

THE PSYCHOSOCIAL & CULTURAL ISSUES OF WAR-AFFECTED CHILDREN IN PAKISTAN: AN INTEGRATED SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT: *Pakistan facing the horrific chapter of a decade-long war against terrorism. The series of consistent violence drawn disparity in social infrastructure to this war-torn country. Lack of research on psychosocial and cultural issues of war-affected children in Pakistan demanded this study to deal with the interpretation of the participant's narrations. As very little attention has seen on the transitional justice for war-affected children by stakeholders. Their experiences directly concerned with the issues of war and its effects on children. A qualitative method used to record the narrative of (N=8) samples from Peshawar. The respondents were the residential caregivers, child protection officers and NGOs officials narrated their experience on the psychosocial and cultural issues of children. Results of their narrative revealed that war-affected children experienced education withdrawal, abandoned with unhappy life, and breakup from social cohesion in a cultural domain with profound coping challenges. War-affected children should be rebounded and intact with families make them resilience and can be healed with fewer efforts. The target interventions of government and non-government institutions should be organized and framed on the re-integration and de-radicalization plan for war-affected children within the socio-ecological framework (microsystem and macrosystem). The policies and practices of all stakeholders should be tailored and intervened on children rehabilitation and prevention services from further exploitations.*

Keywords: War, Children, Ecological Framework, Psychosocial, Cultural

1. Introduction. Children and women suffered over centuries by the ongoing global crisis. They are the most demanding survivors for an instant support within the socio-ecological system. More than one million people are internally displaced by the war against terrorism in war-torn areas of Pakistan. This disaster emerging the predicament in long-term at individual, family, and community levels. [1,2,3,47]. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is the most severe war affected province of Pakistan, where Taliban began a disastrous attempt to get hold of the province since 2004 [4]. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa comprises of twenty-six districts from northern to southern regions, where Frontier Regions and Federal Administrative Tribal Area is under the constituency of the federal government. Humanitarian aid organizations like Save the Children and UNICEF adequately addressed the psychosocial issues of war-affected children, but still, complications are perceiving on safety parameters, toxic stress, psychological & social recovery interventions. It's an imperative demand of day to day intervention but can we look to other dimensions models like one of preventive service development and child ecological system. It's working within a specific culture against war exposure, psychosocial functioning, intellectual abilities, mental, and physical health. A country like Pakistan experienced natural and human-made disasters have brought extreme devastating implications. The amount of trauma received is subjectively concern to everyone. "A child is exposed to psychological sequelae if he left alive in any disaster". Disaster leads to upset the life of all ages children, their psychosocial functioning in the

evolution of event and reactions to that event: availability of social support, parents, siblings and teacher response, individual characteristics and response of children as vulnerability and resilience [5]. In results of these consequences, mental health problems developed later in adulthood. A variety of psychosocial support and intervention programs entertained by Unicef made an enormous contribution to collective treatment against war trauma. But in this study, we are exploring and developing the cultural oriented preventive service model in response to psychosocial adversities and culture implication of war against terrorism on children. Research on war and terrorism illustrated different facets of population and culture shared by the academic researchers, social activists, caregivers, stakeholder and their experience in post-conflict settings.

The research identified an increasing exposure in armed conflict or any traumatic events among abandoned and orphan's children are closely associated with emotional distress and in increasing emotional distress associated with the possible delay of cognitive development [6]. The age variation of the human being as stated by Erikson reacting differently in different situations and the role of environment and association within a specific culture is an individual phenomenology. Children reactions based on the proximity of the event, the losses, and breakdown of family structure. Their development depends on the respond of communities and families; therefore, the response is individual at par on the suffering in the specific situations [7]. Mental health therapy in western settings for trauma and other mental disorders are failed to deliver in diverse cultural contexts [8]. Data have developed through qualitative ethnographic research presented the appropriate interventions to assess the culturally varied issues. The psychosocial impacts of violence in any cultural context on young people seriously fascinated the effects to intervene the practitioners and agencies [7]. In consideration of the psychosocial care and mental health support program in developing countries must be within the pragmatic lens of that culture [9]. Children reactions to war are not only varied from diverse cultural backgrounds, but gender also considered as another variable factor and in order to help them, it is essential to understand their experience [8]. The role of the non-government sector for good quality of mental health and psychosocial services building the capacity human being in an area with the context of limited resources [9]. Psychosocial and clinical interventions are to date approaches to address war-affected children mental health needs. In socio-cultural context, the process of behavioral and cognitive response feed into the ecological system. This exploring the relationship between socio-cultural and driven properties of armed conflict in macro system. The adaptation of traditional socio-cultural mechanisms, power structures, political economics and cultural processes demonstrated in a study on Afghanistan. The preventive mechanisms for transitional justice effects and possessions of social relationships need further investigation on mental health and community-based rehabilitation. A limited research review found on community interventions on preventing services for war-affected children. This research will provide the new guidelines on community-based rehabilitation and the development of preventive service model. While rest of the organizations working on the strategy supported by the ILO, WHO and UNESCO model for the war-affected community [10,11].

