If War – How to Minimize the Loss for School Children

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Abstract:

War is so devastating that if at all possible, it should be avoided. But if reasoning and negotiation fail to yield peace between nations and countries and war results, the loss to children must be minimized. In the last decade, two million children have been killed in wars and conflicts, 4.5 million have been disabled and 12 million have been left homeless. Environmental damage due to the use of nuclear and chemical weaponry is horrendous; there are higher cancer and disease rates as well as higher rates of offspring born with birth defects. Also, disproportionate spending on war takes funding away from programs that improve the quality of life (Marshall, 2004). Children must be kept in mind during times of war; they need to be with their parents, protected within their home communities and have basic health, educational and social services. In as much as education is the foundation on which all professional and service endeavors are built, any decision for engagement in war must protect the educational system; there must be contingency plans in place to safeguard children and meet their developmental needs. This presentation focuses on the issue of war and how it impacts school children. It addresses war as a last-resort strategy, but because of the probability of war continuing to occur, means are offered for various sectors of society to minimize the loss for school children.

Introduction

Some nations have been the battlefield to only a few, if any, wars; other nations have almost constantly been the home of war. Some nations have been very selective

about the soldiers who engage in battle; other nations have cut across their entire population to enlist soldiers. Some nations have made efforts to protect children from the direct ills of war; other nations have made children active participants in war. But whether war is on the mainland or across the distant seas, or whether the soldiers are adult citizens, family members or include children themselves, unless careful thought is given to the impending needs of children, the quality of their education will be extremely negatively affected.

It is almost unbelievable that at this point in time children are targets, expendables, victims, refugees and even perpetrators in one conflict after another, on virtually every continent (Evans, 1996). According to Lasser and Adams (2007), war may be the most profound psychosocial stressor on child and adolescent development. It has the potential to inflict loss, cause disruption of stability, create health problems and result in family and community system disorganization. It is no fabrication to say that war is devastating to nations, and especially children; yet, it is so common around the world. In the midst of the atrocity, children -- every nation's most precious present and future resource, are too often both victims and combatants. It appears only fitting and proper to say, if war -- minimize the loss for school children.

Purpose

This paper first addresses the matter of preventing war. But since war is still so highly regarded as a means of settling disputes among nations, attention is focused on the devastation of war, the involvement of children, its affects on education, how to minimize the impact on children and life beyond the period of war.

Prevent war at all cost

Considerable credit may be given to the freedom gained from select wars of the past, albeit the price paid for the freedom was quite steep. But the employment of current technology in warfare could make human and material loss incomprehensible. While the loss of anyone or the depletion of valuable resources to war is difficult to bear, the loss of large numbers of children to war is unpardonable. The prevention of war must become a goal for the international community; it must improve the protection and care of children in conflict situations and in large measure, ensure that such conflicts do not occur.

Report after report shows that militarism is out of control, cutting a violent path of unprecedented proportions across our planet (Marshall, 2004). In 1995, thirty major armed conflicts raged in different locations around the world. The conflicts destroyed crops, places of worship and schools; nothing was spared, held sacred or protected – not children, families or communities. Some analysts attribute these conflicts to political upheavals and struggles for control over resources. Others think it is a natural outcome of the social revolutions that have torn traditional societies apart. But regardless to the cause, modern-day brutality towards children must come to a halt. Children simply have no part in warfare (Promotion and protection of the rights of children: Impact of armed conflict on children, n.d.).

Children are entitled to a childhood. Society must afford the opportunity for children to grow up as children, not weapons of war. A lot is reported on the methods by which children can be protected from the worst impacts of armed conflict. However, the most effective way to protect children is to prevent the outbreak of armed conflict. The political inertia that allows circumstances to escalate into armed conflict and destroy

children's lives must be eradicated. This means addressing the root causes of violence and promoting sustainable and equitable patterns of human development. Preventing conflicts from escalating is a clear responsibility of national governments and the international community. Religious, community and traditional leaders have often been successful at conflict management and prevention, as have scholars involved in mediation and capacity building. Women's organizations too, have been very influential, promoting the presence of women at the negotiating table where they can act as their own advocates and agents for peace (Promotion and protection of the rights of children: Impact of armed conflict on children, n.d.).

Society must do anything and everything to protect children, to give them priority and a better future; there is a need for a new morality that puts children where they belong – at the heart of all agendas. Protecting children from the impact of armed conflict is everyone's responsibility. Children have a right to peace (Impact of armed conflict on children: A personal note from Graca Machel, n.d.).

