



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

CHILDREN IN WAR ZONES

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by James Garbarino

Since World War II, more than 20 million people have died in war zones around the world. These wars have increasingly inflicted casualties on civilians. Modern wars tend to be fought in and for the minds and hearts of the population. They tend to be fought with savage anti-personnel weapons that result in indiscriminate death and injuries, with little regard for the combatant status of the victims. According to UNICEF, since 1900 the ratio of casualties in war has shifted. Whereas in the early years of this century most casualties were soldiers and relatively few were civilians, now the reverse is true.

With my colleagues, Kathleen Kostelny and Nancy Dubrow, I have spent the last three years visiting war zones around the world—in Cambodia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, the Middle East, and inner city Chicago. The result is a book entitled *No Place To Be A Child: Growing Up in a War Zone* (see insert). It records our efforts to make sense of war as children experience it in the organized violent conflicts that take place between and within nations.

Whether it be in the on-going civil war in Cambodia or the gang wars of inner city Chicago, children are caught in the cross fire. All war is war on children. War leaves holes in the lives of children each time grown male soldiers die, for each of these soldiers is someone's father, brother, uncle, or grandfather.

Children are wounded psychologically and socially each time there is an adult victim of "collateral damage" (as our military leaders call the "accidental" destruction of people who were not the specific target of a "weapons system"). And, of course, children exposed to the immediate horror of war face the challenge of coping with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the task of finding a moral path to make sense of the senseless.

Recording this story in *No Place To Be A Child* was a profoundly disturbing experience, an experience that changed us forever. In Cambodia, we confronted the product of the killing fields where children were executed by the Khmer Rouge by having their heads smashed into the trunk of a tree as punishment for the crime of having educated parents: rows of child skulls, grouped by age and sex. In Mozambique, we sat with children blinded and legless for the crime of having stepped on a land mine planted by Renamo guerrillas. In Nicaragua, we talked with orphans whose parents were killed and left to rot by Contra soldiers. In Palestinian refugee camps, we listened to children wrestle with the pain of having had their homes demolished as punishment for the political activities of their siblings or parents. In inner city Chicago, we came to know children whose parents and friends have been hit by bullets fired in the gang wars, children who cannot use the playground because "there isn't any cover." All this has left vivid impressions and forged a consciousness of war as a profound insult to children.

But looking at the children of war zones reminded us that some of the worst consequences of today's wars are not directly physical and psychological, but social in nature. Wars produce social dislocation, and one consequence is a breakdown in the basic "infrastructure of life." All too often this includes food, health care, and education.

In Nicaragua and in Mozambique, for example, we found thousands of children in the major cities who had come to escape the day-to-day danger of their home regions. The result in both cases was shantytown living. In Cambodia and in the Middle East, war has meant generations of children growing up in refugee camps.

In Chicago, the war drives out those who can afford to leave, just the kind of people who are needed to improve the social climate. Thus, it produces ever-greater concentrations of poor, psychologically needy people who are angry or depressed, people who are stuck in one place.

What is more, the economic crises that accompany and flow from war often mean severe food shortages—and shortages of cash to buy food. And that means inadequate nutrition at best, and malnutrition at worst. In Mozambique, doctors report a massive increase in malnutrition. And we saw these children—with the most severe cases filling hospital wards in Maputo.

In a wing of the hospital in Maputo was the ward where they cared for the most serious cases of malnutrition. Whereas other children were lively and responsive to the hand puppets I brought to entertain them, here I found a lot of apathy. One child in particular caught our attention. She was tiny for her age, and her chart revealed that she was being treated for five separate deficiency diseases.

Her mother had been widowed in a Renamo attack, and they had fled to the city in search of a more secure place to live. They found military security but no protection from a new poverty more pernicious than that they had known in the countryside. The little girl's grim expression and guarded watchfulness were impervious to our puppets and us. No bullet or bomb in her case, but she was a victim of war as much as any of the others we saw.

International studies have confirmed that in the fragile economics of most Third World countries, war means malnutrition and famine. And it means a migration to cities where basic

services and economic resources are already overtaxed. So the children of war are the desperately poor children living in shantytowns, and the desperately weak and sick children in the hospital wards, as well as the traumatized children in homes, clinics, and residential institutions. In the urban war zone in America, even amidst our affluent society, infant mortality and morbidity are much higher than in safer neighborhoods, and poor health and malnutrition are disproportionately common.

