Chapter II

Children and Armed Conflict: Exploring the Paradigms of Study

Introduction:

This chapter is an attempt to broadly explore the way literature has dealt with the issues of children in situations of armed conflict. The layout of the chapter is as follows. The first section tries to briefly capture the phenomenon of children in situations of armed conflict. It highlights the impacts of armed conflict on children who primarily are considered to be passive victims in such situations. The second section looks at how the concept of children and childhood during armed conflict has been dealt with in the literature. It gives a detailed overview of how this field of study has been dominated by the Western notion of childhood and how it has mostly been looked at with a psycho-medical paradigm. This section further highlights the major criticism faced by this dominant paradigm. The third section tries to explore new approach to look at children in situations of armed conflict. This section highlights how children are not just passive victims of armed conflict but are active agents too. Children’s agency and response to adversities like that of armed conflict are highlighted. The fourth and last section tries to highlight how in order to get a holistic understanding of children in situations of armed conflict, one needs to look beyond the hitherto established frameworks and highlight the everyday lives of children.

1. Impacts of Armed Conflict on Children: A Brief Overview

“My mother once told me, there was violence prevailing around when I was born. There was violence when I started growing up. And there still is violence when I have become a big boy...I wish when you bury me, there is no violence”

- A boy in Kasoli (Chhattisgarh), India

The above stated quote is a strong reminder for all of us to open our eyes to the harsh reality of today’s world which is marred by a large number of armed conflicts and
how millions of children across the globe are losing their childhood to this reality. A large number of them are directly or indirectly embroiled in political and armed struggle in both government and rebel forces throughout the world (Hart 2004).

Children do not start wars and neither do they understand the socio-economic and political complexities giving rise to it. Yet, millions of children today are living in an environment where their families and communities face violence and bloodshed. The changing nature of conflict 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 where people live, i.e. the community- it has far reaching consequences for children. The consequences range from being orphaned, displaced, separated, etc. (Angucia 2009: 80-81; Boyden and Berry 2004; United Nations 2010; ICRC 2009; Nilsson 2013). There is wide spread destruction of health and education systems as an aftermath of conflicts depriving children of their basic necessities (UNICEF 2005) which are the pre-requisites for an overall development of a child. They either get internally displaced or become refugees, and are thus, prone to recruitment; girls are vulnerable to being sexually assaulted and exploited; HIV/ AIDS is likely to spread in conflict situations and children going to the fields to play or work are offered killed and maimed by landmines.

Incidences across globe have shown that despite of the existence of various international legal safeguards, the rights of children stand severely violated. What prevails is gross violation of these rights leading to severe marginalization, vulnerability and psycho-social and emotional effects on children (see for example, Boyden 2003; Boyden and Berry 2004; Cook and Wall 2011; Fisher 2002; ICRC 2009; Machel 1996; Wessells 1998). Armed conflict entails many transformations and hazards at the macro, meso and micro levels, with major implications on children’s survival, development, health and overall wellbeing. Boyden (et. al 2002) lists down broad categories of experiences as under:

a. **Social disruption**: Some of the most prevalent threats to children in situations of armed conflict include displacement from homeland, family dispersal, separation and discord, destitution, loss of service access and social interaction, and the intimidatory presence of military personnel.
b. **Lack of Access to services**: In situations of armed conflict, the accessibility, availability and affordability of services is disrupted. There is a direct effect of this on children living amidst armed conflict. The right to survival and development is hindered leading to the basic services like health and education being denied to children.

c. **Impoverishment**: It has been observed across conflicts in different regions that those who are vulnerable economically are the ones most marginalised during such adversities. The reason behind economic vulnerability and thus, marginalisation are many in times of armed conflict. Factors like loss of income, employment, physical destruction of agricultural resources, mass displacement, death or disappearance of the breadwinner in the family, no more availability of land for farming due to presence of landmines, loss of livestock are some of the major reasons for impoverishment. Children are impacted directly by impoverishment. It increases the pressures on them to work, possibly at the expense of their schooling. It also leads to their under-nourishment and malnutrition and other grave health concerns, inability of the parents to meet the basic necessities like food, clothing, shelter, education etc.

