

Interrupted Childhood: The Effects of War on Children's Education and Future Opportunities

Sudha

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Lucknow

Abstract

Children are among the most vulnerable victims of war, which has terrible repercussions that go well beyond the battlefield. Every element of a child's life is disrupted when they are exposed to armed conflict. Over 10% of children worldwide are impacted by armed situations. The impact of armed conflict on children's physical health and development is poorly understood, despite the abundance of research on mental health. The current and historical research on how armed war affects children's health and development is compiled in this comprehensive review. In actuality, we are just now starting to understand how armed conflict both encourages and intensifies child labour. Through an analysis of current literature, international reports, and human rights viewpoints, this paper investigates the complex effects of war on children. It draws attention to the difficulties that children in conflict areas encounter, such as disrupted schooling, child labour, enlistment in armed groups, starvation, and restricted access to basic amenities. The report also addresses how international legal frameworks, humanitarian organisations, and governments can safeguard children's rights both during and after armed conflict.

Keyword: victims, disrupted, armed conflict, starvation

1. Introduction

The term "war" evokes thoughts of devastation, hopelessness, and fatalities. War is defined as an armed struggle between governmental forces and armed groups that are organised under a specific command structure and capable of carrying out military actions, or between such organised groups. Using conventional or irregular military troops, it is typically marked by massive violence, devastation, and mortality. Pursuing political, economic, or territorial goals is a common component of war objectives. The term "warfare" describes the typical actions and traits of different kinds of conflict, or of conflicts in general. Total war can cause enormous suffering and losses among civilians and other non-combatants and is defined as conflict that is not limited to strictly lawful military targets.

Conflict has detrimental effects on education in many places of the world. Although education may continue during times of war, the presence and risk of violence, fear, and safety concerns have a direct and detrimental impact on education and its quality. It destroys schools, turns them into military bases or shelters for displaced families, puts educators and kids in danger of being killed, injured, or abducted, and results in psychological damage. Conflict's indirectly effects include displacement, a decline in health care, a rise in the need for domestic workers, and a lack of social ability to offer educational services.

2. Causes of Educational Disruption-

Not only does conflict disrupt children's education, but it also sets up a series of obstacles that can prevent them from attending school for months or even years. The impacts are profound and interwoven, ranging from the immediate shock of being uprooted to the long-term trauma of experiencing violence.

Listing few of the obstacle between children's education during war

DEATH, INJURY, ILLNESS- Every year, hundreds of thousands of children are killed by direct military aggression. They perish as combatants who are specifically targeted, as civilians caught up in the carnage of war, or during ethnic cleansing. Children sustain a variety of wartime injuries. They are especially impacted by some weapons. A youngster is more likely than an adult to be killed or gravely injured in a landmine explosion. In times of conflict, conditions for maintaining children's health worsen, including access to healthcare, housing, sanitation, water safety, and nutrition. Children who are refugees are more susceptible to the fatal combo of infectious disease and hunger. Increases in child mortality may also be caused by the disruption of population immunisation efforts brought on by war.

DISPLACEMENT- Families and children are frequently exposed to a variety of physical risks when fleeing conflict areas. Attacks, shelling, and landmines pose a threat to them, and they frequently have to go for days on end with little food and water. Children in these situations frequently suffer from severe malnutrition and are more vulnerable to disease and even death. During displacement, girls are particularly susceptible to sexual abuse.

RAPE AND PROSTITUTION- As stated by UN secretary Antonio Guterres "Sexual violence linked to conflict is a catastrophic form of assault and oppression that dismantles the social structure of communities and has enduring, detrimental impacts on survivor's physical, sexual, reproductive, and mental well-being."

CHILD SOLDIERS- Tens of thousands of minors under the age of 18 are thought to be serving in militias in about 60 countries. They are especially susceptible to all of the effects mentioned above.

SCHOOL AS MILITARY CAMPS OR REFUGEES CENTRES- Schools become direct targets for enemy attacks when armed organisations use classrooms as weaponry, sleeping quarters, or defence points and when school turns into refugee camps desks, chairs, and books are destroyed by displaced families who use them for shelter or firewood. Buildings are frequently too damaged or dangerous to be used again, even after camps have closed.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUFFERINGS- During times of conflict, children are exposed to terrifying and horrific conditions, which can have long-lasting effects on posttraumatic stress disorder. Children affected by conflict have significant rates of anxiety and sadness due to severe losses and life disruptions. Exposure to additional hardships and violence in refugee circumstances may exacerbate these effects.

All these causes of educational disruption mentioned above are somehow interlinked with each other, as war begins displacement of people started in seek of safe places and ends in refugee camps for years as a result of losing their source of livelihood and homes. Under all this chaos the pain of disable and vulnerable

groups (women, girls and children) get unnoticed as rape and prostitution with even minors and the psychological trauma of these heinous crimes get stick with them forever.