What is more, the children of war are poor to start with. This is true in the war at home, of course, but it is true in the world's war zones as well. Social class does not take a vacation in a war zone. Like virtually all the regular facts of life, war hits hardest at the poor. The rich have the resources to protect their children and care for them if war does reach them. And who can blame them for that? No parent, certainly.

So long as anything of "business as usual" is left standing in a society at war, the social class system has its way. That's a fact of life (or death) for war zones that some don't like to hear about and others attempt to discount. But it is real nonetheless. We saw it in Chicago, in Nicaragua, and in Palestine, and in Cambodia, and in Mozambique.

It's hard to look on the children of war. Even the success stories tend to remind you of the wastage, to highlight what is lost to so many. But being willing to see clearly the costs of war to children is the first step. If seeing is the first step, then doing is the next.

Knitting back together the world that has been torn apart by war is goal number one. If children are separated from parents, the first goal is to reunite them. If children have been orphaned, the first goal is to reunite them with kin. These are the people to and with whom they belong. If this proves impossible, then the goal is to create a new family for the child through foster parents, adoption, or even long-term group living.

Some children will need more than first aid, however. What can we do beyond first aid? We can support programs designed to offer long-term therapy and rehabilitation for the children of war. If their experiences have been deeply traumatic, if they suffer from clinically diagnosed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, they may need psychiatric intervention.

The second thing we can do is embrace the letter and spirit of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Articles of the Convention concerning children and war (Articles 38 and 39) tell us that the international community is seeking a way to create a protected space for children, a place for childhood, even in the midst of war. It is arguing for each nation to accept and live by the concept of "limited war." And it means that when children and childhood are violated by armed conflict, it is the responsibility of the parties to make whatever amends is possible—even in Chicago.

NO PLACE TO BE A CHILD: GROWING UP IN A WAR ZONE

by James Garbarino, Kathleen Kostelny, and Nancy Dubrow. Lexington Books, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. (Forthcoming)

According to 1990 UNICEF estimates, about eighty percent of the casualties in wars are women and children. Women and children suffer disproportionately when warring groups seek to control the "hearts and minds" of a populace. That children survive at all in the heat of war is testimony to their resilience and to the efforts of the adults who care for them. According to the authors, "These children had indeed experienced 'more than one could dread.' But we also found children of triumph who have struggled with the terror and deprivation of war, and have emerged with beauty of spirit."

Chicago: Poverty is the worst form of violence. The presence of young children in a violent environment increases their risk of physical and psychological harm. In Chicago, over 100,000 children live in public housing projects. Recent official data revealed that the reported rate of violent crime victimization for residents of public housing was fifty percent higher than for the city as a whole. This means that children in public housing projects are twice as likely as other children to be exposed to violent crime. Living in an environment of chronic violence may produce a range of responses by one individual to one particular event, responses that change over time. For example, one mother has observed the reactions of her daughter to shooting incidents. When she was two years old, the girl would hit the floor of the apartment when she heard gunfire outside saying, "Mama, I'm scared." She also developed headaches and stomachaches following the incident. After a year, the child became "immune" to the shootings, her aches ended and when shooting started the girl would tell her mother, "Well, mama, we have to get down on the floor."

A good place to start would be to insist that civilians are "off limits" to warring parties. That includes us Americans too. During the summer and fall of 1990, the United States raged with calls for war against Iraq, war in the form of massive bombing of Baghdad and other population centres. And then in January of 1991, this bombing began. The fact that it seems an obvious strategy to us should fill us with horror at how we have regressed in this century, back to the barbarous past when "sacking" the enemy's cities was a matter of course.

The degeneration of gang warfare in the cities seems to parallel the degeneration of our warring beyond our national borders. Children are hostages to all wars.

Every military action has direct and indirect implications for the lives and well being of children. That should be clear to anyone who stops even for a moment to think of it. When our soldiers kill other people's soldiers, they kill fathers and brothers. When civilians are killed "accidentally"

in the crossfire, or intentionally as part of attacks on "infrastructure," children and their mothers are among them.

We know that "projecting military force" leads to child casualties—whether they be the passengers on an Iranian airliner "accidentally" shot down over the Persian Gulf, or "innocent bystanders" killed in Panama, or the children of military parents who are left behind and must face feelings of abandonment when their parents' units are deployed. But the victims for whom we are directly responsible because of military action are not the only casualties.

Every day around the world, children are hurt by weapons manufactured and sold in and by the United States. Some of these weapons are sold as part of our economic lifeblood. Others are paid for by taxpayers and given away as a matter of geopolitical strategy and as part of our military aid policies.

Professionals who care for children and families bear a special responsibility for seeing, and having seen, for acting.

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Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development.
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