

Mothers' belief about psychological problems faced by the children living in conflict zone

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ABSTRACT

The study was made on impact of armed conflict on children as perceived by their mothers. Mothers from an important part in the overall development of children and their perceptions about the effects of disturbed atmosphere on a child's psychology will be important in formulating policies and programmes that will be required to minimize the effects of these disturbances. The present study has been undertaken to study the psychological problems faced by children from 'intact' and 'disrupted' families of Kashmir as perceived by their mothers and to study the role played by their mothers during the time of crisis. The sample comprised of 100 mothers from intact families (50 mothers of girls and 50 mothers of boys) and 100 mothers from disrupted families (50 mothers of girls and 50 mothers of boys). The tool used for the study was interview schedule. Both open and close ended questions were framed for eliciting the responses. The findings revealed that mothers from both families reported that their children were scared of men in uniform. Mothers also reported that their children have become the victims of violence directly or indirectly. The girls from intact families were the least exposed to violence and this difference was statistically significant. The major response to experiences of violence was crying in case of girls and seclusion in case of boys. The mothers believed that the armed conflict has had an effect on the psychological health of their children and had developed a sense of insecurity among the children from disrupted families. On hearing incident related to armed conflict, mothers either used to find out the locality and intensity of incident or physically went out to locate their children. Imparting education is the best thing perceived by mothers that they can do for the betterment of their children.

KEY WORDS : Psychological problems, Conflict zone, Armed conflict

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In any catastrophe whether natural or man made within a population, three groups suffer the most-children, women and aged. Nothing significant can be done as far as the nature made sufferings are concerned but the last four decades have seen surge in man made sufferings. Armed conflict is one of the most common man made disasters that has uniformly affected all parts of the globe. The effects of armed conflicts lie in displacing people from their inhabited places and rendering them homeless and killings in these families to mention a few. The killings have an impact on the social environment thereby affecting the psychology of the survivors. Armed conflicts also alter the lives of children around the world when they experience violence or its indirect effects in terms of being witness to a violent event, loss of a parent or relative or by not getting the proper social setup which he or she should get in a normal society. UNICEF in 2006 reported that conflicts throughout the world in the last decade have killed an estimated 2 million children and

have left another 6 million disabled, 20 million homeless and over 1 million separated from their parents.

Jammu and Kashmir province has also been embroiled in turmoil for the last 20 years. This turmoil made the environment insecure and toxic for the population living there and has affected children at meso, micro, exo and macro-level. Public places in Kashmir like open fields, bus terminals, roadsides, residential areas and recreational spots have places that witnessed deaths due to incidents of cross-firing, grenade attacks, bomb blasts and landmine explosions. As a result of this disturbance, the Kashmiri women have become apprehensive about the safe return of the family members who go for jobs or the children who go to schools or playing outside. There are a significant number of mothers, grand mothers and spouses who have to come to terms with the agonizing experience of receiving the dead bodies of their loved ones. The ongoing conflict has resulted in a number of deaths shown different number by different sources up to 77,000 dead

since the early 1990s, according to human rights groups. (*Washingtonpost.com*, August 28, 2008). The security forces have been forced to place restrictions on the free movement of people and traffic with meshes of barbed wire and crisscrossing on the roads. Bunkers and check-posts have also been put on road sides and streets which have resulted in shrinking of the available land for the movement of the common people. In a study by Kaz de Jong *et al.* (2008), it was revealed that the ongoing conflict in Kashmir exacts a huge toll on the communities' mental well-being. They found high levels of psychological distress that impacts on daily life and places a burden on the health system. Ongoing feelings of personal vulnerability (not feeling safe) were associated with high levels of psychological distress.

Various studies that have been conducted have shown that there was a negative relationship between armed conflict and different aspects of health (Youssef, 1995). A study by Thabet *et al.* (2008) revealed that war trauma and parents' emotional responses were significantly associated with children's Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and anxiety symptoms. Another study conducted by Hasanovic (2007) in Tuzla, Bosnia found that all the sample children experienced war trauma and many had psychological consequences. The highest prevalence of PTSD, often co morbid with depression, was found among children who lost one or both parents. The children with the lowest rate of psychological disturbances were those living with both parents.

