Children Affected by Armed Conflict – PRIO Blogs." PRIO Blogs - Posts by and About PRIO, 15 Feb. 2018, blogs.prio.org/2018/02/new-mapping-of-children-affected-by-armed-conflict/

⁵ "Child Recruitment and Use." *Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict – Children and Armed Conflict*, childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/six-grave-violations/child-soldiers/

⁶ "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder." *National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)*, [www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd#:~:text=Post%2Dtraumatic%20stress%20disorder%20\(PTSD\)%20is%20a%20disorder%20that,or%20respond%20to%20potential%20danger](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd#:~:text=Post%2Dtraumatic%20stress%20disorder%20(PTSD)%20is%20a%20disorder%20that,or%20respond%20to%20potential%20danger)

Psychosocial support

The support given to help individuals meet the mental, emotional, social and spiritual needs. It is an approach that is done by looking at the patient's psychological factors and the surrounding social environment and influence they have on them.⁷

Displacement

"The movement of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters"⁸

Maim

To injure a person so severely that a part of their body will no longer work as it should.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Impact of armed conflict on children

Children who are exposed to the realities of conflict such as hunger, loss, and suffering are affected for a lifetime; that exposure also brings the children in a state of "toxic stress"⁹. Toxic stress occurs in a child in armed conflict since they don't have enough support from a caregiver so their body can't turn off the stress response, causing lifelong health problems.

Psychological impacts

To begin with, children living in conflict zones have most likely experienced seeing their homes get destroyed by shelling, getting displaced from their homes and having to leave behind family and/or friends. Such great losses can increase chances of depression and anxiety, especially in young children. For a child to grow up properly they should have support and correct nurturing, something that war takes from a child since they are separated from their families. This lack of nurturing creates children that are insecure and live in fear. With more than 16,000 attacks on hospitals and schools¹⁰ children live in constant anxiety and endure negative emotions which only create a never-ending feeling of worry about their safety. "This constant state of anxiety can

⁷ "NCI Dictionary of Cancer Terms." *National Cancer Institute*, www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms/def/psychosocial-support

⁸ *IOM Publications - International Organization for Migration*, publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml_34_glossary.pdf

⁹ "5 Ways That Conflict Impacts Children's Mental Health." *Save the Children*, www.savethechildren.org/us/what-we-do/protection/mental-health/ways-conflict-impacts-childrens-mental-health#:~:text=Anxiety%2C%20loneliness%20and%20insecurity,anxiety%20in%20war%2Daffected%20children

¹⁰ "More Than 300,000 Grave Violations Against Children in Conflict Verified Worldwide in Past 18 Years." *UNICEF*, www.unicef.org/press-releases/more-300000-grave-violations-against-children-conflict-verified-worldwide-past-18

lead to bed wetting, difficulty falling asleep, nightmares, and strained relationships with their loved ones.”¹⁰

Moreover, emotional withdrawal is another psychological impact that, mostly, adolescent children in armed conflict endure. Due to the violent nature that they grow up in, they eventually become desensitized and emotionally numb which in many cases leads to aggressive behavior; they deem this violence as normal which can in turn affect their ability to build successful relationships. This emotional withdrawal due to aggression can also be blamed on the fact that those children are not allowed to leave their homes. Hence, they don't have anywhere to release their energy, so they turn it into aggression.

Health Effects

Moving on, the psychological effects of armed conflict on children can also result into physical symptoms. For example, the stress and anxiety that those children have might intensify and cause them to jump at loud noises and nearby sounds due to PTSD from shillings and bombings.

Additionally, conflict also brings millions of children on the verge of death from severe acute malnutrition, from being forced to drink contaminated water that makes them more vulnerable to fatal illnesses, or from spending their whole childhoods absent from school. In 2022, more than 8,600 children were killed or maimed in conflicts worldwide¹¹. “Warring parties block and deny life-saving assistance to children” emphasizing the fact that it is not inevitable for children to be direct targets in conflict¹².

