

# How war severely violates the basic human rights of children

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## ABSTRACT

This article addresses the critical issue of violence against children, defined as a violation of their rights across interpersonal, community, societal, and global settings, encompassing both physical and psychological actions targeting them or their parents. Globally, WHO estimates that an unacceptably large number of children aged 2–17 years, experience physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect yearly. War stands out as a major contributor to the infringement of children's fundamental human rights. Those in conflict zones undergo traumatic experiences, including the loss of family members, disruptions to social networks, displacement, and the denial of basic needs. The severe deprivation of essential resources and opportunities, coupled with the stress of warfare, poses a grave threat to the emotional and cognitive development of children, increasing the risk of physical and mental illnesses, disabilities, social problems, and intergenerational consequences. The article aims to draw attention to this issue and advocates for the development of appropriate academic and post-academic educational courses and training programs. This will better equip pediatricians and healthcare professionals to effectively combat violence against children in any context.

## **Introduction**

Violence against children, is a global critical issue, which is defined worldwide as a violation of their rights across interpersonal, community, societal, and global settings, encompassing both physical and psychological actions targeting them or their parents.<sup>1,2</sup> Globally, WHO estimates that an unacceptably large number of children aged 2–17 years, experience physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect yearly.<sup>1,2</sup> War stands out as a major contributor to the infringement of children's fundamental human rights. Those in conflict zones undergo traumatic experiences, including the loss of family members, disruptions to social networks, displacement, and the denial of basic needs.<sup>3</sup> The severe deprivation of essential resources and opportunities, coupled with the stress of warfare, poses a grave threat to the emotional and cognitive development of children, increasing the risk of physical and mental illnesses, disabilities, social problems, and intergenerational consequences.<sup>2-4</sup> The article aims to draw attention to this issue and advocates for the development of appropriate academic and post-academic educational courses and training programs. This will better equip pediatricians and healthcare professionals to effectively combat violence against children in any context.

## **Children, not numbers**

Despite the decreasing number of countries involved in armed conflicts in the last decades, the number of children on the frontlines of conflicts and subjected to the effects of war has increased by about 75%, rising from 200 million in 1990 to 426 million in 2019 (1.5). Consequently, approximately one-fifth of the world's children are affected.<sup>5</sup> In 2005, the United Nations (UN) identified six grave violations: recruitment and use of children by parties to armed conflict, their killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, abductions, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access.<sup>5,6</sup> Since 2005, the UN has recorded 250,000 verified cases of grave violations, with 25,000 cases registered in 2020 alone. Of these, half were committed by non-state actors, and one-third by government and international forces.<sup>5,6</sup> About 80% of the verified violations involve boys.<sup>5</sup> Although the actual numbers are estimated to be even higher, the recorded incidents are staggering.<sup>5</sup> Over the last 10 years, an average of 25 children have been killed or maimed every day, totaling 93,236 cases.<sup>5</sup> In its 2020 report, the UN verified that 4019 children were killed, and 6154 children were maimed.<sup>6</sup> Rape and sexual violence are underestimated more than any other violation due to stigma and the difficulty of monitoring and reporting.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, in 2019, 749 cases were verified, with 98% committed against girls.<sup>5</sup> In the same year, the UN confirmed the abduction of 1683 children, with over 95% of cases perpetrated by non-state actors. Children were abducted for recruitment and use as soldiers, as well as for sexual violence or ransom.<sup>6</sup> The denial of children's rights, such as education and health, has been increasingly compromised in recent years. In 2019 alone, 494 attacks on schools and 433 attacks on hospitals were verified. Schools were repurposed for military use, and classes were canceled indefinitely or suspended for weeks or longer. War forcibly displaces people from their homes and countries, resulting in an increased number of refugees.<sup>7</sup> According to data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, the number of internally displaced people due to conflict and violence increased from approximately 25 million in 2009 to 45.7 million in 2019.<sup>8</sup> Millions of children live within armed conflict zones, and nearly 33% of them reside outside their country of birth as refugees.<sup>2</sup> In 2018, children under 18 years constituted more than half of the 26 million refugees worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Worldwide, there are almost 100,000 children who are unaccompanied or separated from their families.<sup>9</sup> Only in 2015, about 96,000 asylum applications were submitted in Europe by unaccompanied children.<sup>9</sup> Exploitation and trafficking are significant risks: of the nearly 90,000 unaccompanied minors who applied for asylum in 2015, more than 10,000 have gone missing.<sup>9</sup>