To prevent armed conflict, the international community should closely monitor arms transfers and impose a total ban on arms shipments to conflict zones. Governments and civil society must address the root socio-economic causes of conflict and support the social infrastructure that protects children (Impact of armed conflict on children: Ten recommendations, n.d.).

Education is essential to protecting children both from conflict and during conflict and to rebuilding nations in its aftermath. It is the key to alleviating poverty and reducing the risks of perpetual conflict by helping lay the groundwork for personal

growth, economic growth and political development (Congress needs to help millions of children out of school in war-torn countries: Save the children, 2007).

From an educational perspective, the prevention of war may require looking at things very differently from the way that they are currently viewed and discovering new uses for weapons of war. It may begin with redefining or reconceptualizing the word "WAR." Each letter of the word may have a meaning such as follows:

W   -Work together to achieve peace around the world

A   -Aim to provide every child a free and appropriate public education

R   -Recognize and reward people who work to achieve a truly humanitarian society

The discovery of new uses for weapons of war may include the following:

- use soldiers to assist in natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornados, and wild fires

- trade the production of guns and bullets for the preparation of food and shelter in poverty stricken areas and undeveloped countries

- use airplanes to more safely and timely transport passengers from city to city

If another peg is needed to promote the concept of preventing war, the children have it. In assessing adolescents' views of war and peace, it was found that they overwhelmingly believe that wars are bad and the majority is optimistic that world peace is possible. Yet, they have come to realize that wars are difficult to prevent, believe that they are sometimes needed and will occur in the future (Garatti & Rudnitski, 2007). The latter views may be positively modified with education that better addresses conflict resolution and heightened skills of effective interpersonal relationships.

Devastating affects of war on children

Armed conflicts result in massive levels of destruction – physical, human, moral and cultural. Large numbers of children are killed and injured; many other grow up deprived of material and emotional needs that give meaning to social and cultural life – their homes, schools, health systems and religious institutions are torn to pieces. War violates every right of a child – right to life, right to be with family and community, right to health, right to the development of personality and right to be nurtured and protected. Much of the impact remains invisible. The resulting insecurity and fear cannot be measured (Promotion and protection of the rights of children: Impact of armed conflict on children, n.d.).

During the last decade it is estimated that child victims of war have included 2 million killed, 4.5 million disabled, 12 million left homeless, more than 1 million orphaned or separated from their parents and 10 million seriously psychologically traumatized. It is reported that 1 in 10 soldiers is a child. Worldwide there are 300,000 child soldiers. During war families and communities are more likely to disintegrate and lose their cohesion. Children are subjected to visible and invisible injuries, experience destitution, abandonment, neglect, abuse, exploitation, and long-term emotional and psychological effects. War often interrupts children's healthy growth and development, debilitates them physically and emotionally and causes them to suffer or die from malnutrition and disease. Increasingly, children are targets, not incidental casualties, of armed conflict (Evans, 1996; Impact of armed conflict on children: A personal note from Graca Machel, n.d.; War Child International, n.d.).

In some countries, conflicts have raged for so long that children have grown into adults without ever knowing peace. Nine year-old children have been raped by soldiers, mothers have seen their children blown to pieces by land-mines, children have watched while their families were brutally slaughtered and children have been so manipulated by adults and corrupted by their experiences of conflict that they could not recognize the evil of which they had been a part (Impact of armed conflict on children: A personal note from Graca Machel, n.d.).

For the Iraq war, the Iraqi children are the ones most directly affected. However, also affected are children in families of American military service personnel serving in Iraq and other trouble spots. These children are deeply affected by the absence of a parent. Teachers need to introduce peace education principles within their classroom setting and school community. Activities need to emphasize to children that care and concern for each other can create a school environment free of violence (Iraq's children of war and America's children, n.d.). In families where the soldier is injured, killed or psychologically debilitated, the experience may have a traumatic effect on all family members. There needs to be an understanding of the range of children's responses to the stressor of having a parent deployed to a war front and to identify strategies to support those children who may be more vulnerable (Groves & Chartrand, 2007).

Listed here are some statistics on the Iraq war:

- some 800,000 Iraqi children are not attending school (2006)
- armed conflict is depriving youth of an education
- conflict is fueling Iraqi health crisis
- professors have been a target of Iraq's violence, causing a severe shortage of teachers

- some 417 schools, including universities, had been attacked, resulting in the closure of several

- over 10,000 professionals, including physicians, have fled the country since 2003

- there are thousands of displaced children in Iraq and most do not have access to education (Brussells tribunal dossier: Children of Iraq – Living with war, n.d.).