In Pakhtun culture, children and women are spared from all sorts of the resentments. While in the prolonged family or tribal disputes, man can be targeted anytime anywhere but children and women are exempted and can freely move. In terms of tribal conflict and violence in the Pakhtun culture are much different from the terrorism committed by Taliban. They spare none and intimidated the natives of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA. They used children as suicide bombers and publicly punished women [3]. In terms of larger community care, only a single study has been done so far on the ecological framework of Bronfenbrenner [12] for internally displaced children in the disaster relief camps of Pakistan [13]. It is difficult to estimate the exact number of war-affected children in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, but one can find them under the umbrella of religious institutions. But we never found any recommended preventive intervention by the Govt & Non-Govt stakeholders for war-affected children in temporary displaced camps as well as under residential care. Therefore, considering the socio-ecological framework within multiple environmental layers suggested services for the war-affected children.

1.1 Socio-Cultural Implications. Cultural implications played a vital role in social disintegration and mass violence that elevating crisis phenomenon in value and normative systems. A very limited insight work found on the cultural aspects in post-conflict settings. How we are dealing with war-affected children and their cultural norms in conflicts? How cultural norms shattered and destabilized by war? Disasters may influence the psychosocial state of young population and can develop the mental and social distress. It can separate children from their caregivers and negatively affect the future reintegration into the new socio-ecological system in post-war settings [15,16]. Pakistan sustained heavy damages to joined as a frontline ally in the war against terrorism with US & NATO invasion in Afghanistan since 2003. All the terrorist's events happened in a rural and urban part of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa directly linked to the FATA, which is the culturally diverse Pashtun ethnic densely populated areas next after Afghanistan. It was the place as a safe heaven and ground zero of international terrorist organizations [14]. The more complex situation has a more severe psychosocial impact not only on the individual but on family, society, and community. Therefore, it seems difficult to obtain accurate diagnostic results through different interpretations and

discrepancies between cultures. Like a widespread trauma, psychiatric disorders and loss not only affects the individual mental health but to massive effects can see on family, changes in social process at societal and community level [17]. In Pashtun culture keeping arms is the historical norms due to over centuries-long disputes across and inside the borders. Before, independence of Pakistan, the area was a hardline battleground for British Army to infiltrate inside. Simultaneously, the socio-legal impact of FCR (Frontier Crimes Regulation) played the tormented role in changing the mindset of civilians in FATA. Where the ultimate anguishes of FCR paved the global agenda of conflict to the streets of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This was the reason of remarkable breakage in the family system by Taliban repercussions that bewildered civilians either to follow them or fight them further crucified in both side skirmishes [18]. Militancy might be out of the screen for sometimes, but no one can be guaranteed for full elimination of extremism in a three-decade radicalized generation [19].

