

WAR AND CHILDREN: SRI LANKAN EXPERIENCE¹

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ABSTRACT

When considering the Sri Lankan civil war, even though there are no accurate figures regarding the damage caused to children due to war, according to the UNICEF reports (2005), one million children in Sri Lanka have been affected all over the island by war, and they suffer from the shortage of food, health facilities, clothing, and education, due to displacement. However, this assumption revealed that the study concerning effects of war on children in Sri Lanka is very limited. At the same time, due to the Easter Sunday attack in 2019, the fear of war and the impact of war on children are again taking in to consideration in the country. Because, due to Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka 46 children were killed (UNICEF, 2019). Therefore, main objective in this study is to discuss how civil war in Sri Lanka impact on children. This study is mainly based on qualitative interviews, supplemented with quantitative and observation method. Secondary data such as books, related articles and research materials was used. Field work was done in three war affected areas in Batticaloa and Vavuniya district in three different periods such as 2004, 2005 and 2016. Data was collected from 30 children, 10 parents of the children and 10 school teachers. According to this discussion, it was observed that within a situation like war, children can be affected mainly directly or indirectly which cause adverse impact on children. Such impacts can be psychological or connection with other health issues or education. At the same time, the impacts of war on children destroy their social life or the trust about the society and simply war can destroy their whole world. Children might on the surface appear to be well adjusted, but deeper examination of their inner world shows the negative effects of war.

KEYWORDS: children, war-affects, psychology, health, education, child soldiers

1. INTRODUCTION

Child in a war torn area, in Sri Lanka, June, 2005: We lived in utter fear of death. We were terrified that we would die in the next minute or so. I remember the sound of shells passing over our house ever since I was a kid. I also remember the shootings and the burning of our house, which I saw with my own eyes. I can still feel the fear that went through my mind as our house got burnt down. I can still remember the way my mother, sister and brothers cried (Interview 2).

The above quotation indicates an experience of a child who lived in the midst of war in Sri Lanka, and it shows that feelings of strong fear had developed in the child due to war. It also reveals the feelings of uncertainty regarding the future, and also the ruined or degraded trust in the people and whole society. This child actually revealed his feelings during the cease-fire period and there was no combat when he was interviewed. This shows how even during a non-war situation some children cannot erase unhappy memories of war in the past.

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The war in Sri Lanka was started in 1983. The Sri Lankan population consists of three main ethnic groups namely Sinhalese, Tami and Muslims. According to the census of 2011, 74% are Sinhalese, and they are considered as the major ethnic group in Sri Lanka. 18.2% are Tamils including Tamils of Indian-origin; Muslims represent 7% of the population, while the rest (0.8%) are Burghers, Malays and others (Census of population and Housing, 2011). The war was going on between the government of Sri Lanka with the majority of Sinhalese and one Tamil group named Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (L.T.T.E.) and it ended in May 2009. Several ceasefire agreements have been signed between the two parties; the last one was signed in 2002. It went up to around the end of 2005, and subsequently the war started again. However, currently war is not going between the two parties due to the killing of the leader and other carders of the L.T.T.E. Though the government has declared that war is over now it will take at least a decade to save the country from the sequels of war.

However, since 1983, people belonging to all the ethnic groups suffer in many ways due to this war, and especially children can be mentioned as a most vulnerable group. Even though there are no accurate figures regarding the damage caused to children due to war, according to the UNICEF reports (2005), one million children in Sri Lanka have been affected all over the island by war, and they suffer from the shortage of food, health facilities, clothing, and education, due to displacement. Even though many studies have been done on war-affected children in many countries, in Sri Lanka the studies concerning this subject is very limited. At the same time, due to the Easter Sunday attack the fear of war and the impact of war on children are again taking in to consideration in the country. Because, due to Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka 46 children were killed (UNISEF, 2019). Therefore, main purpose in this paper is to discuss how war impact on children in Sri Lanka and get clear idea how children can be protected violence activities in future.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: CHILDREN IN CONFLICTS

Some children who live in conflicts zones are constantly exposed to war. Due to war, they suffer physical injuries, mental agonies and even death. Some children participate directly in war, and this especially, applies to child soldiers. While children may not face such experience directly, if for instance, their parents are involved in war activity, the children can indirectly become victims of war. In any of these circumstances, children can be affected in various ways related to age, sex, and personality so on.

For instance, Garbarino, et al, (1996) make an attempt to explain, in a basic way, the difficulties children face and how children are affected by war. The first point is that due to war, children will lose family support that is essential for their development. Corroborating the views of Erik Erikson's child development theory, Garbarino, et al explains that the role of family, especially, the role of 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.