Children affected by armed conflict

Child soldiers

The UN has 6 verified “grave violations” of children’s rights in conflict; being recruited and used as a child soldier is one of them. “Save the Children”, a nonprofit organization that works to help children in need all around the world by offering both short-term and long-term aid, has revealed shocking trends about children living and suffering in the war zones. “149 million children live in high-intensity conflict zones, areas experiencing thousands of battle-related deaths each year.”¹³ This is occurring due to the fact that children aged younger than 8 years old are being recruited and used for fighting, sexual exploitation and more.

Refugees

In addition, there are numerous children who are also affected by armed conflict although they have managed to escape its territories. Instead of having to worry about shelling and the

¹¹ "Children Killed in Conflicts Worldwide 2022." *Statista*, 12 Dec. 2023, www.statista.com/statistics/1357928/children-compared-people-killed-conflicts-worldwide/#:~:text=Children%20is%20one%20of%20the,or%20maimed%20in%20conflicts%20worldwide

¹² “UNICEF’s Change Agenda for Protecting Children in Armed Conflict.” *UNICEF*, www.unicef.org/children-under-attack/change-agenda

¹³ "Child Soldiers: Childhood's End." *Save the Children*, www.savethechildren.org/us/charity-stories/child-soldiers

threat of armed conflict, refugees are forced to find their way into a new world. Multiple refugees get separated from their families during this phase leaving some children without parents; an estimated 40% of displaced people, at the end of 2023, have been children¹⁴. The process that refugees go through is rough and comes with great dangers at every step of the journey. Children could be subject to drowning at sea, dehydrating during desert or sea crossings, become victims of kidnapping, extortion, torture, and rape, or be assaulted, shot, and killed by criminals or border officials. Even when children survive and reach their final, 'unknown' destination they carry great weight from the traumatic years of their childhood for the rest of their lives.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

Russia

Conflict has had a severe negative influence on children's physical and mental health in Russia, especially in locations like Chechnya in addition to near the border with Ukraine. In these combat areas, landmines, gunfire, and bombs frequently create a physical threat to children, resulting in wounds, disabilities, and occasionally fatalities; the mortality rate of Chechen children below 12 years is on the increase¹⁵. Violence and instability have a significant psychological impact, with many children suffering from trauma, anxiety, and long-term mental health problems; the aforementioned effects of conflict. In order to address the issue, the Russian government has been collaborating with international organizations to offer medical attention, psychological support, and educational initiatives that promote recovery. Nevertheless, the efficiency and accessibility of these initiatives are sometimes limited by persistent violence as well as complicated political issues, depriving many children of the care they need to completely heal and develop.

Canada

Throughout the years Canada has been a leading advocate on children and armed conflict; they have been committed to ending the use of children in hostilities and making sure that they are protected around the world. In 2017 they showed this commitment by signing the Safe Schools Declaration for protection of schools and universities from military use in armed conflict. Additionally, they have provided funding to the Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict and have also been an early supporter. Moving on, they have funded many programmes aimed at preventing the enlistment and demobilization of minors as soldiers. These initiatives focus on, as stated by their Government, on strengthening accountability,

¹⁴ "| UNHCR." *UNHCR*, www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/#:~:text=Colombia%2C%20Germany%2C%20the%20Islamic%20Republic,in%20need%20of%20international%20protection.&text=At%20the%20end%20of%202023%2C%20of%20the%20117.3%20million%20forcibly,below%2018%20years%20of%20age

¹⁵"EFFECT OF THE RUSSIAN WAR ON CHECHEN CHILDREN: EXTREMISM IN THE YOUNG GENERATIONS?" Home, www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/10695-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2006-3-8-art-10695.html

“community-based and research work to reintegrate former child soldiers” and preventing the recruitment of new child soldiers.¹⁶

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The DRC is facing one of the world’s worst humanitarian disasters and has become the second largest internally displaced people’s crisis globally; between January and April 2024 more than 900,000 people were forced to flee their homes. Overall, 7.3 million people are currently displaced, 3.7 million of those are children. Children in DRC no longer have access to medical care, enough food, education or have lost their families¹⁷. The lack of education exposes children to increased protections risks, such as “being recruited by armed groups or forced into child labour”¹⁸; of course, the children's physical and mental health are severely impacted by this exploitation.

