

## Children and Armed Conflict: Exploring the Approaches of Study

Shagun Saklani Pande\*

**Abstract:** *Children are mostly considered to be vulnerable and passive victims in situations of armed conflict. The field of study of children and armed conflict has hitherto been dominated by the psycho- medical approach. Interventions in the field are also highly influenced by psychiatric and psychological research and therapeutic work. However, this approach has been critiqued for omitting the societal, environmental and relational dimensions of a child's life that play an influential role during such adversities. One argues in favour of newer approaches like the social constructivist and everyday life sociology to study this phenomenon. These approaches look at children as social actors and active agents in their own rights during situation of armed conflict. Children's agency and their response to adversities cannot be ignored. In order to get a holistic understanding of children in situations of armed conflict, one needs to look beyond the hitherto established frameworks and explore the everyday lives of children.*

**Key Terms:** Children | Armed Conflict | Psycho- Medical approach | Social Constructivism | Everyday Life

\*Shagun Saklani Pande, PhD. works with Concern India Foundation, Mumbai. Email: shagunsaklani1@gmail.com

### Introduction

Today's world is marred by a large number of armed conflicts. Millions of children across the globe are losing their childhood to this current reality. Children comprise of the most vulnerable section of the population during times of armed conflict and get directly or indirectly embroiled in various armed struggle throughout the world (Hart 2004). Cases of murder, rape, mutilation, forced recruitment; displacement, separation from family etc. are some of the most visible examples of atrocities against children in such situations. Not only are large numbers of children killed and injured, but countless others grow up deprived of their material and emotional needs, including the structures that give meaning to social and cultural life. The changing nature of war from being interstate to civil in nature dictates that, the community- the spaces where childhood is lived and experienced, becomes the battleground. When violent confrontations take place within these spaces, it has far- reaching consequences for children. The consequences, interdependent among themselves, range from being orphaned, emotional scars, trauma, displacement and poverty among others (Angucia 2009: 80-81). The destruction of health and education systems during war and its aftermath leave to children deprived of

their basic rights to education and health (UNICEF 2005). Large numbers of children are subjected to conflict- induced displacement (Boyden and Berry 2004; ICRC 2009; United Nations 2010; Nilsson 2013). There is gross violation of rights of children leading to their marginalization, vulnerability and severe psycho- social and emotional consequences (Machel 1996; Wessells 1998; Fisher 2002; Boyden 2003; Boyden and Berry 2004; ICRC 2009; Cook and Wall 2011).

There exists a dialectic relation between the psychological and social elements that impact children during situations of armed conflict (Hick 2001: 17) wherein psychological elements consist of those that effect emotions, behaviour, thoughts, memory, perception, and understanding. On the other hand, the social elements consists of altered relationships due to death, separation, estrangement and other such losses, family and community breakdown, damage to social values and customary practices; and destruction of social facilities and services. During the times of armed conflict, families and other social institutions often cease to exist and this results in children being denied lasting relationships of affection as well as stable ground

upon which to develop physical, intellectual and moral terms (West 2000: 180; Nilsson 2013). Children today find themselves caught up in complex and long term conflicts that have multiple causes and are being sucked into these seemingly endless endemic struggles for power and resource.

The kind of incidences children witness and the experiences they go through during the times of armed conflict often disrupt their development, not just physical and psychological but also social and emotional. Under such conditions, 'children may be socialized into a model of fear, violence and hatred because the scars of trauma are borne by these children for the rest of their lives' (Garbarino, Kostelny and Dubrow 1991: 16) Armed conflict, thus, entails many transformations and hazards with major implications on children's survival, development, health and overall wellbeing.

### **Children and Armed Conflict: Exploring the approaches of study**

The field of study of children and armed conflict is vast, and there is extensive literature in varied disciplines available on it. However, the focus of this literature has been more on the concept of childhood rather than the lives of children. Childhood is considered as a distinct, natural phase in the human life cycle, which extends from birth to adolescence. According to Boyden (2003: 3) 'the understanding is that this particular phase called *childhood* has its own dynamics, interests and rights and children are often considered here as immature persons in the process of development'. They are considered to have different abilities, special emotional, physical, and psycho- social needs than the adults. Therefore, in comparison to the adults, children are generally considered to be pre-logical, pure and natural beings, innocent in their ways of the world and incompetent in it (Freeman 1983: 7), thus distinct from adults. Literature also stresses on the need for a safe family and social environment for a child's overall development and well- being. Jenks (2000) and Boyden (1997) state that going by these pre-requisites for a child's wellbeing and development, a child has to necessarily be reared by parents in a domestic setting, secluded from dangers and hardships of the adult world and kept safely in spaces like home and schools. However, these pre-requisites are completely marred during times of armed conflict leading to children's vulnerability and marginalization. One observes that childhood has been the focus of significant academic scholarship (Freud and Burlingham 1943; Bluebond- Langer

1978; Scheper and Hughes 1992; Apfel and Simon 1996) however, most of these researches have been conducted in the discipline of psychiatry, medicine and psychology adhere to the *Psycho-Medical Approach* that has dominated this field of study, especially that of armed conflict and children.