Greitens (2001) also discuss fundamental impacts of war on children. He argues that research on war and children has normally been limited to studying only the impacts of violence or the effects of separation from the family members. Researchers often ignore the children's experience such as the devastating consequences of loss of trust or the opportunity to learn adult work roles. Therefore, he focuses on three extreme consequences of war on children at general level. The first one is the negative impact on children's health and he argues that this linked with the direct as well as indirect effects of the displacement of communities, the braking up of families and social structures, and the weakening of household food production and nutrition security, the loss of access to education and so on. Greitens further state that among infants and children under 5 years of age, mortality rates are often substantially higher in countries during or just after conflict compared to countries of similar socio-economic status that are at peace. According to Greitens, the second extreme effect of war on children is sexual violence. Referring Cairn's (1979) ideas, he explains that as many as 80,000 women and girls were raped in former

Yugoslavia. In Rwanda, mass and public rape was used as an instrument of terror as part of the attempt to destroy the fundamental social fabric and shatter people's sense of security, self-esteem and identity. The third one is the increasing responsibility for children who have to bear the burden as breadwinners in the family. Owing to this situation, children have to give up or postpone their education and they are forced to work in order to earn a living. According to Greitens, there are occurrences of children being sold or migrating to other places seeking money. Some adults feel that they relived of a burden if children can work and at least find some solace doing so.

As has already been stated, Greitens' main focus is on the indirect consequences of war on children; consequences which might cause a serious dent in the children's mental and physical growth, as well as have an adverse impact on social relations. Therefore, his discussion regarding war effects on children must be taken seriously in research in this area.

The Graca Machel study, or the 'Machel study', is considered the first study regarding war and children on a global level, and it is the view of many researchers that this study fulfilled the need of discerning the larger picture of how war impacts children (Wessells, 1998). According to Wessells (1998), five key issues were examined in this research. Those issues were: (1) children's participation, (2) preventive measures, (3) the adequacy of existing standards, (4) measures to improve protection of children and (5) the promotion of children's physical and psychological recovery and social integration. However, this study identified eight common problems that children face due to war on global level. These problems are 1. child soldiers, 2. displaced children, 3. sexual exploitation and gender based violence, 4. landmines and unexploded ordnance, 5. sanctions, 6. health and nutrition, 7. psychological effects and 8. education.

This study was able to highlight a global picture regarding war and children for the first time, and it was a very important step for understanding the situation for these children, the study used a holistic approach to examine how war affects children worldwide. Even though, there are many important points in this study some weakness also could be seen. As an example, Wessells (1998) states that in the case of many war-affected countries, a representative sample were not examined. Therefore, he argues that there can be several shortcomings when this study is applied for all the countries where war is going on. Another drawback would be the lack of comparison between a war situation and a non-war situation. He argues that some problems could be common to both situations, and therefore, it is not correct to apply those problems only to war situation without doing a comparative study. However, while the study has its limitations, it has opened the doors to new avenues for conducting further research on war and children.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is mainly based on qualitative interviews, supplemented with quantitative and observation method. Secondary data such as books, related articles and research materials was used (Agger et al, 1995; Summerfield, 1996; Boyden, 2005, Chase, 2000; UNICEF, 2019). Field work was done in three war affected areas in Batticaloa and Vavuniya district in three different periods such as 2004, 2005 and 2016. Data was collected from 30 children, 10 parents of the children and 10 school teachers.

4. RESULTS

Study of war effects on children an extremely complex task, because on the one hand, this is a broad subject, while on the other hand there are several ways of thinking about the effects of war on children. For instance, even though, it is often concluded that children are affected by war in negative ways, some studies may also suggest that children can actually benefit from war. For example, someone can argue that children who do not receive enough food, clothes or other necessary things at home, may receive them at refugee camps or in rehabilitation programmes. Some researchers also argue that even though children can be affected by war in many ways, they have the capacity to adjust to the situation and cope with the calamity that they face (Cairns, 1995; Summerfield, 1999, Gibbs, 1994). However, many

researchers show that whether or not a child is affected by war, children’s usual environment and behaviour can be changed as a result of war (Fox et al, 1993). Moreover, the way in which children respond to a war experience and the strategies that they use to cope with such events may depend on, for instance, children’s age, gender, social circumstance and family support. However, the purpose of this section is to understand the situation of war affected children in Sri Lanka to some extent as a foundation to illuminate the issues of how such children can be helped and to understand the responsibility of authorised personal and institutions.

