

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: From the Eyes of Children

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As Israel's coalition government assumes power, the future of children on both sides of the divide remains uncertain. On the Palestinian side, are the issues regarding the impact of exposure to traumatic events on children's mental health and their development. Whereas on the Israeli side, the influence of political socialization on children solidifies their beliefs towards acceptance of the need for conflict that acts as an impediment to the peace-making process. This view has been further strengthened by the recent appeal by UNICEF to end the conflict that often targets children, either directly or indirectly. Due to the conflict, various rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child have been violated over the years on both sides.

Historically, like in other contemporary military conflicts, Palestinian children and adolescents are witnessing atrocities and humiliation and have been either compelled to join or on their own volition chosen to participate in the violence. In the tussle between the imposition of sovereignty by Israel over the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and the human rights of the Palestinians, it is the children who have lost their innocence.

What needs to be understood is that in prolonged conflict, children experience what is known as Type I and Type II trauma exposure based on traumatic events, adversities, and day-to-day stressors. In simple terms, Type I trauma refers to a one-time, horrifying, and life-endangering experience that in the present context refers to witnessing killings, being wounded, and experiencing the destruction of one's home. On the other hand, Type II trauma refers to stresses and adversities faced on a day-to-day basis resulting from poverty, social inequality, and dangerous living conditions.

One such experience that has a long-lasting impact on children is witnessing atrocities being committed on family members. It is believed that children who have experienced severe violence towards their families face sleeping difficulties that is not the case with children who themselves have been targeted by the military. The reason being that family represents security and protection, thus when a child witnesses humiliation and violence towards parents and/or other family members it impacts them enormously. It goes without saying that the focus now needs to shift towards ensuring protective measures like youth education, supportive relationships, and social participation as there exists a strong correlation between exposure to conflict and mental disorders for children.

To further understand this, the case of Palestinian refugee children can be considered since they are found to be at greater risk for mental disorders and psychosomatic complaints as compared to children living in non-conflict-affected settings. In this context, the importance of resettlement of such children and adolescents at risk assumes greater significance for those who are with their families and those who have been separated from their families. Seen in this light, practices around the world can act as a guiding force. For example, Canada's current Settlement Workers in Schools program is an excellent example of protective support for children and families. As per this program, the resettlement workers are assigned individual children and their families for whom these workers are responsible to provide counseling, educational advice, and support.

Regarding Israeli children, the aspect of political socialization of children is something which the newly formed Israeli coalition needs to carefully deliberate upon. In simple terms, political socialisation refers to a set of processes through which the beliefs, attitudes, motivations, values, and patterns of behaviours of individuals are shaped in the context of political events and scenarios.

The ways in which such learning is manifested in Israel is something that needs to be addressed. Educators convey to students important events like Holocaust Day, Memorial Day, and Independence Day, and emphasize the Jewish connection to the Promised Land. Further, educators also refer to the United Nations decision to establish the State of Israel in 1947 but because the Arabs did not agree, there remains no other choice but to fight.

It cannot be emphasised enough that such content that children learn at an early age remains with them throughout their lives and develop as a foundation for development into a mindset that supports conflict. These suspicions find strength in the fact that unlike other examples of political protests and violence in which a minor percentage of youth participate, large proportions of Palestinian children and adolescents have been directly involved in the violence. The need of the hour is taking proactive steps by putting in place an active and problem-solving mechanism for these children that would help them to partially withdraw from such activities keeping in mind the impact on their mental health.

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