Devastation goes on even after war. Girls returning home are often marginalized and excluded from their communities. They are viewed as violent, unruly, dirty or as promiscuous troublemakers. With no other means of supporting themselves, many are forced to turn to sex work, making them even more stigmatized and isolated (Forgotten casualties of war: Girls in armed conflict, n.d.).

The threats children face during times of conflict strike at the very heart of childhood. Conflict kills tens of thousands of children every year; it also maims them physically – through injury, an increased risk of disease and malnutrition. It affects their development by increasing the risk of separation from parents, making them more vulnerable to abuse and less able to get humanitarian assistance and it often stops their education as schools are shut down (Forgotten casualties of war: Girls in armed conflict, n.d.).

During conflict, community and families are fragile. Families are often forced to flee their homes and children are more likely to get separated from their parents. It is in these circumstances that children are abducted or coerced into joining armed groups where they become spies, porters, combatants and so-called 'wives' of military commanders (Forgotten casualties of war: Girls in armed conflict, n.d.).

Even children not directly impacted by political violence often are aware of current violent political conflicts and report feelings of fear, worry, sadness, anger and confusion. Recognizing what children understand about war is a first step in helping them cope with war and the feelings associated with it. Children's understanding of war precedes their understanding of peace. They associate peace with what it is not (e.g., absence of fighting) and with interpersonal interactions (sharing, friendship). They associate war with fighting, shooting and killing with objects such as guns, soldiers and airplanes. Helping children to see peace as something they can do may help them cope with events they cannot control; they need help in visualizing a world in which they feel safe and know peace (Walker, Myers-Bowman & Myers-Walls, 2003).

Things children do in times of war

One of the most alarming trends in armed conflict is participation of children as soldiers. They serve armies in supporting roles, as cooks, porters, messengers and spies. However, increasingly they are being used as soldiers. Some commanders have even noted that they are desirable because they are more obedient, do not question orders and are easier to manipulate than adult soldiers. The children most likely to become soldiers are those from impoverished and marginalized backgrounds and those who have become separated from their families. Once recruited, child soldiers receive much the same treatment as adults, including often-brutal induction ceremonies (Promotion and protection of the rights of children: Impact of armed conflict on children, n.d.).

Girl recruits, in addition to preparing food, may attend to the wounded and wash clothes and be forced to provide sexual services or may be "married off" to rebel leaders. Like boys, girls take an active part in fighting. They also take on other

military duties such as gathering information. Most girls are sexually violated by members of the armed group (Forgotten casualties of war: Girls in armed conflict, n.d.; Promotion and protection of the rights of children: Impact of armed conflict on children, n.d.).

While children of both sexes might start out in indirect support functions, it does not take long before they are placed in the heat of battle. Their inexperience and lack of training leave them particularly exposed. For example, when the shelling starts the children may get overexcited and forget to take cover. Some commanders supply them with alcohol or drugs to deliberately exploit their fearlessness (Promotion and protection of the rights of children: Impact of armed conflict on children, n.d.).

Education in times of war

In areas of war and conflict, education is often among the first casualties. Schools close, teachers flee or are recruited into the military and school systems are no longer funded. This puts children at risk, making them easier targets for recruitment as child soldiers or exploitation as cheap labor. There are 39 million children who live in areas of war and conflict and cannot go to school. Save the Children wants Congress to support legislation – the Education for All Act of 2007, that ensures American leadership for international effort to provide all children in areas of war and conflict with a basic education. The legislation ensures that all children have access to quality education and supports training teachers, eliminating school fees and including education along with food, water and shelter (Congress needs to help millions of children out of school in war-torn countries: Save the children, 2007).

Unaccompanied war children constitute one of the most vulnerable groups. Isolated from services and community support mechanisms, they suffer disproportionably from educational deprivation, abuse, exploitation, physical impairments and psychosocial trauma (Evans, 1996).

Because of risks to education during conflict, schools may be highly susceptible to shelling, closure or looting. Teachers are also prime targets because they are important community members and tend to be more than usually politicized. Fear and disruption make it difficult to create an atmosphere conducive to learning and the morale of both teachers and pupils is likely to be low (Promotion and protection of the rights of children: Impact of armed conflict on children, n.d.).

Education should develop the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. It gives shape and structure to children's lives and can instill community values, promote justice and respect for human rights and enhance peace, stability and interdependence. Schooling can represent a state of normalcy and offer the chance to be with friends and enjoy their support and encouragement. Children benefit from regular contacts with teachers who can monitor their physical and psychological health (Promotion and protection of the rights of children: Impact of armed conflict on children, n.d.).