4.1 Psychological impact on children

In the discussion on war and children, the attention is often focused on the psychological impact. This is due to the fact that most people believe that children can be traumatised by war, and it is often stated that children might have symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in war areas (Agger, 1995; Thabet, & Vostanis, 1999). In my study also concerned with discovering to what extent the selected children are mentally affected by the war. In this regard an attempt was made to assess mental conditions such as fear, sadness and aggressiveness in the children and effect of these conditions on the children’s day to day activities in terms of, for instance, education and health. In particular, the ‘ladder of life technique’ was used for the purpose of making this assessment and to come to grips with this reality. Through the ‘ladder of life technique’, the children were asked some questions to which they were asked to respond by marking a position on the ladder, consisting of 0 to 10 rungs. The bottom rung of the ladder represent negative feelings and the top rung of the ladder represent positive feelings. Their responses were sought from two different periods; the first how they replied three years before and the second how they replied at present.

Table 1: The impact of war on children in Sri Lanka (mean value of the answers)

Event	'X' area (N=10)		'Y' area (N=10)		'Z' area (N=10)	
	past	current	past	current	past	current
Playing with friends when free	0	5.7	1.9	4.9	1.3	6.0
Sleeping problems	1.4	6.0	1.9	4.2	1.2	5.8
Nightmares about war events	0.8	2.4	1.9	4.4	0.5	6.0
Ability to Concentrate or remember things	0.3	4.6	1.7	4.7	0.8	5.8
Afraid of the Army or the Police	0	6.4	1.9	5.1	0.3	7.0
School performance	0.4	4.3	1.7	4.3	0.5	7.5
Future expectations	0.3	6.0	1.4	5.1	0.8	7.0
Total	0.4	5.0	1.5	4.1	0.7	6.4

Sources: Primary data from field assessments

According to the ‘ladder of life technique’ the positive attitude of children should be represented in the highest rungs and while negative attitudes should be represented in the bottom rungs of the ladder. According to the above table it is clear that the mean value of all children’s responses is at or below rungs 5 in the ladder, both in the ‘past’ category and the ‘current’ category. In the period in which this research was conducted war was temporarily stopped due to the ceasefire agreement between the government and the L.T.T.E. and the children were living in a relatively peaceful atmosphere. The ‘current’ category in the table represent children’s responses during the ceasefire period and very little improvement can be seen children’s attitude in that peaceful period than the ‘past’ category. Even though the results can be considered an improvement of children’s attitude over the past in the wake of war experience, it does not represent a substantial improvement. The mean value of the children’s

responses is still at the bottom part of the ladder, which means that even within the peaceful atmosphere the children were not fully comfortable nor had a positive outlook.

According to the findings mentioned above, it is clear that the children who were involved in this study have undergone some mental stress due to war. Even though, the level and types of mental condition are different from child to child due to the support they receive, all the children show some signs of some kind of traumatic situation through their thinking and behavior. For instance, most of the children suspect that war can begin at any time and if so they will be affected again by it. This is one good example of how much fear the children have about war.

4.2 Impact of war on children's education

This study finding revealed that there was a great deal of negative impact on children's education due to war. Many children have become orphans and, due to the closing down of the schools, there was a direct bearing on children's education. Most of the schoolteachers revealed that in the ceasefire period, even though children return to their villages, most of them do not want to continue their education. Schoolteachers further state that even those children who are involved in education do not come to school daily or do not show any interest in studies. The main reasons for this as explained by school teachers was lack of family support, stressful environment, lack of motivation, lack of resources etc.

Many researches confirm that that family involvement is a powerful influence on children's achievement in school. For example, Ziegler (1994) states that when parents are involved in their children's education, the children attend school daily, do homework regularly and participate in the term test. They produce good results and in the long-term get involved in higher education to a much larger extent than children with less support from their parents. This shows that parental involvement is essential and has a direct bearing on the progress of the children's education. Many of the children who involved with this study have lost their parents due to war and this is one of the main impacts of war on children's education.

According to the findings of the study, abject poverty and the fact that children had to take on family responsibilities were other reasons for the disruption of children's education. Most of the children did not have sufficient facilities for their education or resources to buy necessary equipment. Furthermore, some of the children had to look after younger siblings and children were the breadwinner in some families. At the same time, some children have to discontinue their studies due to the fact that they were conscripted for war as child soldiers. Apart from that, death of school teachers, and lack of facilities for both students and teachers, no roads to come to the school due to war destruction and no buildings to teach were other negative impacts for children's education. From the above mentioned facts, it can be noted that there are many direct and indirect impacts on children's education due to war. Even though, some children continue their studies towards higher education within this kind of war situation, they are few in numbers. Therefore, it must be stated that for proper education in these war-torn areas, social, economic and political attention must be devoted to these children.