## **No lighthearted moments for children**

As well stated by Sir Richard Steele, in his recollection of childhood published in "The Tatler" in 1709, the infant mind is analogous to the body in embryo, receiving impressions so profound

that they are as indelible as any mark a child bears from birth.<sup>10</sup> Childhood should ideally be a carefree period, filled with joyous moments and cherished memories. Unfortunately, not all children are fortunate; in times of war, they become vulnerable victims exposed to traumatic events that impact their physical and mental well-being. The harm suffered by children in armed conflicts persists throughout their lives, with direct and indirect effects. Although not all children and adolescents exhibit adverse consequences in response to war and conflict exposure, it underscores the importance of considering individual exposure history and subjective interpretations of events to accurately identify the mental health risks faced by youth in war-affected zones.<sup>11</sup>

In war zones, children endure a wide array of injuries and illnesses. Primary physical injuries include orthopedic lesions, disfigurement, burns, traumatic brain injury, and death, often resulting from explosive devices like mines, artillery shells, and bombs. Other studies have also documented the effects of chemical or biological weapons. Residual disability is a significant complication. An increase in acute and infectious illnesses such as tuberculosis, measles, hepatitis B/E, and cholera has been recorded due to living conditions that involve limited access to water, sanitation, and vaccinations, along with overcrowding and mingling with large groups of displaced individuals in camps or other settings.<sup>8,12</sup> Malnutrition is a central aspect of war, influencing children's growth both in utero and during early childhood, leading to lower birth weight and reduced height-for-age in their teenage years.<sup>13-16</sup> Unhealthy habits (tobacco use, alcohol consumption, poor diet, lack of physical exercise), pollution, lack of clean water, and concurrent diseases such as measles, typhoid fever, and cholera, especially in children, contribute to excess mortality.<sup>8</sup>

The primary impact of war on children predominantly concerns their development and psychological well-being. Adversity during childhood

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can alter brain structure and neuroendocrine function, resulting in changes in learning, behavior, and physiology.<sup>12</sup> Children's education collapses dramatically, leading to higher rates of delayed language skills acquisition, lower intelligence quotient scores, and poorer overall academic achievement. These cognitive impairments further limit the overall health and socioeconomic opportunities of affected children. War brings about the loss of loved ones, disruption of traditional family structures and safe housing, increased exposure to traumatic experiences and violence, disruption of family structures, and social disintegration, leading to a wide range of psychological reactions from mild and temporary stress responses to more severe problems.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, children are vulnerable to sexual violence, harassment, and exploitation, all of which contribute to mental health problems in children and adolescents.<sup>17</sup> Common stress reactions include specific fears, anger, insecurity, dependent behavior, prolonged crying, lack of interest in the environment, and aggressive behaviors.<sup>4,17</sup> Preschool children exposed to violent trauma often engage in re-enactments of such trauma during play and storytelling, featuring morbid themes, restrictions in fantasy play, and social withdrawal.<sup>4,17,18</sup> In adults, the self-perpetuating desocialization and dehumanization, along with the excitement of combat and sexual violence, are typical feelings experienced by child soldiers, who are constantly exposed to dead bodies and mutilated victims. Numerous studies have documented a higher prevalence of mental disorders among children (2–4 times as high as global prevalence estimates) during and post-conflict compared to the general population, focusing on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety disorders. A meta-analysis reported a 22.7% prevalence of PTSD, 13.8% of depression, and 15.8% of anxiety disorders.<sup>4,8</sup>

### **Supportive strategies**

Pediatricians play a crucial role in the efforts to eradicate violence against children by advocating for and implementing policies that prevent and alleviate harm in war zones. Basic necessities, including shelter, sanitation, food, water, schooling, primary healthcare, and mental health support, should be ensured, establishing safe zones that respect the rights of children.

Evacuation protocols and access to secure medical centers equipped with the necessary resources should be established in war-torn areas, where the primary goal is the protection of children. Achieving these objectives requires collaboration among various professionals, including educators, experts in international humanitarian law, and both governmental and non-governmental organizations.<sup>8,19-21</sup>

## Conclusion

In the current historic moment, it is crucial for pediatricians and families to provide support to children, mitigating the potential psychological repercussions mentioned earlier. Pediatricians can significantly contribute to ensuring that the children of the future enjoy better opportunities for a normal and enriched childhood. Their role is pivotal, especially in fostering psychological well-being and contributing to the personal growth of children within a community with its own set of rules. Children must cultivate love and respect for others, understanding that "other" does not signify a limitation but rather a treasure for their personal development. Consequently, the child of today can evolve into a better individual tomorrow. **CRedit authorship contribution statement**

**Pietro Ferrara:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **Ignazio Cammisa:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **Margherita Zona:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Visualization,

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Writing – original draft. **Ida Giardino:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. **Maria Pastore:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. **Massimo Pettoello-Mantovani:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing.

## Declaration of competing interest

The Authors do not have any potential conflict of interest, real or perceived;

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