Educational planning may include establishing alternative sites for classrooms and changing the venues regularly, because they are targets in times of war. Children can sometimes attend regular schools in host countries. Non-competitive learner-centered approaches may help foster self-confidence in children and develop a wide range of skills. Specific recommendations for education are to maintain education systems during

conflicts; sustain education outside of formal school buildings; extend the boundaries of emergency funding; as soon as camps are established for refugees or internally displaced persons, children should be brought together for educational activities and support for re-establishment and continuity of education should be a priority for donors (Promotion and protection of the rights of children: Impact of armed conflict on children, n.d.).

For a former child soldier, education is more than a route to employment; it helps to normalize life and to develop an identity separate from that of the soldier. There is the need to develop peer relationships and self esteem. Many may have fallen far behind and teachers and parents may object to having ex-combatants enrolled in school; older ones will require strong components of training in life-skill and vocational opportunity; and frustrations of poverty and injustice may remain (Promotion and protection of the rights of children: Impact of armed conflict on children, n.d.).

Minimizing the impact of war on children

Children are both our reason to eliminate the worst aspects of armed conflict and our best hope of succeeding in that change. In a disparate world, children are a unifying force capable of bringing us all together in support of a common good (Impact of armed conflict on children: A personal note from Graca Machel, n.d.).

Teachers can help children whose parents are U.S. military personnel to better cope with the absence of a parent by closely monitoring them, engaging them in conversations and keeping alert to signs of emotional distress. Teachers are in a key position to recommend assistance for children of service personnel where needed. Service learning is also very helpful for these children. It prepares children to be responsible citizens throughout their lives; it can focus on giving to others in need and it

also is a bridge between academic skills and community action (Iraq's children of war and America's children, n.d.).

Among the recommendations to reduce the impact of armed conflict on children are (1) peace and security – the need to make children and women the heart of all actions to resolve conflicts and implement peace agreements; (2) monitoring and reporting violations of child rights and (3) health, psychosocial well-being and education – these are the pillars of all humanitarian assistance for children in emergencies (Impact of armed conflict on children: Ten recommendations, n.d.).

Girls have identified ways that the international community can help them in long-term reintegration such as follows:

- mediation work with the community and family to explain that they were coerced into joining the group

- assistance in establishing and maintaining livelihoods

- access to school and skills training

- networks that provide emotional support

- medical tests and assistance (Forgotten casualties of war: Girls in armed conflict, n.d.).

One key way to minimize the impact of war on children is to talk to them about war. But in so doing, it is important to always tell the truth and always reassure them. Some children will be more fearful than others, but they will take their lead from the teacher or other adult. Other points to consider in talking to kids about war are:

- encourage children to speak about what they are feeling; it is damaging for them to keep it in

- explore positive ways of coping to allay children's fears

- always be attentive to the children's needs, fears and questions

- show children that they are loved

- during times of stress and overwhelm, be there for the children

- be open, honest, clear and accurate

- if it is necessary to correct misperceptions, do so with simple, age-appropriate explanations

- reassure children that steps are being taken to make things safer (Love our children, n.d.).

Teachers and parents should not hesitate to get more advice and help when needed in working with children. Additional resources to help cope with war are the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychiatric Association and the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Love our children, n.d.).

All sectors of society must come together to build "ethical frameworks," integrating traditional values of cooperation through religious and community leaders with international legal standards. Some of the groundwork can be laid in schools. Both the content and the process of education should promote peace, social justice, respect for human rights and the acceptance of responsibility. Children need to learn skills of negotiation, problem solving, critical thinking and communication that will enable them to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence. The most difficult challenge is to achieve tolerance not just between individuals, but also between groups. The media can play an important role by helping readers and viewers to enjoy diversity and by promoting the understanding that is needed for peaceful co-existence and the respect that

is required for the enjoyment of human rights. Also essential are clear and strong

mechanisms for reconciliation, the protection of minorities and access to social justice.

Governments can specifically outlaw the kinds of discrimination that breed resentment.

The persistent violation of the rights of minority and indigenous groups has helped

generate the conditions that lead to armed conflict (Promotion and protection of the

rights of children: Impact of armed conflict on children, n.d.).