2. Theoretical Context. Psychosocial distress is a critical disorder to consider as conceptual issues framing the interpretation of research on children. Recognizing the role of proximal and distal influences and the extent to which the psychosocial adversities on child-specific or all family members shared the mechanism that affected the behavior in an environment [20]. Bronfenbrenner set out a model that explains how transactions shape the social ecology between children and varying perspective of their functioning and growth. This model elaborated to explain the response of children against traumatic events. Therefore, understanding the impact of traumatic events is inevitable to examine, its effects on the social ecology of children. While under the ordinary situations, environment foster the child development of coping functions and basic regulation [21,22,23,24]. Traumatic events destabilized the situation and created the sense of lost control and capriciousness. Wars directly affect the multiple social-ecological circles of the child and these effects disrupt the support systems of religious and community organizations, extended families and schools as well as the unavailability of loved ones and caregivers. Traumatic events disrupt the beliefs and cultural rituals. Low-intensity wars disrupted the fundamental perspective of the child's social ecology (social, religious, medical, and public services) by coercing of the civilian population [25]. Bronfenbrenner Ecological System Theory presents a conceptual structure to comprehend the impact of culture and context on psychological well-being. The ecology of a child is characterized by a compacted social-cultural system, while the child interactions are critical to the systems of well-being and development. The first cycle in immediate environment is microsystem that refers the context in which child interacts with socialization agents directly, for example, with classmates and teachers within the classroom, or siblings, and parents within the family [26].

A microsystem is defined as the specific setting and circumstances of human interactions. The formal education in the context of a classroom (the interaction between teachers and students) are the example within community and school. Microsystem in primary context is a direct interaction but accounted and acknowledged all the aspects of the ecosystem (including indirect influences) [26,21,27]. Bronfenbrenner [12] introduced a model for understanding the context effects on the child. He proposed that development transpired within set "layers" of context. The first layer involves relationships in which the child takes part: relationships with parents, siblings, and peers. These interactions are embedded within structures that have a bearing on how the relationships develop. Such an assumption is consistent with the ecological systems theory. Child development occurred through the progressive and complex process of interactions among the persons and child, objects, representation in an immediate environment. This interaction must transpire on a regular basis and moderately over expansions with the time. According to Bronfenbrenner, the various levels of interacting dimensions of this model cover the personal factors (temperament of orphan children) and the process factors (child-headed family interactions). He explained the structure of full reciprocal impact in families, classrooms, peer groups, local communities, and schools into four ecological systems interactions with chronosystem (Microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem) [28]. Rutter explained the antagonistic environmental experiences that are the critical factors of poor psychosocial adjustment. The growth of poor psychosocial functioning, including the delinquent and antisocial behavior mediated through multiple processes.

The hostile experience has the long-term effect through cognitive and effective models on the psychosocial functioning, presenting the interpersonal interaction, social and environmental experiences [20,29]. Bronfenbrenner explained the culture of competition, materialism, and dominance, which has an impression on the emotional well-being of children's. The policies placed may not be the safeguard against inconsistent exposure to masses, violence and instant gratification. Because child does not develop in isolation, that's why it need a serious attention through culture beliefs and larger social-ecological context to maintain detrimental impact on children [12]. Children's development in post-conflict settings worked in a socio-ecological theoretical context that carries the bequest of war. The adversities of war including diminishing of social services (e.g., health care and education) are comprised of poverty and societal factors. War changes the family constellation as well as impaired the mental health function and individual factors of parental loss trauma [30,31,32]. In a child development context, it is crucial

to be consistent with social-ecological frameworks at varied levels, as the family, community, and society. Within the broader developmental framework, in-depth study is the way to study comprehensively the effects and impressions of war and violence on children i.e. the socio-cultural and psychological risks and probability for resilience in the provision of socio-ecological contexts [30]. For the war-affected population, qualitative research suggested for family support and children mental health functioning, the attachment in microsystem level within ecological settings [33]. This review indicates the prevalence of relationship between family and children mental health. Among the war affected population children needs to sustain safety and support at the micro level within a specific culture, family, and friends. The qualitative narrative collected from NGOs, Child protection commissions and social activists elaborate the inquiry into further understanding of the problems of children future. The absence of parents in orphan and vulnerable children life placed a great gap at the micro level within their ecological system [34]. While looking to the other aspects of children survival in post-conflict settings orphanages/residential care providing an alternate care for the orphan and abandoned children.