### **The Psycho-Medical Approach and its Critique**

The psycho- medical approach has dominated the field of study of children in situations of armed conflict (Ayalon 1983; Djeddah and Shah 1996; Hamilton and Man 1998; Gupta 2000). Tracing back to the seminal work conducted by Freud and Burlingham (1943) in the aftermath of Second World War highlighting the catastrophic effects of war on children, has been the centre point of referral for many scholars. Further interventions in the field of children and armed conflict are also highly influenced by psychiatric and psychological research and therapeutic work. The psycho- medical approach has brought out the varied physical, psychological and emotional effects of conflict on children and has brought forward important insights into the domain of children's sufferings leading to awareness amongst the academia, humanitarian organisations, relief agencies and national and international forums about children's existence and acknowledgement in the situations of armed conflict. The concepts of trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) have also been the major outcomes of researches adhering to the psycho-medical approach in the field of armed conflict and war (Sack, Clarke and Seeley 1996; Bracken and Petty 1998; Halligan 2009). The experience and exposure of children to armed conflict is further associated with children being portrayed as vulnerable and traumatized and there is also an assumed relationship between children experiencing war and the development of mental health problems (Watters 2011: 111).

**Criticism:** This approach has invited criticism wherein some critics have questioned the validity of PTSD as an interpretive model due to its specific cultural and historical origin and conception (Boyden 2003) and others have argued against the trauma framework for having its roots in the American cultural setting and not having the ability to translate into other social, cultural and political contexts (Bracken and Petty 1998). The focus of this approach has been on the survivors of armed conflict rather than the social formations that give rise to such adverse situations or the empirical information on children's experience during situations of armed conflict. Boyden (2003) and Boyden and Berry

(2004) have majorly criticised the psycho- medical framework for bringing out a fairly mechanistic relationship between armed conflict and children and only highlighting how children are victims exposed to traumatic experience leading to their psychological consequences and disorders. Boyden and Berry (2004: xv) argue that *firstly*, it completely omits certain important environmental, societal and relational dimensions of children's lives. These dimensions, in reality, play a fundamental role in social integration, protection, care and development of children in such adverse circumstances. In situations of extreme violence and disorder too, children mediate by relationships with their caregivers, peers and others in their social circle. *Secondly*, children are considered as recipients of adult agency. For example, child combatants are always thought of being divorced from the conditions and ideologies that produce and reproduce political violence. There is no space for personal volition. The ability of children to face adversities is neglected. However, it is argued that children can be active participants and have the capability to define their own allegiances during situations of armed conflict, as well as their own ways and methods of coping with adverse situations. *Thirdly*, the psycho- medical approach works on the assumption that children's response to adversities like that of armed conflict has a universal pattern. It leaves no space for prevailing social, cultural and indigenous practices and approaches in situations of armed conflict. The psycho-medical approach follows a universal stereotyped notion about social norms, values, dynamics and power structures.

The researches conducted using the psycho- medical approach mostly make use of pre- coded and pre- defined research methods. Under this, children's own concepts, understanding and perception get diluted by those of the adult researcher or adult interpretation at large. This often creates a discrepancy between what *is* and what *comes out*. These instruments are mostly adopted from the industrialised world and quantify children's responses to highly stressful incidents, whether as witnesses, victims or perpetrators (Gupta 2000). Adding on, Boyden and Berry (2004) state that most of such studies are conducted in a limited period of time and rely on quantitative information on children's response to a single episode of violence, separation or loss. There is seeming reluctance to take children's response at face value and this is because children's opinion are seen as especially

pliable and susceptible to suggestion (Scott 2000: 106).

The trend in literature also highlights that adult interpretation of children and their experiences of conflict have dominated the field of research. Children are looked at as being objects rather than social subjects having valid insights and perspectives of their own. However, this has been critiqued on various grounds. Boyden (2004) argue that going by adult interpretations of children's experiences means that the subjective meaning that children give to conflict and violence does not have a strong role to play in shaping the reactions and responses to such adversities. It also implies that children's interpretation of their own self and of the world around them does not have any scientific validity as that compared of the adults that also includes the researcher. It could also imply that children are not well equipped to give a proper account of their lives and that their testimonies are unreliable. Lastly, with an adult interpretation of children's experience, it can also be stated that one assumes that the experiences are universal in nature and that the researcher is in some way privy to these experiences even before interacting with the informants.