d. **Threat to physical integrity of children**: Children in communities affected by conflict are at constant risk of being subjected to violations by state and non-state actors and law enforcement bodies. These violations include physical violence often leading to disability, sexual abuse, torture, extra-judicial detention, killing and recruitment. Many children disappear and remain missing and unaccounted for even after conflict has ceased. Emergency legislation often leads to children being detained, frequently without charge, and to interrogations, commonly without the presence of a legal representative and/or parent. Children in displacement camps, surrounded by security personnel, are vulnerable to harassment. Children are caught between state and non-state actors and hence, face exploitation and harassment from both sides.

e. **Transformations in children’s roles and responsibilities**: During conflict, the survival and productive options of families and communities undergo a transformation. With income and employment capacities of families being drastically hit, the economic roles and responsibilities alter and in many cases,
children take up the responsibility to support and run their families. However, children get into the economic sphere in varied ways wherein some get recruited as combatants, other take up exploitative and hazardous work and remaining extend a helping hand to the family. Children continue to be vulnerable even in post-conflict situations like those in displacement camps etc.

**f. Differentials in Children’s Vulnerabilities:** Factors like age, gender etc. also play an important role in the way a child gets affected during the times of armed conflict. It has been largely researched that during the times of armed conflict, women and girls become more vulnerable. Often the death, disappearance or incapacity of either parent leads to girls taking up additional domestic responsibilities, which is often a detriment to their education. Girls, out of the fear of being harassed, are often prohibited to step out of the house. Conflict also has an impact on children’s relationship with their peers, especially after communal conflicts, where often parents are less likely to allow their children to mix with friends from other ethnic groups. *Age* also plays a very crucial role in impacting children during situations of armed conflict. Younger children are susceptible to physical injuries and they lack the ability to act independently or protect themselves from adversities. They also have certain physical susceptibilities. Although *older children* are considered to be more resilient physically and have greater capacity to manage risk, but they are still vulnerable to sexual violence, physical assaults, recruitment and forced labour.

Having briefly looked at the larger impacts of armed conflict on children, one can argue that alongwith the physical injuries that one often highlight, armed conflict shakes the very foundation of a childhood. There also 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.

Adding on, children living amidst armed conflict grow up deprived of their material and emotional needs, including the structures that give meaning to social and
cultural life. It is often argued that 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 in 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.

Often, conflicts last the length of a ‘childhood’, meaning that from birth to early adulthood, children live amidst conflict and experience it on an everyday basis. In such environment almost all children, whether victims or perpetrators of violence suffer the traumatic effects of exposure to extreme violence and significant loss socially and emotionally. The kind of incidences children witness and the experiences that 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, as stated by Garbarino et. al. (1991: 16), ‘children may be socialised into a model of fear, violence and hatred, because the scars of trauma are borne by these children for the rest of their lives’. Children continue to be ‘trapped within their trauma and grief, surrounded by reminders of what happened...their mind…is a landscape of mental craters and destruction’ (Dyregrov and Raundalen 1996).

2. *Childhood and Children in situations of Armed Conflict: Exploring Paradigms*

Armed conflicts across globe have brought out a normative understanding of the nature of children and childhood. The field of study of children is vast, however, it can be stated that there is extensive literature in varied disciplines available on the nature of children, childhood and child development. However, the focus of this literature has been more on the concept of childhood rather than the lives of children. Mostly, it looks at childhood as a distinct, natural phase in the human life cycle, which extends from birth to adolescence. The understanding, as Boyden (2003: 3) puts it, 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; Hockey and James 1993), thus, distinct from adults. The French historian Aries (1962) suggested that childhood is unique in the way that ‘it quarantines children form the world of adults, so that childhood is associated with play and education rather than work and economic responsibility’.