4.3 Impact of war on children's health

Due to war, children get injured and sometimes lose limbs or hands, and they may also experience mental stress. These are the results that could be seen as the direct consequences of war in the health area. Apart from that, children can also face indirect side effects such as malnutrition and the contracting of contagious diseases can be cited as example of indirect health impact on children due to war. The World Food Programme (2003) reveals that the malnutrition rate in children in North and East part is twice that of the national average in Sri Lanka.

According to my study apart from direct health issues such as injuries, the biggest indirect health problem was malnutrition among children that were interviewed. In discussion with adults and guardian of the children, they revealed that these young children lost their parents early in their lives and this fact was the direct cause of their malnutrition situation. My study further revealed that when children lose their father, mother has to work and this leads to neglect children and their health requirements. Apart

from that, problems of transformation of food, poverty and some restrictions of the government and the L.T.T.E. as main causes for children's high malnutrition in war affected areas.

In Sri Lanka's war torn areas, the infant mortality and maternal mortality is greater than other districts in the country. According to the annual health bulletin (2000) the highest record of maternal mortality rate in 200 was from war-areas. For instance, in the Killinochchi district, it was recorded as 14.0 per 10000 live births. In the other non-war districts in the country the rate is between 1 and 2 per 10000 births. The cause of higher maternal deaths in war-torn areas is the non-attendance at prenatal clinics, and also the fact that there are few opportunities for treatment in emergency situations. Some of the children that I interviewed lost their mother when the giving birth to these children and some lost their father too due to war.

4.4 Child Soldiers

A child soldier is "any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messenger and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. It includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms" (McKay, 2005:387). In Sri Lanka, nearly 4059 child soldiers had been recruited in the end of 2005 forcefully and voluntarily (UNICEF, 2006).

According to this study, several reasons as to why the children were prompted to join as child soldiers were observed. For instance, loss of parents due to the war, being witness to the death of their parents, relatives or friends, destruction of property and houses and deprivation of the basic essentials for living.

According to the study, another major factor as to why the children joined the war as child soldiers was that they wished to take revenge on the warring party. Other reasons were to experience the freedom outside of the home, and the feeling of pride as a child soldier. It was noted that the children who did not have a supply of basic needs at home also wished to join the L.T.T.E. Furthermore, the gun they got when joining as child soldiers was like an ornament for some of the children. Although much time has to be spent training, the above mentioned reasons explain why some children had a desire for war, according to this study. Further, this study shows that some children were encouraged by some of the parents and adults to join the L.T.T.E.

Apart from these reasons, breakdown in the civil administration can also have an indirect influence on the increase of child soldiers in a war-torn area. Brochini, et al (2002) pointed out that the government will not be able to maintain a civil administration in war-torn areas due to a breakdown of rules and regulations, law, and order and so on. They further say that due to the weakened state of those areas, the rebel group may join in the supply of essential items for the basic welfare of the people. When the rebel group is involved in supplying essential items, the people get close to them and children may also become attached to the rebel group with greater confidence. I also could observe in my study that children were closely attached to the L.T.T.E. members. The quotation given below indicates the attitude of a child regarding the rebel group.

My mother has to go through lots of hardship to provide us with food and cloths. But the L.T.T.E. helps us. They are so kind to us" (Interview 12).

Becoming a child soldier has a very negative impact on both children and society. Therefore, it is very important to observe what the social impacts of this issue are. When we consider children in a personal way, becoming a child soldier causes some kind of dislocation in that child's whole life. For example, on becoming a child soldier, children get experience and learn how to fight, and how to kill people before they develop their own personality; before they get experience that they should get within the family life. Because of this, the children might miss the chance to learn their role of family life and ordinary lifestyles that are accepted by society. At the same time, children lose their education, and may perhaps also face health problems due to the hard military training

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this paper was to discuss in what ways children are affected by war, and a special attempt was made to understand the impact of war on Sri Lankan children. As explained earlier, it was an extremely difficult task to explain how war impacts children within a short discussion like this. However, the aim was to get a basic idea in what ways children can be affected in a violent situation. According to this discussion, it was observed that within a situation like war, children can be affected mainly directly or indirectly which cause adverse impact on children. Such impacts can be psychological or connection with other health issues or education. At the same time, the impacts of war on children destroy their social life or the trust about the society and simply war can destroy their whole world. Children might on the surface appear to be well adjusted, but deeper examination of their inner world shows the negative effects of war. Therefore, there should be some mechanism to help children deal with the war impacts. Even though the civil war is over in Sri Lanka around 10 years back still the effects of war on children can exist. At the same time, from time to time new conflicts arise and children all over the country suffer due to these new conflicts. Therefore, special emphasis is needed to protect children from war, or violence in the country.

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