Yemen

Millions of children in Yemen are living in terrible conditions as a result of the continuous conflict, which has a serious negative impact on their physical and mental health. The trauma of seeing violence and losing family members to airstrikes is a contributing factor in the sadness and depression that more than half of Yemeni children report experiencing¹⁹. Around two million children have missed school due to the war, and many of them have been forced to start working at a young age, further depriving them of their childhood²⁰. The ongoing fear of violence and instability has a significant psychological impact, causing social disengagement, anxiety, and nightmares in many kids.

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF has been instrumental in forming worldwide alliances and developing technical guidelines to fight child violence holistically. They contribute by increasing political will, holding decision makers accountable, and raising awareness by expanding the availability of data and assembling evidence. This work is carried out in collaboration with partners in business, civil society, faith-based organizations and the media, as well as with governments and representatives from the health, education, and other social sectors, including the judicial system.⁹

¹⁶ "Children and Armed Conflict." GAC, 24 Aug. 2022, www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/armed_conflict-conflits_armes.aspx?lang=eng

¹⁷ "Just a Moment..." *Just a Moment..*, www.savethechildren.net/whats-happening-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo

¹⁸ "What's Happening in the Democratic Republic of the Congo?" NRC,

www.nrc.no/perspectives/2024/whats-happening-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo/

¹⁹ "Five Years of War in Yemen: More Than Half of Children Feel Sad and Depressed." *ReliefWeb*, reliefweb.int/report/yemen/five-years-war-yemen-more-half-children-feel-sad-and-depressed

²⁰ "Childhood Interrupted: Conflict's Toll on Yemen's Children." *International Committee of the Red Cross*, 30 Nov. 2020, www.icrc.org/en/document/yemen-childhood-interrupted-conflicts-toll-yemens-youth

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
15 April 1919	Eglantyne Jebb launched the Save the Children Fund to raise money to help children affected by World War One. ²¹
27 February 1991	The Committee on the Rights of the Child was created to monitor and report on the implementation of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child. ²²
20 December 1993	The Secretary General was asked to choose an expert to conduct a thorough investigation into the matter of the involvement of children in armed conflict, in resolution 48/157, "Protection of children affected by armed conflicts." ²³
25 August 1999	The UN Security Council resolution 1261 was adopted unanimously.
25 May 2000	The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1314, emphasizing the need for the protection of children in armed conflict.

²¹ "Just a Moment..." *Just a Moment...*, www.savethechildren.net/about-us/100-years-children

²² "Just a Moment..." *Just a Moment...*, www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crc

²³ *Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict – Children and Armed Conflict*, childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Study-on-the-evolution-of-the-Children-and-Armed-Conflict-mandate-1996-2021.pdf

12 February 2002	<p>The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict was adopted.</p> <p>The first International Red Hand campaign Day against the Use of Child Soldiers.</p>
26 July 2005	The UN Security Council adopted resolution 1612.
17 June 2013	Launch of the "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign by the UN to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers by government security forces. ²⁴
28 May 2015	The Safe Schools Declaration was adopted to avoid the military use of schools and to strengthen the protection of children and education at times of conflict.
September 2018	The Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers was launched.
24 February 2022	The war between Ukraine and Russia began which has put an estimated 7.5 million children at extreme mental and physical health risk. ²⁵

²⁴ "Children, Not Soldiers." *Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict – Children and Armed Conflict*, childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/children-not-soldiers/#:~:text=Launched%20in%202014%2C%20the%20campaign,not%20be%20used%20in%20conflict

²⁵ "Page Restricted." *Page Restricted | ScienceDirect*, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165178122003924