In the realm of childhood studies, it was Piaget’s theory of Child Development that dominated the international researches and policies for long. There has been a focus on the universal psychological and biological structures influencing child’s development. It 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 well-being and development, a child has to necessarily be reared by parents in a domestic setting, secluded from dangers and hardships of the adult world, kept safely in spaces like home and schools and kept strictly away from social-economic dangers. However, one argues that in situations of armed conflict, these pre-requisites for child development are often lost putting them in a more vulnerable and risky position.

Following theorists such as Freud (as cited in Blos 1967) and Erickson (1968), the basic idea dominating this field of study is that all children undergo similar developmental stages, irrespective of the cultural, economic or social contexts within which they live. This notion ignores the fact that social contexts are different for different people at any point in time. For some, this context is characterised by a strong social and economic structures, however, for many the social world is devoid of such structures and are characterised by violent confrontations and adversities. The universal pattern of development, irrespective of their social, economic, political and cultural context, tends to ignore children as independent social category.

However, children as a category were integrated after the Industrial Revolution (Boyden 2003: 2). Gradually the idea of child and childhood got institutionalised. In the contemporary times children are recognised as separate category and thus, children specific Conventions, Protocols and other frameworks have come into existence that highlight the universal protocols on age and rights of a child. These frameworks include the United Nations’ Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989, its Optional
Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict 2002, African Charter of the Rights and Welfare of the Child 1999 etc. This has also led to universalisation of the definition of child which is followed as a norm by academicians, researchers and humanitarian organisations etc. *Child* is thus, anyone under 18 years of age.

However, the idea of childhood is not universal. What emerges is the fact that different cultures conceive childhood differently (Afua 2005) depending on different social, cultural, and economic realities. In contrast to the Western notion of childhood, many cultures define individuals as adults as soon as they attain puberty. Many societies define the boundaries of childhood and adulthood in social terms rather than by a chronological age (James and Prout 1997; Francis 2007). To quote a few examples, a girl in Afghanistan is considered an adult as soon as she gets married and particularly after the birth of her first child. On the contrary, the social adulthood of a man is not reached till he becomes the head of the family and assumes certain roles and responsibilities after his father (Berry 2003). In African societies, the transition to from childhood to adulthood takes place through socio-cultural rites and practices and only then social status is appropriated (Tefferi 2007). In many other cultures, children get a social identity of adults once they start participating in the household activities that include, fetching wood, water, tending livestock, cultivation practices etc. So, part of this social definition comes from practical circumstances in many societies as against the Western notion of childhood is primarily based on the juridical 18 years of age as the limit of childhood.

However, childhood has been the focus of significant academic scholarship (*see* for e.g. Bluebond-Langer 1978; Freud and Burlingham 1943; Apfel and Simon 1996; Scheper and Hughes 1992). However, most of these researches that have been conducted in the discipline of psychiatry, medicine and psychology and adhere to the *Psycho-Medical Paradigm*. This paradigm is seen dominating even the field of study on children and armed conflict. However, it is criticised for the same. The following section briefly explores this paradigm and its critique.
2.1. Psycho-Medical Paradigm and its Critique:

The psycho-medical paradigm has dominated the field of study of children in situations of armed conflict (see for example Ayalon 1983; Djeddah and Shah 1996; Gupta, 2000; Hamilton and Man 1998). Tracing back to the seminal work done by Freud and Burlingham (1943) in the aftermath of Second World War highlighting the catastrophic effects of war on children, it has been the central 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 experience and exposure of children to armed conflict is further associated with children being portrayed as vulnerable and traumatized and there continues to be an assumed relationship between children experiencing war and the development of mental health problems (Watters 2011: 111).

The psycho-medical paradigm has thus, 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 suffering 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 paradigm in the field of armed conflict and war (Bracken and Petty 1998; Halligan 2009; Sack et. al. 1996).

However, this paradigm has invited criticism too, for e.g. some critics have questioned the validity of PTSD as an interpretive model due to its specific cultural and historical origin and conception (Boyden 2003). The trauma framework has also come under major criticism, where the scholars state that the concept originated within a specific American cultural setting and does not translate into other social, cultural and political contexts (Bracken and Petty 1998). Further research conducted with a focus on psycho-medical paradigm are often criticised for looking at children as vulnerable, passive beings in their communities who need to be protected and taken care of, rather than active members (Cairns 1996). The focus of this paradigm 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. Drawing from the works of Boyden and Berry (2004) and Boyden (2003), the limitations of the psycho-medical paradigm to study children in situations of armed conflict has been stated as under.