LONG TERM EFFECTS ON CAREERS AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES-

Wars have always had an impact on nations, civilisations, and their economies. The most impacted groups are students, who are at the periphery of their careers. When a conflict breaks out, society's educational systems crumble and finding acceptable employment becomes more challenging. There are far fewer job opportunities. World War I, World War II, the battles between India and Pakistan, China and India, Kargil, Russia and Ukraine, and the current confrontation between the United States, Israel, and Iran all demonstrate how wars impact career and employment options for students worldwide.

We must comprehend the mechanism that influences students' employment chances and career options.

- **Unstable Economy:** During any conflict, the government of the nation in question shifts a significant portion of its national budget from development initiatives to military operations.
- **Scholastic disruption:** Universities, colleges, and other educational institutions may close during a war, their infrastructure may be destroyed, and students may need to relocate. Students' learning and skill-building processes may also be impacted.
- **Manpower dislocation:** As a result of the war, many individuals relocate or migrate to safer areas, increasing competition for the few available jobs.

3. Case Studies

Russia and Ukraine war

Human health has suffered severe and long-lasting consequences as a result of the massive humanitarian crisis brought on by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Children are among the most severely impacted groups, with the biggest effects on their health and well-being. Even before the crisis began, there were significant barriers to child health in Ukraine, including high incidence of infectious diseases, such as multidrug-resistant tuberculosis, and a dearth of routine vaccines.

In March 2026 alone, 89 children were killed or injured in Ukraine as a result of ongoing attacks. Compared to the same period last year, there were 49% more child casualties during the first quarter of 2026. Since February 2022, at least 3,452 children have died or been injured in Ukraine. The actual number is probably far greater because these are merely UN-verified cases.

Israel - Gaza war

Children in Gaza are suffering from one of the worst humanitarian disasters in history. They have been subjected to bombing, famine, and displacement for nearly two years as they bear the brunt of the Gaza battle. Thousands of children have died, and many more are suffering from severe emotional trauma and injuries that could change their lives. According to the United Nations children's organization, at least 300 children have died in Gaza in the approximately 300 days after a purported "ceasefire" was declared on October 10, 2025, or one kid every day.

According to UNICEF, over a million children need safety and emotional help, and over 58,000 children have lost one or both parents. One of the biggest child safety problems globally, the agency previously estimated that some 17,000 youngsters were unaccompanied or separated from their families. Numerous families are dealing with frequent relocation, economic loss, and restricted access to protection, healthcare, and education.

The conflict in Gaza has not spared children. In September 2025, the IRC reported a 48% increase in child protection cases. The conflict has claimed thousands of lives, and abuse against children is still sadly widespread. Thousands of children in Gaza have had their lives changed by shrapnel injuries and the resulting amputations. Additionally, disease and malnutrition are killing children. However, for almost two years, education—which is typically a source of safety and healing—has been unattainable.

Reasons why mainly children are affected by war-

Separated families- many children get separated from their families due to ongoing war and become refugees in another country and couldn't get the life they deserved and hustle for even the basic amenities.

Vulnerable victims- Due to their extreme vulnerability, ease of manipulation, and low maintenance costs, children are used as "instruments of warfare" in conflicts. Both state armies and non-state rebel groups compel hundreds of thousands of children worldwide to serve in the military and girls counter the dual exploitation of sexual abuse including rape and prostitution as well.

Mental health- We cannot consider war to be a singular occurrence because the effects of trauma are passed down through generations. Up to 227 million adult war survivors may have PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), 199 million may have serious depression, and 110 million may have both, according to epidemiological studies findings have significant ramifications for the long-term mental health outcomes of children who are impacted, since 1 in 6 children worldwide—more than 449 million live in conflict zones and 1 in 22 children were murdered or injured by armed conflict every day in 2021.

4. International Responses

By upholding international humanitarian law, providing life-saving medical and nutritional assistance, setting up demobilisation and reintegration programs for child soldiers, and keeping an eye out for serious violations to hold offenders accountable, international organisations safeguard children in conflict areas. Organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and large non-governmental organisations (NGOs) employ legal frameworks, diplomatic pressure, and field activities to protect children instead of using force.

UNICEF

Violence against children is prevented and addressed by UNICEF and its partners. UNICEF partners with industry and other sectors and works with governments in the fields of health, education, and other social areas, including the legal system.

UNICEF and its partners at the local and national levels are:

1. assisting in the strengthening of laws and policies to enhance the provision of public services to families and children in their homes, communities, and schools.

2. Using parenting initiatives to assist parents and caregivers.
3. Consulting youth to make sure their opinions are taken into consideration and used to influence UNICEF programming.
4. Addressing negative social norms and behaviours in communities and promoting social change that creates safer surroundings.