Studies carried out in Kashmir showed impact of armed conflict on psychological health of people (Marqoob *et al.*, 2006; Rather *et al.*, 2006; Khan and Marqoob, 2006 and Kaz de Jong *et al.*, 2008). These studies have evaluated the effects of armed conflicts on the members of the society from the perspective of the effected individuals. The present paper tries to study the consequences of armed conflict on children from perspective of the mothers *i.e.* the effects of armed conflict on children as visualized by their mothers. This study was conducted over five districts of Kashmir province to study the mothers' beliefs about the psychological problems faced by the children of intact and disrupted families. The study involved mothers (50% of sample) who had lost their spouses in this armed conflict and other 50 per cent who had experienced the conflict but not the spousal loss. We also tried to study the role played by mother during time of crisis

RESEARCH METHODS

Sample size:

The sample comprised of a total of 200 mothers out

of which 100 mothers of children were selected from intact families (50 boys and 50 girls) and 100 mothers of children from disrupted families (50 boys and 50 girls). Definition of 'intact' and 'disrupted' families is given below:

Mothers of children from disrupted families:

Those mothers who have faced family disruption in the form of death of spouse due to armed conflict.

Mothers of children from intact families:

Those mothers who have not faced any direct consequences of armed conflict in the form of death of their spouse but are witnessing the effects of armed conflict.

MMIF: Mothers of males of intact families (N=50).

MFIF: Mothers of females of intact families (N=50).

M MDF: Mothers of males of disrupted families (N=50).

MFDF: Mothers of females of disrupted families (N=50).

Locale:

The study was carried out in Kashmir province of J & K state. Out of 10 districts of Kashmir province, 5 districts were randomly selected *viz.*, Anantnag, Kulgam, Pulwama, Shopian and Srinagar. From each district, 20 mothers of children from disrupted families (10 boys and 10 girls) and 20 mothers of children from intact families (10 boys and 10 girls) were selected.

Sampling technique:

Multi-stage sampling technique was used for collecting the data.

Tool used:

Self-devised interview guide was used to elicit requisite information.

Data collection and analysis:

The data were collected by interviewing the mothers of children from both family structures in the year 2008. Both content and quality analysis were done. The statistics applied on the data comprised of Chi square. The levels of significance were obtained at highly significant (p-value < 0.01), significant (p < 0.05) and insignificant (p-value > 0.05).

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings obtained from the present study have been discussed in the following sub heads:

Background information:

Mothers who were part of this study were mostly in the age group of 35-45 years. 70 per cent boys and 60 per cent girls from intact families and 56 per cent boys and 46 per cent girls from disrupted families had mothers within this age group. The mothers of the children from intact families had at least studied up to 12th standard (46% of boys and 44% of girls) while the children from disrupted families had mostly illiterate mothers (52% in case of boys and 62% in case of girls). While as the majority of mothers belonging to children of intact families were housewives (76% in case of boys and 80% in case of girls), the mothers of children from disrupted families were in doing menial jobs, crewel work, tailoring or labourers (48% of boys and 28% of girls).

Fear of armed personnel among children:

The mothers of children from both intact and disrupted families reported that children were scared of armed personnel. The percentage of mothers who had observed such feelings was 68 per cent for boys from both intact and disrupted families and 66 per cent for girls of disrupted families and 76 per cent for girls from intact families (Table 1). The higher percentage for girls belonging to intact families was not found to be statistically significant. In terms of the conversations about the security personnel, a higher percentage of boys (66% from intact and 46% from disrupted families) were found not to involve in such conversations as compared to the girls (42% in both groups) from their respective groups (Table 1). This different in behaviour of the boys and girls belonging to intact and disrupted families was not statistically significant when compared with the means of the other groups.

Less conversation about armed personnel among the boys of intact families can be for the reason that these

boys were not exposed to events of armed conflict at the same levels as boys from disrupted families. A similar number of girls from intact and disrupted families indulging in such conversations could be because of the closed social interaction between the females. Although boys also indulge in interactions but that is mostly in terms of physical activities like playing games while as girls mostly discuss things in social gatherings.