Firstly, this paradigm has brought out a fairly mechanistic relationship between the cause and effect: which flows in a certain pattern. It highlights how children, as passive victims, are exposed to a certain traumatic experience that leads to psychological consequences and disorders. Boyden and Berry (2004: xv) argue that 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 and children mediate by relationships with their caregivers, peers and others in their social circle.

Secondly, this paradigm looks at children as passive recipients of adult agency and victims of conflict. 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. More emphasis is given to children’s vulnerability and helplessness. What comes out is the dichotomy between adults as active perpetrators and children as passive victims who needs protection and care during situations of armed conflict.

Thirdly, this paradigm brings forth the notion that children’s responses to catastrophic events have a universal pattern. It completely gives no space for the existence of social, cultural and indigenous practices and approaches as they are considered to have little credibility and efficacy. Children’s experiences of conflicts are far more diverse, subtle and complex than what is implied by these pre-defined models.

The tendency of the psycho-medical paradigm to look at children as an undifferentiated, universal category in situations of armed conflict has also been criticised. This paradigm completely ignores and disregards evidences from the social science researches that reach beyond commonalities of human conditions that bring forth major differences in the children across the globe. These differences arise from personal agency and varied social, cultural, historical and economic circumstances that children grow up in. Childhood is, thus, not a fixed state bound by pre-determined
developmental stages. As Boyden (2003) calls it, a diverse but shifting category that follows certain biological sequences and responds to cultural and social environment.

2.2. Children in Armed Conflict: Mostly an Adult Interpretation

Children in situations of armed conflict are usually considered to be weak and incompetent in interpreting their experiences and social world. The trend in literature on children living in situations of armed conflict has also suggested that most of the studies and researches on them have been conducted with a pre-conceived notion of childhood and the psychological, social and emotional consequences of the conflict. This trend is dominated by the interpretation of children being objects rather than social subjects. The data for such work is also primarily gathered from adult informants. Adult interpretation of children and their experiences of conflict have dominated the field of research.

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 further 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. 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 (see Boyden 2004).

The use of pre-coded research instruments, in itself, acts as a barrier to understanding children’s experiences and responses to armed conflicts. Boyden (2003: 18) calls it invoking a positivist paradigm that states more about the pre-conception of the researcher than the perspectives or actual experiences of children. With pre-coded and pre-defined research methods, 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. There is a 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).
However, it is believed that a 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 (Scott 2000: 99). There is hence a need to conceptualise children as social actors 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 paradigm 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. One needs to look at children as social actors in their own right.

3. Children and Armed Conflict: Exploring a New Approach

As stated hitherto, literature in the field of children and armed conflict has primarily been based on a psycho-medical paradigm that brings forth a mechanical relationship between children and armed conflict. It is, however, argued that there is need to bring out researches that look at children in situations of armed conflict with a more diverse approach and explore how armed conflicts affect children’s social, cultural and economic roles and their integration in the society they live in. Researches 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.

Cook and Wall (2011) state that reproducing discourses of innocent victimhood as the only way to grasp children’s involvement in armed conflict serves as a market for media depiction and for attracting charity and aid, but this leads to meagre steps to widen the view on children in such adverse conditions and fail to acknowledge the way children act upon, react and experience armed conflict.

Children need to be looked beyond being passive and vulnerable in situations of adversity and considered as social actors in their own right.
3.1. **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)

Children are *social actors* in the society. However, tracing the wider literature in the field of study of children, it can be stated that one of the first people to have suggested that children should be regarded as having their own separate social world was anthropologist Charlotte Hardman (1973). *Social world*, as defined by James and James (2008: 124), is the context of children’s everyday lives as a social group of children and in relation to the adult world.

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.

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.