Scott (2000: 99) argues that direct interaction with children usually provides a far more complete picture of his/ her own life and thus, the best source of information pertaining to children, their perspective, actions and attitudes are children themselves. There is hence a need to look at children as social actors in their own right who have the capability to take conscious decisions and make sense of the social world around them. Decisions, actions and responses of children in times of armed conflict are consequence of personal and collective history and the circumstances amidst which children live. It also implies that there is a need for new approach of research, research methods and methodologies that are child- centric and bring out data which is sensitive to the social and cultural context in which children grow.

### **Children and armed conflict: Exploring the newer approaches of study**

Scholars across have argued for a vital need to conceptualize children and their experiences in adverse situations like that of armed conflict with a more diverse approach. Research need to look at how armed conflicts affect children's social, cultural and economic roles and their integration in the society they live in. Research are needed to

understand what are the sources of emotional, social support and their own strategies for survival and coping (Boyden 2004) and also illuminate how children in different cultures perceive violence, suffering, displacement and formation of their political and ideological commitments.

Many scholars have concluded stating that childhood is socially constructed (James and Prout 1997; Boyden 1997) and there has also been a shift in the way children are being studied in situations of armed conflicts. This *social constructionist* view has particular implications for research in this field—where researchers are encouraged to relate their study of children’s lives amidst armed conflict to the local ideas about their roles, responsibilities, capacities, entitlements and obligations of the children. The experience of each and every child in times of armed conflict should be explored for itself rather than in terms of universal notion of ideal childhood. The central argument of this perspective thus, argues that children cannot be considered in isolation from other social groups within communities and societies and that the social, cultural and political issues should be foregrounded rather than biological (Scheper- Hughes and Sargent 1998). Researchers need to incorporate children’s voices, perspectives, diversities and active participation.

There has been a gradual shift in the way children are looked at during situations of armed conflict. Hart (2004: 2) points out that studies are now including perspectives and methods from a range of disciplines like anthropology and sociology, which he argues are ‘particularly situated in describing children’s agency and social contexts as well as childhood’s diverse cultural constructions’. Ethnographic studies also occupy a prominent position in the field of study of children in armed conflict and are considered to provide indispensable perspective (Boyden and Berry 2004).

### **Children: The Social Actors**

*‘Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes’* (James and Prout (1997: 8).

Considering children as social actors is also important for understanding how children are represented or acknowledged in the discourses

within the society where they live and how these discourses and representation further impacts the child’s everyday life and experiences. It helps in understanding what children are like, what are the roles and responsibilities that children take up, what are their needs in a certain societal setup, what is in best interest for them etc. and thus considering them as active agents rather than mere objects in the social world.

Drawing from here, one argues that children in situations of armed conflict need to be looked at as social actors in their own right. They are capable of internalising, give meaning to and resist adult discourse and reconcile their everyday experiences with adult interpretations of conflict events. One needs to take children’s voices in consideration and by doing so we need to acknowledge their position as active participants in their social life, their experiences and engagement with the conflict and the subjective understanding and interpretation of the world they live in. They need to be encouraged to provide first hand experiences and insights into their own self, feelings, experiences and interpretations. Children can and do reflect upon their experiences of conflict and make sense of it as active agents.

### **Children’s Agency and Response to Armed Conflict**

The practice of looking at children as independent social actors brings out their capacity to make choices, express their own selves and construct meaning within the social world. This has opened up more explorations on how children exercise their agency. *Agency* per se means the capacity of an individual to act independently (James and James 2008: 9). However, this phenomenon needs to be explored and explained further. Giddens defines agency as the ‘intentional action that encompasses both, the intended and unintended motivations and desires’ (Cassell 1993: 93- 95). In his structuration theory, Giddens suggests that structure and agency are both important and interconnected and cannot be looked at in isolation. The social structures provide means through which people act and people’s actions bring out different forms of these social structures. Therefore, it can be stated that people do possess the power that through their actions can change the social structures and institutions through which they have to live and work (James and James 2008: 10). These theoretical perspectives have significance in order to understand children, their agency, and their capacity as agents in the social world. This looks at children’s subjectivities as independent social actors

within the social, moral, political and economic constraints of society. Researchers have also highlighted the constraining influence that shape children's position as that of minority group in the society. Children's agency is usually not acknowledged and recognized by the adult world leading to a minority social status ascertained to children. This social status shapes the subjectivities of children and also reproduces their relative powerlessness. James and James (2008: 121) state that considering children as social actors in their own right brings forth one aspect that differentiates children from others is the level of permission and scope given to them to act independently by those around them, particularly the adults. There is high influence of the adults in their social lives, including their parents, care-givers, teachers, local leaders etc. These restrictions might not always be physical in nature, but psychological and cultural too. It is this restriction that limits their experiences of acting as an independent social actor thus, has an effect on what they choose to do.