Forms of violence experienced by children:

All the mothers of children from disrupted families reported that their wards were exposed to the incidents of violence whereas in case of intact families only 92 per cent of boys and 76 per cent of girls were exposed to incidents of violence as reported by their mothers. Less exposure to violence as reported by the mothers of girls belonging to intact families and it was found to be statistically significant (Table 2). Majority of the children (72%) from disrupted families had experienced the armed violence by being a witness to the death of their parents or by observing their funerals. Surprisingly, a higher percentage of the mothers of children from intact families reported experience of other forms of violence like beating of own self, hearing frightening noise of gun battles and witnessing beating of a relative or stranger. Physical violence found to be experienced only by boys belonging to both intact and disrupted families and the difference in this experience is statistically significant. The reason for the observation of the death of the father as main form of violence among children of disrupted families can be because the death of a parent has had a deep impact on the thoughts of children or mothers or both that the other forms of violence have gone unnoticed or unreported. In case of intact families, every form of violence has made an impact that it could be recognized by their mothers.

Table 1: Fear of armed personnel among children

Responses	Mothers of children from intact families			Mothers of children from disrupted families			χ^2 analysis
	Boys (n = 50)	Girls (n = 50)	Total (n = 50)	Boys (n = 50)	Girls (n = 50)	Total (n = 50)	
Scared of men in uniform							
Yes	34(68)	38(76)	72(72)	34(68)	33(66)	67(67)	MBIF MGIF MBD MGDF
No	16(32)	12(24)	28(28)	16(32)	17(34)	33(33)	MBIF MBDF MGIF MGDF MBIF MGDF MGIF MBDF
Talks about such men							
Often	2(4)	5(10)	7(7)	10(20)	8(16)	18(18)	MBIF MGIF** MBDF MGDF
Sometimes	10(20)	5(10)	15(15)	8(16)	8(16)	16(16)	MBIF MBDF*
Rarely	5(10)	14(28)	19(19)	9(18)	13(26)	22(18)	MGIF MGDF MBIFMGDF*
Never	33(66)	26(42)	59(59)	23(46)	21(42)	44(44)	MGIF MBDF

* and ** indicate significance of values at $P \leq 0.05$ and $P \leq 0.01$, respectively.

Figures in parenthesis are percentages

The effects of the experience of the incidents of armed conflict as observed by the mothers of the children were recorded as crying, remaining silent for few days, getting lost in thoughts or enquiring too much about the conflict. It was observed that majority of mothers of girls from both intact and disrupted families (50% and 40%, respectively) reported that their wards started crying in response to the experiences of violence due to armed conflict. 42 per cent boys from intact families and 44 per cent from disrupted families were reported by their mothers to be lost in the thoughts. All these results are presented in Table 2. In a study conducted by Vanheck *et al.* in 2001, substantial gender based differences were demonstrated in crying frequency and crying proneness. Women reported a higher frequency of crying and more proneness to cry both for negative and positive reasons. These must be expected as natural responses because girls are mostly tender and break down on experiencing a traumatic event while as boys generally get silent in such situations. Gramer and Imaike (2002) have reported that boys were more emotionally stable than girls. Aleem in 2005 examined differences between the emotional stability of male and female students and found male students to be emotionally stable than female students.

Reactions to incidents of armed conflict:

The routine events that form the part of an armed conflict are the killings of people and the armed encounters themselves. The responses of children as observed by their mothers on hearing about the death of people and hearing the sound of bomb blasts/cross firing were analyzed (Table 3). Mothers of majority of boys (62%) and girls (52%) from intact families reported that their wards responded normally on hearing news regarding killings of people due to armed conflict. Whereas in case of children from disrupted families, majority of mothers of both boys (60%) and girls (62%) reported that their wards went into solitude if reminded of similar incident. Significant differences were found on the basis of familial dimensions. Majority of boys (52%) from intact families were reported by their mothers to have shown normal responses on hearing sounds of bomb blasts whereas in case of boys from disrupted families only 26 per cent had shown such response. More boys from disrupted families (36%) had shown psychological responses in such situations as compared to boys from intact families (8%). The boys showing spiritual response were almost equal from both the groups. Spiritual response like reciting Quranic verses or praying more during such times was the major response shown by girls on hearing the noise