3. Methodology. The aim of this study is to identify the psychosocial issues of war-affected children to cope with in culturally deteriorated society by the war against terrorism. The current qualitative study designed as to identify the target interventions aimed at treating or improving the psychosocial and cultural issues of war-affected children. This study purposely employed (N=8) high official respondents from different backgrounds i.e., social activists, government stakeholders, residential manager & caregivers selected from Peshawar. Because people in temporary displacement camps are under the strict surveillance of security forces and access to FATA was prohibited due to ongoing military operations. Peshawar is the capital city of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and has a strategic role in coping with disasters and ongoing military operations in FATA & FR. This qualitative research is the part of a longitudinal study on war-affected children conducted during October 2016 to October 2017. We appreciated the profound support of Child Protection Commission KP and TDP (Temporary Displacement People) Pakistan Army Management Secretariat for the provision of important information related to the intended research. Open ended questions were asked from the respondents about war and psychosocial issues of children. The lack of literature on the problem exist in Pakistan framed this study to review the Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) Ecological model for war-affected children. In various aspects of this model, integration and resilience revealed the commonalities of safety and health in surviving children. This study evaluated the ecological lens on the interventions in micro and macrosystem on preventions services.

Table 1 *Summary of Study Informants (Stakeholders)*

Total Key Informants (Government)	N=4	Total Key Informants (Non-Government)	N=4
Child Protection Commission Officers	02	Orphanage Caregivers	02
FDMA Spokes Person	01	Residential Manager	01
TDP Management Secretariat Peshawar	01	Social Activist Narrative	01

4. Findings. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA have sustained heavy damages to people lives and homes in war against terrorism. It is commonly observed in children persisted with unforgettable memories of the loss of their dear such as father, siblings and other family members. Such incidents left psychological wounds throughout life with posttraumatic distress [35]. Taliban openly claimed the responsibilities of attacks through media on civilian, paramilitary, army and police in retaliation of drone attacks in FATA. But on the other side media has given less attention to the issues of war-affected children in Pakistan. It was the Malala incident that instigated universal coverage revealed the denial conditions of children inside KP & FATA [36,37].

A Peshawar based social activist, working for children rights in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa narrated in the discussion with Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) on **Re-Integration to Safety**: “We all should take steps for rehabilitation of affected children otherwise they may indulge in unlawful and negative activities. As their homes had been damaged in militancy, therefore, they are needed special support, education and focus to bring them in the mainstream, particularly tribal belt youngsters who got affected by militant violence”. **Sensitivity towards Traumatic Memories**: Children are very sensitive in terms of their vulnerable memories. That’s revealed by the caregiver of one orphanage. “War-affected children are very emotional and aggressive as compared to other

orphan children. They are always asking about revenge of the father death and complaining about that to us. Such children need urgent psychosocial and counseling support, because of their vulnerable background”.

Sustainability of Peace: It is difficult to sustain peace in post-conflict settings and having the sense to realize that the role should be equally played by everyone. A social activist urges on the general awareness about war-affected population problems: *“Great responsibilities rest upon the shoulders of all government institutions covering Army, law enforcement agencies, education department, civil societies, NGOs, social welfare organizations etc. that they should come forward to assist affected minors”*. It's beyond to recognition that providing psychosocial support and other rehabilitation methods, what kind of other intervention needs to cope with war-affected children, who believe in vengeance. The one caregiver shared his experience: *“One child shared about his aspiration that I will take revenge of my father death, whenever I found the killer. He wants to become an Army man. But for what? Because of revenge. He decided that no one can stop me from taking revenge”*. It's a series of lived experiences of war-affected children shared with caregivers. A young 16-year adolescent from Swat district witnessed the brutal murder of his father by Taliban in 2009. He suffered from the severe emotional stress of his father death before placed under residential care. After psychological counseling interventions, he relaxed from different mental problems due to involvement in various healthy activities. Almost all the war orphan children of FATA & Khyber Pakhtunkhwa facing same problems [38].