However, it is argued that children do exhibit agency in their own individual spaces, through their own actions and demonstrate competence, resourcefulness, resort to range of strategies like engaging with political- military actions, responding to adversities (Hart and Tyrer 2006). Therefore, the importance of child agency cannot be ignored. In adversities like that of armed conflict, agency becomes a pertinent issue. During such circumstances, children are often restricted to act independently and have high levels of influence by the adults around them. In situations of armed conflict, child's agency is often characterised by passivity and victimhood. However, children in times of armed conflict do project diverse characteristics. Their response to adversities is often beyond the pre- defined notions of child agency during armed conflict. A close study with children in zones of armed conflict can bring forth the diversities in children as social actors.

**Response to adversities:** Scholars have portrayed society as an integrated, self- equilibrating system in which armed conflict and other such adverse circumstances are considered to be exceptions that lie outside the range of normal human experiences (Allen 1989; Davis 1992; Boyden 1994). In such exceptional situations, children are mostly looked at with a lens of victimhood and passivity. However, when one is attempting to look at children as social actors and active beings in their own lives, it

becomes important to look beyond the victimhood realm and explore the existence of strategies that these children employ to deal with adversities on an everyday basis. There is, definitely, no denial of the existence of trauma and victimisation of children during situations of armed conflict but the knowledge about children's resilience and responses to adversities has the capacity of greatly enhancing interventions as well as addressing the larger issues of children living amidst armed conflict.

However, interestingly many recent researches have argued that armed conflict is continuous with normal social experience and is not necessarily the harbinger of social breakdown and chaos (Duffield 1990; Davis 1992) and there is a strong relationship between social power, exposure to adversities and the resilience of children. Infants and young children, out of biology, are dependent on adults for their care and protection, and in some cases even older children lack the ability and competence to face adversities. But one cannot draw generalization about children in this particular realm because by doing so, we attempt a folly and tend to underestimate and ignore the resourcefulness, resilience and social competence that many children growing amidst armed conflict possess. Therefore, conflict does necessarily bring destruction and while armed conflict did causes many to become extremely vulnerable, vulnerability does not in itself preclude ability (Boyden and Berry 2004: xvii).

Children faced by adversities often show their resilient side. As Boyden (2004) states that even when confronted by appalling adversities, it is revealed that many children are able to influence positively their own fate and that of others who depend on them, such as the younger siblings, sick parents etc. However, by highlighting such an argument, one is not trying to state that children are always able to face adversities strongly, but to bring forth that many a times, adverse situations like that of armed conflict bring out their resilient and resourceful side. Children who are exposed to difficulties within their families and communities often remain resilient (Cairns 1996), growing in context of constant change and contradiction proved to be a source of strength for children (Dawes and Donald 1990). Children also take up adult roles within their families in situations of adversity and rather than going into a vulnerable state, take up the responsibilities of the household and siblings in such situations. A child- headed household is not an uncommon phenomenon in situations of armed

conflict (Machel 1996; United Nations 2002: 23; Muzurana, Raven- Roberts and Parpart 2005: 6).

During adversities, there is alteration in status, roles and responsibilities in a child's life and these then play a crucial role in creation of self- perception, perception about adults, and their own identity and adaptation measures during and after conflict times. Children make sense of the adversities like that of on-going conflict situation etc. and respond to them in the due course of their lives. This highlights the active, constructive nature of a child and his/ her engagement in the social environment which mostly is not addressed by scholars who tend to focus more on categorising children as victims and vulnerable beings. Engaging with their social environment would mean children interpreting their world, making sense of it, making decisions and choices, defining their own roles and responsibilities, managing and coping with crisis and adversities (Baker 1998; Hutchby and Moran- Ellis 1998).

However, there still exists a dearth of literature available on children's responses to adverse situations like that of armed conflict. Mostly, the social construction of experiences has now become accepted by many as the most powerful source of differentiation between children globally in terms of behaviour, thinking, adaptation and indeed, responses to armed conflict (Boyden 2003: 10). These also bring forth alternate ways in which children respond to adversities around them like that of armed conflict. Boyden (*ibid*: 8) states that these literatures merit some consideration for they appear more promising than conventional perspectives insofar as they offer more plausible explanation of how children engage with armed conflict and are affected by it.