Table 2: Violence experienced by children related to armed conflict

Responses	Mothers of children from intact families			Mothers of children from disrupted families			χ^2 analysis
	Boys (n = 50)	Girls (n = 50)	Total (n = 50)	Boys (n = 50)	Girls (n = 50)	Total (n = 50)	
Violence experienced							MBIF MGIF*
Yes	46(92)	38(76)	84(84)	50(100)	50(100)	100(100)	MBDFMGDF
No	4(8)	12(24)	16(16)	-	-	-	MBIF MBDF
							MGIF MGDF*
							MBIF MGDF
							MGIF MBDF*
Form of violence experienced							MBIF MGIF**
Witness loss/ funeral of parent	-	-	-	36(72)	36(72)	72(72)	MBDFMGDF
Himself was beaten	10(21.73)	-	10(11.90)	2(4)	-	2(2)	MBIF MBDF
Hear noise of gun battle	11(23.91)	19(50)	30(35.71)	4(8)	4(8)	8(8)	MGIFMGDF*
Witness beating of relative/stranger	25(54.34)	19(50)	44(52.38)	8(16)	10(20)	18(18)	MBIF MGDF
							MGIF MBDF*
Effect on child							MBIF MGIF**
Started crying	3(6.52)	20(52.63)	23(27.38)	6(12)	25(50)	31(31)	MBDFMGDF**
Remain numb and silent	11(23.91)	11(28.94)	22(26.19)	12(24)	8(16)	20(20)	MBIF MBDF
Lost in thoughts	21(45.65)	6(15.78)	27(32.14)	22(44)	10(20)	32(32)	MGIF MGDF
Enquire too much about ongoing conflict	11(23.91)	1(2.63)	12(14.28)	6(12)	2(4)	8(8)	MBIFMGDF**
							MGIFMBDF**

* and ** indicate significance of values at $P \leq 0.05$ and $P \leq 0.01$, respectively

Figures in parenthesis are percentages

of bomb blasts/cross firing with more girls from disrupted families (74%) showing such responses as compared to those from intact families (48%). All these results are shown in Table 3.

The different reactions seen among the children from intact and disrupted families to the incidents of armed conflict can be attributed to the differences in the impact of these incidents on these children. The children belonging to disrupted families have lost their fathers and they must be having torrid memories of it leading to psychological responses. The spiritual activities must have been to seek solace and relief in such actions. In a study conducted by Kaz de Jong *et al.*, in 2008 in Kupwara district, it has been reported that praying and meditation was used by the subjects as a coping mechanism to overcome the stress due to the armed conflict (Kaz De Jong *et al.*, 2008). In another study by Cordozo *et al.* (2004) in Afghanistan, the people were reported to resort to religious practices in times of armed conflict (Cordozo, 2004). It was further observed that mothers had tried to console their wards by adapting different methods like exchanging ideas with children, distracting their thoughts or try to rationalize the points of the conflict with them. No specific patterns were observed in the methods that were employed by the mothers signifying that mothers of children from both intact and disrupted families were worried about the children and tried to some show pacify their wards.

Mother's belief about the effect of armed conflict on children:

The mother's belief about the effect of armed conflict on children were elucidated by ascertaining their views about the changes they had observed in their children due to the armed conflict or due to the combined effect of armed conflict and loss of the father. The perceptions of mothers about the direct effect of armed conflict were studied by the changes about loss of peace of mind/childhood/happiness, prevalence of insecurity and the effect on the psychological health (Table 4). Psychological health was one of the main aspects that was found to be affected among children from both intact and disrupted families. While in case of the children from intact families, it was the major effect, 50 per cent in case of boys and 44 per cent in case of girls, 38 per cent girls from disrupted families and 30 per cent boys from disrupted families were perceived by mothers to be having affected psychological health. The prevalence of insecurity was the other major effect experienced by the mothers of the children from disrupted families. The boys from disrupted families scored a higher percentage in this parameter (42%) as compared to girls (34%). In fact this was the major effect observed in case of boys from disrupted families. 54 per cent of the mothers of boys from disrupted families and 62 per cent of those of girls felt that psychological problems had started in their children after the deaths of their fathers. The major effect that had been noticed among the boys