Discovering ways to minimize the impact of war on school children was a

major objective of this presentation. Table 1 contains ways that different sectors of

society can facilitate accomplishment of the objective. More specifically, it highlights

the things that children themselves can do, how parents can help, what educators and

other professionals can do and the roles that governments and the international

community can play in the process. With these principal forces coming together, the

future for school children is certain to be more promising.

Looking beyond wartime

Children are seen as both our present and our future. It is essential that adults

give children futures worth having. With prevailing opportunities children can build

bridges of communication and become mobilized as militants for peace. Children can be

helped to understand that preventing the conflicts of tomorrow means changing the mind-

set of youth today (Impact of armed conflict on children: A personal note from Graca

Machel, n.d.).

The consequences of war on certain children persist for a long time. Therefore,

alongside the rebuilding of the houses, schools and other necessary services, children

must be prepared for reintegration into the community. Remaining physical problems

Table 1

Minimizing the Impact of War on School Children

How Children can Help
- Make schooling a priority in all conversations and deeds, then diligently pursue it
- Make family an institution of togetherness, strength and pride
- Make peace and friendship buzz words in all interpersonal relationships
- If given a choice, hasten to choose school over guns and bullets
- If your parents or relatives serve in the military, support them with all your heart and soul

How Parents can Help
- Demonstrate responsibility; love, support and protect children as they grow and develop
- Integrate children into the community to develop citizenship skills
- Monitor children's activities; encourage them when they are right, correct them when they are wrong
- Never voluntarily offer or encourage your school-age child to join the army
- Talk to children about war; point out how it harms or how it might benefit society

How Educators and other Professionals can Help
- Make development of the whole child the aim of education
- Make school a place too inviting and stimulating for students to dissociate from it
- Make instruction meaningful and authentic for each student
- Make conflict resolution come alive with every opportunity that presents itself
- If there is war, listen to children's concerns, answer their questions and assist as needed

How Governments and the International Community can Help
- Settle conflicts in board rooms with effective communication and negotiation
- Just say no to the concept of child soldiers; let children be students
- View children as too precious to be deployed in the arm services
- If all else fails and war is the last resort, minimize the loss to children in every way possible

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must be treated and any psychic or psychological problems must be eradicated. The

communities, families, schools and children themselves must take part in curing and

supporting child soldiers. One means of intervention for child victims of war is

creative therapies, which include cultural media and personal account or the creative word. Cultural media include arts of interpretation – using theatre, dance, writing, oral storytelling, etc., to decrease the harmful effects of war; visual arts to express thoughts and feelings by photographs and drawings; music; cinema; television and radio. The personal account or creative word can be used as a means of treatment of psychic problems of war. The reactive therapies can decrease the psychological problems of children touched by war (Minou, 2006)

Children are a unifying force capable of bringing people to common ethical grounds. Their needs and aspirations cut across all ideologies and cultures. Children need nutritious food, adequate health care, decent education, shelter and a secure and loving family. Children are both our reason to struggle to eliminate the worst aspects of warfare and our best hope for succeeding at it. Society must be such that children are more precious and important than things; it must be a place where people can be more human, caring and gentle (Promotion and protection of the rights of children: Impact of armed conflict on children, n.d.).

Summary and Implications

This presentation has provided information on ways to reduce the impact of war on school children. Effort was made to delineate what is practical and possible. But we must look beyond what seems immediately possible and find new ways and new solutions to shield children from the consequences of war and to directly address the conflicts themselves. All rights to which children are entitled are consistently abused during armed conflict. The flagrant abuse and exploitation of children during armed conflict can and must be eliminated. All children must be spared the pernicious effects of

armed conflict (Promotion and protection of the rights of children: Impact of armed conflict on children, n.d.).

Some children may reach adulthood without the obvious effects of war; they loose neither parents, siblings or close friends and receive uninterrupted, quality education. Other children fall at the opposite end of the spectrum; they are both victims and combatants of war. For the former, because these children too are members of an international community, they are indirectly affected by war. For the latter, to simply survive is a challenge.

War should not be considered a necessity in modern society. With various sectors of the international community working together it could all but be prevented, if not entirely prevented; its negative impact on children can certainly be minimized. Basic tenets on war and children are summarized as follows:

- war is too devastating for a place in modern society

- if nations must fight – leave the children out of it

- let war be a frown and education the smile that turns the frown upside down

- make education the key to world peace

Implications and recommendations resulting from this study are: (1) there is a need to respond to the targeting of children for war by targeting children for peace and stability; (2) there is a need to recognize and protect the rights of children and (3) there is a need to supply children with appropriate tools and opportunities for developing a stabilizing, growth-oriented future (Somers, 1997).

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