As stated by the Assistant Chief Operation Officer of Child Protection Commission that Child Protection Welfare Commission is working under the provisional authority of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government in coordination with other parent organizations inside FATA as well. He talked about **Justice** system: *“It is judiciary to look for the speedy justice for the children. We are fully relying on courts decisions on unaccompanied, separated children and child sexual abuse cases. We are currently based in 12 districts in KP, but we have a very close coordination and liaising with FATA secretariat and the department as well, including the FATA disaster management authority, child, and gender cell along with the National Disaster Management Authority as well”*. NDMA (National Disaster Management Authority) and FDMA (Fata Disaster Management Authority) are the main stakeholder playing an active role in man-made and natural disaster inside FATA. According to FDMA child protection and gender specialist that dealing with a **Culturally Sensitive** community in FATA is challengeable: *“FATA is totally different when it comes to the system. There is FCR (Frontier Crime Regulation) in FATA, which is silent over the women rights. Like the cultural sensitivity is there. Specifically, we cannot talk openly about sexual abuse and we have a specific strategy for that. We do believe in the mainstreaming of FATA because they don't have the UN basic services. With the support of Pakistan Army FDMA returned 97% war-affected displaced people”*.

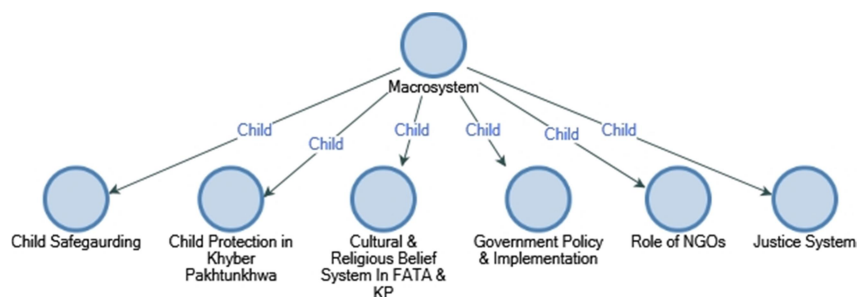


Figure 1: Stakeholders Thematic Coded Cluster from Macrosystem

5. Discussions. Children of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa witnessed exploitation of brutality by the terrorists; they bomb schools and murdered their family members. In such incidents, depressiveness along with other psychological symptoms of mental health disorders have developed [39]. Numerous psychological repercussions of such attacks are affecting children's health and the ability to hinder their educational rights in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa/FATA [40]. In last one-decade, severe trauma cases developed in children by seventeen percent only in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Children feared to go school and other outside healthy activities aftermath of Army Public School. The military operation against terrorists has a direct psychosocial impact on people of FATA & Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. They are extremely disturbed in that society, where the atmosphere remains tense with the detrimental socio-psychological conditions. The horrific shelling on terrorist shelters by army prevail stark in people minds, particularly children, whose suffering of continuing emotional dilemma and trauma. Due to current militancy and terrorism scenario in the region, the rate of children depression has increased at a high level and we lack specialized psychiatrist to cope up with trauma. Unicef launched a project **Khpal Kor** foundation to provide the psychosocial support for terrorism affected children. Psychologist in **Khpal Kor** foundation argued that the war affected children inclined to fear from

darkness and self-esteem problems. Children from 11 to 15 undergone diverse types of mental disorders after each incident and failed concentrate on their education [41].

The number of war traumatized children is very high in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and due to limited resources and spaces, only a few organizations are active in this program. A Peshawar based child psychologist revealed that the impact of conflict and violence is clearly visible in residents of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where children are particularly suffered from post-traumatic symptoms in form of nightmares and flashback after terrorist attacks [42,39]. Unfortunately, govt hospitals lack the facilities of psychosocial support and trauma therapy along with parental care in such situations. The respondent's narrative and previous literature have provided extensive definitions of interventions and alternative care provisions and a considerable variability of preventive service models in post-conflict settings. For instance, the arrangements of foster care can include the traditional types of family support and other models as well. Like in other settings of care under the relatives, kinship and guardianship found in Ukraine, Russian Federation, South Africa and Georgia, defined as foster or formal care arrangements. This kind of settings is monitored and sanctioned under the legal system with children cared by relatives or kin and friends [43]. Looking to the dilemmas of ongoing conflicts, we developed an ecological and culturally comprehensive intervention program for families exposed to war and terrorism. This integrated model based on Micro and Macro systems will be suitable not only for suffered families but can be implemented as policy guidelines in government and non-government sector. As we already evident that local culturally oriented model works better than western style interventions, which is always biased for local ethnic tribes. War-affected children are directly exposed to war events and subjected to the long-term effects of the war, poverty, displacement, exploitation, homelessness, interrupted education, political instability, discrimination, unhealthy life and abandoned to the pleasure. Conflicts withdraw the childhood happy period from his/her life and stressed with other adult responsibilities. Children education is compromising by an armed conflict which is imperative for the development of social infrastructure. But our understanding and experience of war based on the remote media narratives and representation, while the real images of everyday experiences of war-affected children are outside from the modalities within war and post-conflict situations [44]. These stances fail to be recognized an essential context and function of the life practices emphasized by human development theories [12,45].