However, once needs to state again that arguing on the lines of adversities bringing out their resourcefulness does not suggest that children should be put through such adversities, expected them to tolerate it and put up a strong front. It is a mere attempt to acknowledge children's agency, resourcefulness and their own understanding of the adversities, their efforts in facing them and contributing to family and one's own survival. Responses and adjustments to adversities like that of armed conflict, sufferings, grief, loss, separation are all experienced in a context and are patterned by the cultural meanings they manifest (Boyden *ibid*: 12). In situations of armed conflict, it is important to understand children's responses and experiences by

closely looking at the social, political, cultural and moral context. Hence, in order to get an insight into children's agency and response in such situations, their altered childhood while living amidst prevailing adversity, there is a need to focus closely and explore child's everyday life and the living experiences and derive a larger understanding thereof.

### **The Everyday Life**

The socio- cultural context amidst which children live and grow influences the way they look at, interpret and give meaning to their social world. The way children give meaning to their everyday environment, rural, urban, peaceful, violent, within or away from family, and how children engage in and with these local environments form a significant part of how children's lives are negotiated. The structural relations between children and adults and also amongst children themselves are all significant in shaping the everyday life experiences of children. It is often argued that reality is socially constructed and explores the ways in which individuals are involved in the on-going 'making' of everyday life through their actions. Infact, it is the interdependence and connections with others through which social action unfolds. Berger and Luckman (1967) brought out the concept of social construction of reality and argued that the reality of 'everyday' life arises through the interactions amongst people and also with the environment in which they live, including the cultural and material world. Through this lens, an individual cannot be placed outside the 'social.'

Looking at children's lives by drawing from qualitative methodologies looks at children's own perspectives rather than exploring them through others. This prioritizes children's voices and experiences. These subjective interpretations about their everyday lives are often drawn using ethnographic and narrative approaches. These approaches recognize the 'ways in which we make and use knowledge to create and preserve our social worlds and places within them' (Fook 2002: 132). Making use of these approaches to explore and understand children's accounts, we tend pay less attention on 'facts' and 'truths' of a phenomenon but rather focus what meaning does the phenomenon has on/ for the child and what it tells us about how children understand themselves and their relationships with others (James and Prout 1998).

In order to get an insight into children's everyday life in conflict zones, one also needs to look at how

interactions and communications occurring within the society, where children live, impact them. Looking at children in situations of armed conflict with this theoretical position and considering children as competent social actors actively shaping the social and political worlds around them, underscores two aspects. Firstly, one needs to closely examine the various structures that play a significant role in the everyday life of a child in situation of armed conflict. This would include State, non-state actors, family, school and other significant individuals like teachers, caregivers, peers etc. Secondly, one needs to closely look at how children cope in the social world characterized by conflict by developing their own strategies that bring forth their own perspectives. It becomes important to explore how children's multifarious affiliations, involvement and interactions with the institutions and individuals impact their experiences and perceptions about the conflict and locating their own self amidst it. There needs to be an attempt to explore how children living amidst conflict perceive, produce and reproduce their own understanding of the conflict around them, while they navigate daily between different spaces and contexts, like families, peers, school, community, displacement camps etc. These spaces hold an important and influential position in the lives of children and it is through these spaces that the dynamic view of children's agency unfolds the complexity of their everyday life in conflict situations. To study the everyday life of children in situations of armed conflict, one needs to study them in their *natural context*, their everyday social world. Naturally occurring interaction is the foundation of all understanding of society (Adler, Adler and Fontana 1987: 219). These interactions include the perceptions, feelings, and meanings that children experience as well as the own micro structures that they create in the process.

Therefore it can be stated that studying children as social actors and active agents in their own right and context brings out a pool of knowledge that children possess about their environment, which otherwise is undervalued in the adult discourse. Children, living with violence in their daily lives, often exhibit and show elaborate skills and actions that often counterbalances ruptures and distress in their family and help them to rebuild a new and meaningful life. Focusing on children's daily interaction with adults and peers also brings forth how children look at their lives in different ways at different times and what sense they make of their changing social world. There is a need to look at how armed conflicts affect

children's social, cultural and economic roles and their integration. Children's experiences, perception, subjective interpretation and meaning giving process to the environment they live in, which in the present day world is marked by violent conflict, can be best looked at by studying children's everyday lives and living experiences. Children need to be studied in their natural context, which in situations of armed conflict are characterized by violence, displacement and uncertainties.

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