

Exploring the Impact of Wars on Children: A Case Study of the Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract: In the background of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, people are suffering from the brutality of war. However, it is not obvious that the minority children are actually the most affected among people other than soldiers, politicians and other civilians. This paper will be a review on the existing problems children face and how they are still prevalent nowadays. This research will attempt to move the spotlight on the war itself, where people are not directly engaged with, to the lives of children, whom people could care about and actually put effort in it to help the situation to get better. In Ukraine, children face the risk of diseases, psychological illness, halt of or experience education with misinformation. This study uses the method of case study and aims to create a gather of scattered information in news, UN reports and volunteer interviews to showcase the lives of children in current Ukraine.

Keywords: children, war, international politics

1. Introduction

In the course of human history, wars have been an important component. In wars, there have not been enough focus on children and their well-being. According to the most recent report conducted by United Nations, there were 18,890 children significantly impacted by war in violence including mass killing, maiming, abduction, recruitment, and use of children [1]. The fact that children are suffering from wars and unsettlement is worrisome because there is still little attention for them. Since the start of the Russian invasion against Ukraine in February 2022, there have been numerous children forced to leave their homes and flee to other places for safety. In previous studies, there have been studies regarding the possible impact of war on children in history. In this paper, the main focus will be an overview of what war could bring or has already brought to the children, especially in the Russia-Ukraine war. The clarification of the children's lives right now is significant because people are either not paying much attention to the contemporary children, or do not have a systematic review of what the children are facing. The following paper will explore the impact of war on children specifically in the Russia-Ukraine war in terms of their physical health and psychological health.

2. Impact

2.1. Physical Health

The first and most noticeable impact on children in wars is the threat to their physical health. Children are one of the most vulnerable groups of people. They are not strong enough to protect themselves from bullets. Not only are the combats killing numerous children, but the children's lives are also threatened by many other factors, such as the lack of medical support and the leftovers of war.

2.1.1. Child Soldiers' Explosion to Danger

Although strictly prohibited in the use of child soldiers in the Geneva Conventions, which states that "Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces," child soldiers are still recruited across the world [2]. According to the UN, more than 105,000 children are active as soldiers today. While the boys are required to fight or smuggle drugs, the girls, 40% of the child soldier group, will be forced to provide sexual services and others that can hardly be put into words [3]. The recruiters, who are typically non-governmental armed forces, make the child soldiers not only fighters but also scouts, spies, mine sweepers, and all other risky occupations. In Antonio Guterres' annual report to the Security Council on Children, he revealed that 8,521 child soldiers were used actively in 2020, about 2,674 were killed in battles, and 5,748 were injured [4]. Given how risky the war for child soldiers is, children still fight in the East European Plain. Both sides are using child or underaged soldiers, according to the reports in both countries where Russia publicized a 15-year-old boy standing on a tank captured from Ukraine and Ukraine reports a 17-year-old volunteer fighting in the war. In Russian propaganda, underaged children are portrayed as heroes in war [5]. In Russia, underaged soldiers are reportedly fighting alongside the militants. In Ukraine, there is also propaganda about a 17-year-old volunteer who experienced heavy fighting on the frontline and was eventually wounded and kept in the back. As a result, not only is one side of the war using children as soldiers, but both sides are justifying child soldiers and making it seem normal and heroic to fight in battles at a young age. It will result in more and more children not recognizing how harsh the war is. The illusions created in pro-war propaganda and especially emphasizing children's role in the war, intrigue children to join the fight and be exposed to more danger.

2.1.2. Lack of Medical Support

During the war, the entire healthcare system has been significantly destroyed. More than 700 attacks on hospitals and medical infrastructures are recorded by WHO's Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care (SSA) [6]. These attacks are devastating to the Ukrainian healthcare system. The constant strikes targeting hospitals affect the efficiency of doctors giving treatments and send out a panicking signal to the whole country. Thus, a lot of them choose to flee from Ukraine for a better environment. Since the start of the war, more than 13 million people have left their homes and reside either in foreign countries outside of Ukraine or in other places inside the country. Life is even more challenging for them because they are primarily women and children who are "forced to shelter for extended periods in crowded, cold, and unventilated spaces that are patently unfit for human habitation," as revealed by a study by National Library of Medicine [7]. As a result, they have limited resistance against diseases like COVID, diabetes, cancer, HIV, and TB. The displaced refugees showed a much higher infection rate, with a 4.54% chance of having one of the diseases above compared to 1.2% for the rest of these diseases [8]. Moreover, most of the affected among them are children, as martial law on February 24th, 2022, prohibits males aged 18-65 from leaving the country and refraining from joining the army [9]. As mentioned, the lack of medical support due to the

unceasing Russian attacks on hospitals and the harsh environments the children are exposed to collectively contributes to the dangerous situation for displaced children, as they are more likely to infect the diseases but also less likely to get proper treatments.

2.1.3. Unexploded Ordnance

Children's lives are also severely threatened by leftovers of war, which are called Unexploded ordnance. They are unexploded bombs or land mines unused and yet still dangerous after the war. According to the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) for Syria, on average, nine children per month have been verified as killed or injured by explosive ordnance between March 2011 and December 2019. Because of their natural curiosities, children are the most vulnerable group to be harmed by unexploded ordnance. Most cases happened when they were "playing" with the explosives. Most explosives have a distinct shape or color, which may appear intriguing to children while not understanding the risk behind them. On the other hand, children were also used in scavenger hunts after the war, which significantly increased the risk of them being exposed to unexploded ordnance. This ordnance may kill or severely injure them and leave the children with permanent disabilities. In Syria, most cases are related to the loss of upper limbs (25%), hands and fingers (33%), and eyesight (29%) [10]. Since the war's breakout, more than 30% of the Ukrainian territory might be at risk of explosives [11]. There are already cases where children are killed by unexploded ordnance.