In order to address the needs of vulnerable children and families, UNICEF's supply and logistics operation, which has been based in Copenhagen since 1962, purchases and ships more than 1,200 different commodities from its supply centre in Copenhagen (the largest humanitarian warehouse in the world). UNICEF raised more than \$5.6 billion in supplies and services for children in 164 countries and regions in 2025 alone, including \$1.44 billion in emergency supplies that were delivered to support critical humanitarian efforts in 67 countries.

5. Policy Recommendations

The UN security council has identified six grave violations serve as the basis to gather information and report on violations affecting children are:

- killing and maiming of children
- Recruitment and use of children as soldier
- Sexual violence against children
- Abduction of children
- Attacks on schools and hospitals
- Denial of humanitarian access for children

Participation in hostilities the 1977 Additional Protocols

Too many children take part in military conflicts. This involvement can take many forms, from helping combatants by providing them with guns and ammunition, conducting reconnaissance operations, etc., to actually recruiting kids to fight for their country's armed forces and other armed organisations. The first international agreements to address such circumstances were the Additional Protocols of 1977.

Geneva Conventions (1949) and their Additional Protocols (1977)

Protection of Children under International Humanitarian Law

- Attacks against children are prohibited;
- Children must be evacuated from communities that are besieged or surrounded;
- Children are entitled to special protection, care, and assistance;
- Children must be housed apart from adults if they are arrested or incarcerated;
- The recruiting of minors, their involvement in hostilities, and the death punishment for minors under the age of eighteen are all prohibited.

Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the involvement of children in armed conflict (2000)

- During armed conflict, children are entitled to extra protection;

- Outlawing the forced enlistment of anyone younger than eighteen in the country's armed forces;
- Prohibition of recruiting individuals under the age of eighteen into armed groups, either voluntarily or under duress.

Security Council Action Child Protection

- The devastating effects of conflict on children were documented in Graça Machel's 1996 report, *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*;
- In resolution 1261 (1999), the Security Council concluded that the situation of children in armed conflict constituted an international peace and security concern;
- Peacekeeping mandates now contain specific wording about child protection;
- When it comes to kid safety, peacekeeping operations have particular obligations.

6. Recommendations-

However, there are potential solutions. First, regardless of the perpetrators, international leadership must constantly denounce abuses against children. Second, it is the responsibility of UN member states to guarantee complete adherence to international humanitarian law, including the secure delivery of aid. Third, infractions must have concrete repercussions, including as penalties, legal accountability via the International Criminal Court, and compensation. Fourth, to improve accountability, procedures for ongoing funding and oversight must be established. Lastly, states must work together to avert violence and give civilian infrastructure protection top priority when there is a high potential of conflict escalation.

Awareness program

The Community Development Authority in the United Arab Emirates and UNICEF Gulf Area Office worked together to create the Child Rights Awareness Activities Toolkit (CRAAT). By creating an atmosphere where kids are aware of their rights and have the confidence to speak out for themselves, this all-inclusive toolbox seeks to advance child rights among kids, their families, and the community.

Rehabilitation and bridging learning gaps

By providing children with an alternative to employment, education is essential to the rehabilitation of child labour. Children are less likely to return to labour-intensive settings when they are in school. In addition to providing them with productive time, structured instruction fosters their intellectual and emotional growth. The first stage in reintegrating children into society is education, according to many rehabilitation programs.

Children who were engaged in any kind of labour or struck down in conflict zones miss out on years of schooling, results in huge lack of knowledge. Rehabilitation of children not only give them a better life but also transfer them into formal schooling by providing bridge courses, special training centres and non-formal education system. In such programs teachers and educators are trained to deal with the children who have ever suffered trauma, abuse and any kind of violence. Their role extends far beyond academics, as they have made the children feel safe by providing emotional support and encouragement which is must for holistic development.

7. Conclusion

Although children don't cause wars, but they bear the brunt of their consequences. They are more likely than adults to be killed or seriously injured by explosive weapons. To guarantee genuine respect for children, there must be a significant effort to raise awareness of and adherence to international humanitarian law. Therefore, all levels of the armed forces and national security forces should incorporate the idea of child-specific protection into their peacetime training and exercises. Campaigns to increase public awareness, especially among children and adolescents, should also be planned and the subject should be introduced in the curriculum of universities. We cannot let a generation of children become collateral damage to the world's unregulated wars, whether they be in Haiti, Myanmar, the State of Palestine, Sudan, Ukraine, or anywhere else. We must unite to shield kids from the atrocities of war, reverse the terrible "new normal" of child abuse, and maintain our common humanity.

In addition to being a fundamental right, education is a powerful tool for transforming lives. By establishing a new reality, child labour rehabilitation offers hope, dignity, and the opportunity to dream once again. Society can ensure that every child has the chance to receive an education, be nurtured, and lead a life free from exploitation by implementing education-oriented rehabilitation programs.

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