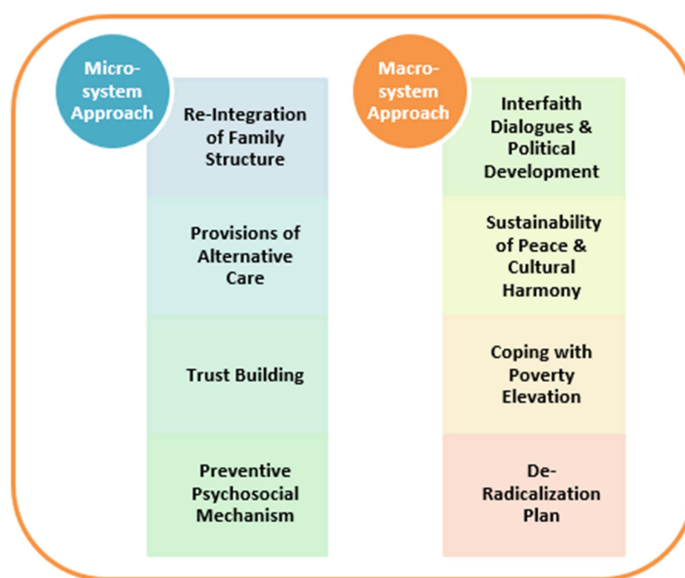


Figure 2: Integrated Socio-Ecological Model for War-Affected Children in Pakistan

6. Conclusion. It has been evident that all the progress made on the emergency plan based on safety and re-integration in post-conflict settings, but we don't have a long-term integrated preventive plan on micro and macrosystem level. It's an ultimate challenge for the government to eradicate militancy in FATA and KP but we need a strong efficacious intervention for children and youth affected by the conflict. The integrated socio-ecological model should be organized collectively on preventive services i.e., de-radicalization, education, cultural norms and emotional resilience to cope with the vulnerabilities of affected families. Psychosocial consequences of political violence and war are well recognized on young population physical & mental health.

Several studies on war atrocities and different cultures have documented lethal effects on children [42,16,39]. War hampers the overall development of children physical or psychological conditions and loss the cultural values by societal structural changes. Even war-affected children feeling helpless and insecure along with family. We need to understand that mandatory access to all the channels to listen to children's voice and their discourse about the problems. To respect the local culture and to follow the ethical discourse representation through media and websites promoting the self-representation of war-affected children. It is impossible to implement child protection policy in the true sense of words without amendment in Frontier Crimes Regulation. Because it's a system of justice conflicts with the law in FATA for minors. Although Federal government has already initiated the process for employment quota in Army, cadet colleges and APS (Army public schools), cash for rebuilding homes, health units, child and mother nutritional plan, temporary shelter schools and monthly cash for families (TDP Army Secretariat Peshawar) [47]. But on the other side, it's a great demand for professional clinical psychologists/psychiatrists, the establishment of trauma centers for such larger community existed in KP and FATA. The provision of alternative care services across KP (orphanages, boarding schools, and madrassas) are not enough to recover war-affected children from trauma. Most of the care centers are running under the religious/faith-based organizations, which arising a serious concern on the psychological health of vulnerable war-affected children under their care [46]. Finally, this study makes a conclusion on the developing of integrated preventive services (Figure 2) model for war-affected children in Pakistan. But to further explore the lived experience of war-affected children government of Pakistan should grant an access to local organizations and academic researcher inside FATA.

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