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

United Nations Security Council resolution 1261

The UN SC resolution 1261 was adopted unanimously on 25 August 1999 to condemn the targeting of children in armed conflict. This was a giant leap into addressing the issue of children affected by war since it was the first resolution by the SC to place this issue onto its agenda. Inside this resolution, the Council, as stated above, condemned the “grave violations committed against children in times of conflict, and requested the Secretary-General to submit a first report on children and armed conflict as an issue that affects peace and security to be presented the following year.”²⁶

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989 by world leaders and has since changed children's lives all throughout the world; it is now the most ratified human rights convention in history. In this treaty they have evolved around the idea that “children are not just objects who belong to their parents and for whom decisions are made, or adults in training. Rather, they are human beings and individuals with their own rights.”²⁷ This statement highlights their purpose and their commitment to children as they understand the necessities they require at a time of urgency. They understand that childhood is separate from adulthood since it's a “a special, protected time, in which children must be allowed to grow, learn, play, develop and flourish with dignity.”¹⁹

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

Children, Not Soldiers UNICEF Campaign

As stated above UNICEF has put great effort into supporting children in conflict zones, with programmes that center on emergency relief, education, psychosocial support, and family reunification. In 2014²⁸ UNICEF launched the "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign, which aimed to end the use and recruitment of children by government forces in conflict by 2016. While the goal was ambitious, several countries made significant progress towards achieving it; however, ongoing conflicts and the rise of new conflicts have made it difficult to fully achieve the campaign's goals.

²⁶ "1999 – The First Resolution Adopted by the UN Security Council on Children and Armed Conflict Placed the Issue of Children Affected by War on the Agenda of the Security Council. (Security Council Resolution 1261)." *Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict – Children and Armed Conflict*, 19 Aug. 1999, childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/1999/08/1999-security-council-resolution-1261/

²⁷ "Convention on the Rights of the Child." *UNICEF*, www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention#:~:text=In%201989%2C%20world%20leaders%20made,children's%20lives%20around%20the%20world

²⁸ "Children, Not Soldiers." *UNICEF*, www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/children-not-soldiers-yemen

Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998)

The International Criminal Court's (1998) Rome Statute designates the recruitment of minors as a war crime, meaning that those who engage in such activities would be held legally responsible. These frameworks do not, however, improve enforcement. Even when they do, many nations lack the funding and political will to adequately implement these international agreements into their national legal frameworks.

African Charter (AU) on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1999)

The African Union's (AU) Peace and Security Council, which focuses on conflict prevention, management, and resolution, including the protection of children, was established in 1999. The AU's African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1999) complements international legal frameworks and specifically addresses the protection of children in armed conflicts within the African context. Nevertheless, the AU's ability to enforce these measures is often limited by the sovereignty of member states and the complexities of regional politics.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Enforcement

Forcing stronger legal frameworks and enforcement is a critical first step. Promoting the ratification and execution of global agreements, like the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocol regarding the involvement of minors in armed conflicts, in addition to enhancing domestic legislation to outlaw the enlistment and exploitation of child soldiers, can improve children's legal safeguards and ensure that those who violate them face consequences. Nevertheless, putting these policies into action can be difficult in conflict areas because of poor governance and little resources.

Family Tracing and Reunification Programs

Reunification and family tracking initiatives need to be improved in order to help children's mental health and well-being when they reunite with their family. Family members' separation during conflict can lead to serious emotional distress and vulnerability. Reunifying children with their families helps restore a sense of normalcy and security.

Psychosocial Support Services

Enhancing psychosocial support and mental health services is another vital solution. Training local mental health professionals and community workers to provide trauma-informed care and integrating psychosocial support into existing healthcare and education systems can build local resources and offer long-term support to children. However, mental health services may be stigmatized in some cultures and require continuous funding for training and implementation, a resource that the government lacks at times of conflict.

Establishing Safe Zones and Child-Friendly Spaces

Within conflict areas, creating safe zones and child-friendly spaces (CFS) may provide children with education, healthcare, and psychological assistance in a secure setting, giving them instant relief and a feeling of normality. Although these programmes reduce the stress that kids face, they still need a lot of money and resources, and if they're not adequately protected, they might end up as targets.

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