Table 3: Reaction on hearing incidents related to armed conflict

Responses	Mothers of children from intact families			Mothers of children from disrupted families			χ^2 analysis
	Boys (n = 50)	Girls (n = 50)	Total (n = 50)	Boys (n = 50)	Girls (n = 50)	Total (n = 50)	
Killings of people							MBIF MGIF
Getting numb and silent	6(12)	10(20)	16(16)	3(6)	1(2)	4(4)	MBDF MGDF
Getting into solitude as if reminded of similar incident	-	-	-	30(60)	31(62)	61(61)	MBIF MBDF** MGIF MGDF**
Showing momentary grief	13(26)	14(28)	27(27)	5(10)	3(6)	8(8)	MBIF MGDF**
Responding normally	31(62)	26(52)	57(57)	12(24)	14(28)	26(26)	MGIF MBDF**
Sounds of bomb blasts/cross-firing							MBIF MGIF**
Psychological response	8(16)	24(48)	32(32)	18(36)	37(74)	55(55)	MBDF MGDF**
Spiritual response	16(32)	18(36)	34(34)	19(38)	11(22)	30(30)	MBIF MBDF*
Normal response	26(52)	8(16)	34(34)	13(26)	2(4)	15(15)	MGIF MGDF* MBIF MGDF**
Role played by mother							MGIF MBDF
Exchange ideas with child	8(16)	11(22)	19(19)	14(28)	15(30)	29(29)	MBDFMGDF
Try to distract his thought	5(10)	6(12)	11(11)	7(14)	7(14)	14(14)	MBIF MBDF
Rationalize the child	6(12)	7(14)	13(13)	16(32)	15(30)	31(31)	MGIF MGDF MBIF MGDF MGIF MBDF

* and ** indicate significance of values at $P \leq 0.05$ and $P \leq 0.01$, respectively.

Figures in parenthesis are percentages

was that most of them (51%) used to be seen lost in their own thoughts while most of the girls (48%) were seen to cry during festivals and feasts remembering their fathers. Not many experiences of nightmares were observed by mothers of the children (Table 4).

The effects on the mental health of the children must be a direct consequence of the armed conflict because armed conflicts usually disturb the social structure. The children are forced to stay indoors that limits their interaction with their counterparts and thereby think mostly about the reasons of such circumstances. The belief of mothers of disrupted families about the prevalence of insecurity among their children can be because of two reasons. The mothers themselves must be feeling insecure having lost their husbands and they must be expecting these effects to pass on to their children also. On the other hand, the children also must be definitely

feeling insecure because of the experience of loss of father in such conflicts which must be making them to fear these conflicts

Safety concerns of mothers for children on hearing about conflict incidents:

Enquiring about their children when mothers hear about some untoward incidents is a natural phenomenon. Similarly in Kashmir, there are occurrences of armed conflict frequently so the primary responses of mothers on hearing about such incidents were ascertained. Most of the mothers from intact and disrupted families had primarily tried to enquire about the location and intensity of the conflict whenever their wards were not present at home (Table 5). Mostly mothers knew about the location of their children where they usually go to play so enquiry about the location was the predominant one.

Table 4: Mothers belief about effect of armed conflict on children

Responses	Mothers of children from intact families			Mothers of children from disrupted families		
	Boys (n = 50)	Girls (n = 50)	Total (n = 50)	Boys (n = 50)	Girls (n = 50)	Total (n = 50)
Effect of armed conflict	13(26)	17(34)	30(30)	14(28)	14(28)	28(28)
Lost peace of mind/childhood/happiness						
Prevalence of insecurity	12(24)	11(22)	23(23)	21(42)	17(34)	38(38)
Psychological health affected	25(50)	22(44)	47(47)	15(30)	19(38)	34(34)
Psychological problem related to death of father						
Yes	-	-	-	27(54)	31(62)	58(58)
No	-	-	-	23(46)	19(38)	42(42)
In , what way						
Starts crying on seeing belongings of his lost parent	-	-	-	3(11.2)	10(32.2)	13(22.4)
Cries on his remembrance on every festival and feast	-	-	-	6(22.3)	15(48.4)	21(36.2)
Always lost in his thoughts.	-	-	-	14(51.8)	5(16.1)	19(32.7)
Cries on seeing funeral of any person	-	-	-	2 (7.4)	1(3.2)	2(5.2)
Resorted to smoking	-	-	-	2 (7.4)	-	-
Nightmare experienced by child related to armed conflict						
Yes				3(6)		3(3)
No	50(100)	50(100)	100(100)	47(94)	50(100)	97(97)

* and ** indicate significance of values at P = 0.05 and P = 0.01, respectively.