2.2. Insufficient Psychological Support

War also has a devastating influence on children's psychological health. Of those who are directly exposed to battles, nearly one-third of them are in danger of depression and PTSD. Witnessing the killing and destruction of their homelands can be devastating for premature children. They recognize their homes as the safest place and their ultimate escape. Seeing them destroyed and forced to leave their homes increase the potential of being affected by psychological disorders. Furthermore, as they flee to other regions and do not have enough support from professional psychologists, they have no one to talk to or be treated by in a land they are not familiar with. According to Maria, a psychologist volunteer in Ukraine, many children suffer from a significant syndrome of psychological disorder. They tend not to talk about anything when recalling details about the war or the land behind it, because they are trapped in fear of themselves, so they keep silent and look away when they are reminded about the war. It is vital to help children out of the hidden trauma as they are in danger of self-harm and severe aggression if left untreated. Most of them are separated from important family members; some need to fight, and others escape [12]. Given the harsh environments they must deal with, they wake up every day with desperation for the war still going on, not being able to return to their homes, and the loss of family members and other children.

2.2.1. Children's Suspension from Education or Receiving "Brain-wash" Education

In the background of war, children and their education often do not earn enough attention. Although there are regulations on not to attack schools during wartime, there are still numerous schools under strike, and students have been forced to halt their educations. The case is especially harsh when the enemy disregards the laws. As of January 24th, more than 2,300 were damaged, and 400 schools were destroyed entirely across Ukraine and making 2.3 million students unable to continue their education [13]. Even the ones who could continue studying might face a strong sense of uncertainty brought on by sudden airstrikes or attacks. Not to mention the enormous group of children forced to flee to another territory. There is no guarantee for them to continue studying in a school. Schools are essential not only because education is the very foundation of a country but also because schools can effectively prevent psychological diseases. On the other hand, even if the students are receiving education

normally as they did before, they cannot form a correct mindset regarding their country. There have been multiple examples of invaders tempting to change the perspective of history and languages. In the invasion of Singapore from Japan, there were instances that in the areas under Japanese control people were forced to apply Japanese traditions and use Japanese instead of Singaporean. They were forced to accept the Japanese version of history and learn only what the controller wanted [14]. For example, the children were taught that the Japanese invasion is a liberalization for oppression. They claimed that they will create a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere”, which is only a disguise for invasions. In the process, the invaders unceasingly used military control, ideological infiltration, and economical exploitation to maintain their control in Eastern Asia [15]. The same things happened to Ukraine as well. According to Washington Post, teachers are provided uncommonly high salaries to teach in occupied Ukraine. They could earn more than three times higher to teach in Ukraine than teaching domestically. It is publicized as the “denazification” of Ukraine, and the children are forced to learn that Ukraine did not exist in history. The hired teachers will head to Luhansk and Donetsk, Zaporizhian Kherson, and other Russia-controlled cities to spread the perspectives Putin wants them to have. The children are in danger of being brainwashed and forgetting about their homelands [16].

3. Discussion

As mentioned, children are one of the most vulnerable groups of people to war. In terms of their physical health, whether they are being recruited to be a part of the war, or they experience it indirectly. The reason why there are still numerous children participating in fighting and all other aspects of wars is that they are not recognized as they should be. After the breakout of the war, children are not paid enough attention as there were too much emphasis on the war itself. Children should not be a part of the war because they are not responsible for it. They do not participate in the decisions regarding the relations between states, nor they have the right to vote for a president or a policy. Thus, they should be refrained from the influence of war ideally, while they are unfortunately heavily influenced in reality.

Insufficient emphasis is the main reason why they are still been harmed, although people seem to care much about them. Reports regarding children are either too vague or too subjective for people to know and be aware of the urgency of helping them. On the other hand, they are not presented to most people. Compared to the process of war, the lives of children seem to be a relatively not as important topic.

With more people knowing and caring about them, it is easier to make more strict laws against the use of child soldiers, enforce them, and better the laws with a more complete procedure of protection during the war and restoration after the war. It includes forcefully protect the children from the recruitment of terrorism and armies, discouraging propaganda of making them heroes, and giving them an alternate way of living. A more complete system of restoration also includes psychological aid, proper treatment of unexploded ordnances and restorations of medical infrastructure and schools, which requires much more attention than what they have now.

Each individual country or organizations should realize that how important it is to protect the children from conflicts and wars so that they can grow up safely and happily. They should shift their focus to a broader scale of pushing for a safe world for children globally. Also, the UN can play avital role in the process, where it is one of the only platforms where states come together to discuss and solve a particular problem. Only with strong enforcement from the governments can the children’s lives be secured.

4. Conclusion

Not only the idea of children refraining from war should be the ideal, but it should be the reality when it comes to the protection of children. In the previous passage, it is clear that children are heavily influenced by war. Some of them are directly recruited as soldiers and fight in the conflict that they should not have been a part of; some are driven out from their homes and are exposed to more risks of diseases and psychological illness; some have to break out from education or face bombardment while studying; and the whole group face the risk of finding an unexploded mine by the street and eventually harmed by it.

Future studies shall focus three aspects, a more complete understanding of how wars could potentially impact the lives of children and how to help them out of the abyss of psychological illness and a physically dangerous environment after war. There should be more children, ideally all of them, been traced after the war to receive psychiatric assessments and analysis to help them and, at the same time, use them as samples to gain a complete, concrete and systematic understanding of the potential harm of war on children. Through the use of questionnaires, in-person interviews and psychological support, researchers would get more vivid examples.

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