Figures in parenthesis are percentages

Table 5: Safety concerns of mother on hearing of incidents related to armed conflict

Responses	Mothers of children from intact families			Mothers of children from disrupted families			χ ² analysis
	Boys (n = 50)	Girls (n = 50)	Total (n = 50)	Boys (n = 50)	Girls (n = 50)	Total (n = 50)	
Try to enquire about location and intensity of incident	23(46)	22(44)	45(45)	26(42)	20(40)	46(46)	MBIF MGIF MBDF MGDF MBIF MBDF
Try to find out children	16(32)	20(40)	36(36)	8(16)	18(36)	26(26)	MGIF MGDF
Spiritual response	11(22)	8(16)	19(19)	16(32)	12(24)	28(28)	MBIF MGDF MGIF MBDF*

* and ** indicate significance of values at P ≤ 0.05 and P ≤ 0.01, respectively.

Figures in parenthesis are percentages

Table 6: Best parents can do for children under given circumstances

Responses	Mothers of children from intact families			Mothers of children from Disrupted families		
	Boys (n = 50)	Girls (n = 50)	Total (n = 50)	Boys (n = 50)	Girls (n = 50)	Total (n = 50)
Proper education	12(24)	19(38)	31(31)	19(38)	16(32)	35(35)
Keep them away from incidents of armed conflict	12(24)	7(14)	(19)	11(22)	11(22)	22(22)
Keep a proper vigilance on children	13(26)	5(10)	(18)	5(10)	9(18)	14(14)
Guide them to right path	8(16)	10(20)	(18)	8(16)	9(18)	17(17)
Shift them to peaceful environment	5(10)	9(18)	14(14)	7(14)	5(10)	12(12)

* and ** indicate significance of values at P= 0.05 and P = 0.01, respectively.

Figures in parenthesis are percentages

Roles of mothers/parents could play for their children:

We also tried to ascertain what mothers thought parents/mothers could do best for their children. Majority of the mothers of boys (38%) and girls (32%) from disrupted families and girls (38%) from intact families believed that the best thing they could do for their children was to impart proper education. Marginally the mothers of boys of intact families (26%) gave priority to proper vigilance as compared to education (24%) (Table 6). The education brings the enlightenment and therefore children may become aware about the bad consequences of armed conflict and thus preventing their participation in such issues. Most of the mothers had observed some psychological disturbances among their children so they must be thinking that sending them to schools will provide their children a chance to interact more with other people and thus distract their attention from the thoughts of the armed conflict. The participation in the extra-curricular activities also will act as brain refreshing aids to replace their thoughts about the armed conflicts.

Conclusion:

From the study it can be concluded that children of Kashmir have been exposed to incidents of armed conflict in different forms directly or indirectly. The form of violence experienced due to armed conflict and reaction of children towards incidents of armed conflict depends upon the gender and family structure of these children. In case of children from disrupted families, the major incident that finds mention in case of all the children is the death of their father while as in case of children from intact families, the memories of these incidents are very varied. Overall these incidents have had a deep impact on these children and have affected their psychological health as reported by the mothers. Mothers of children from both family structures thought education to be the best thing for their children in present scenario.

Suggestions:

As most of the mothers believe that education is best in these circumstances that could help their children, we propose that efforts must be made to develop the education system in Kashmir. Also it becomes imperative for the elder members of their families to provide a healthy and cordial atmosphere at home that is free from stress and gloom. We also propose that special programmes must be formulated for mothers also so that they themselves are relieved of the impacts of the armed conflict. Once they have healthy thoughts and feelings, they can have a very positive impact on their children.

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