Hart (2008: 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’. Adding on to it are ethnographic studies which also occupy a prominent position in the field of study of children in armed conflict and is considered to provide indispensable perspective in this field (Boyden and Berry 2004). Therefore, children need to be looked at as active, meaning- making beings...
and as subjects in their own rights. Researchers need to incorporate children’s voices, perspectives, diversities and active participation. Children thus, need to be repositioned as subjects rather than objects of research.

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.

3.2. Children’s Agency and Response to Armed Conflict:

The practice of looking at children as independent social actors underscores 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.

3.2.1. 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. Following Giddens, one defines agency as the ‘intentional action that encompasses both, the intended and unintended motivations and desires’ (as cited in Cassell 1993: 93-95). However, it has further been argued that ‘agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place and therefore, agency implies power’ (ibid: 96). There have also been competing claims as to the extent to which an individual can act independent of the social structures, institutions and value systems that make up the societies in which they live.

What gets highlighted is 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. In Mayall’s (2002) view, children’s agency is not usually acknowledged and recognised by the adult world and this leads to the minority social status ascertained to children. This social status shapes the subjectivities of children and also reproduces their relative powerlessness. This view in particular raises many questions regarding the extent to which children are able to exercise their agency and thus, affect the society and social world they live in. 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 and it 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.

During such circumstances, children are often restricted to act independently and have high levels of influence by the adults around them. The role played by State in relation to child’s agency is also crucial. In situations of armed conflict it is thorough State’s categorisation of children, role played by its institutions, application of its rules and policies on children all constrain or direct children’s agency to a large extent. Although, children do exhibit agency in their own individual spaces and actions, but as Meredith and Shandy (2008: 773) argue ‘when it comes to state policy, room for manoeuvring comes primarily through the structural interstices caused by policies in flux, the uneven application of law and process. The State, thus exercises overpowering influence over children. In situations of armed conflict, child’s agency is often characterised by passivity and vulnerability.

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. However, children in times of armed conflict do project diverse characteristics. A close study with children in zones of armed conflict can bring forth the diversities in children as social actors.
3.2.2. **Response to adversities:**

Following the Western notion of looking at children in armed conflict, it is usually believed that as child development and wellbeing is primarily based on biological and psychological structures that are universal across all class and culture, the responses of children to adversities like that of armed conflict will also be more or less similar (Boyden and Berry 2004). Mostly guided by this notion, the studies in the field are conducted pre-coded research instruments. 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). The usual practice in this domain has also been to have adult informants talk on behalf of children. 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.

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’ (see Allen 1989; Boyden 1994; Davis 1992). In such exceptional situations, children are mostly looked at with a lens of vulnerability and passivity. The adversities, like that of armed conflict are looked at as an impediment in the overall growth and development of children. 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 vulnerability 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 with a more holistic approach.

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 (Davis 1992; Duffield 1990) and there is a strong relationship between social power, exposure to adversities and the resilience of children. Although, infants and young children, out of biology, are dependent on adults for their care and
protection and lack the ability and competence to face adversities but one cannot
generalise this because by doing so, we attempt a folly and tend to underestimate and
ignore the resourcefulness, resilience and social competence that they 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 too. 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 (see Cairns
1996), growing in context of constant change and contradiction has proved to be a
source of strength for children (see Dawes and Donald 1994), in certain adversities,
children have been better able to accommodate dissonance and change than adults (see
Palmer 1983). 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 a common
phenomenon in situations of armed conflict.

During adversities, there is alteration in status, roles and responsibilities in a
child’s life and these 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
However, one 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 and expect 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 and as (Boyden 2003: 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.

Although experienced personally, an individual understands and engages with them through ways that are socially mediated (Klienman & Klienman 1991). In situations of armed conflict, where children are placed in a complex context, 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 in prevailing adversity, there is a need to closely explore child’s everyday life and the living experiences in a conflict situation and derive a larger understanding thereof.

4. Life at the Cross Roads: Children’s Everyday Life Amidst Armed Conflict

It has hitherto been established that there has been a shift in the approach to look at children in times of armed conflict. Children, from being looked at as passive recipients and objects of research are now also looked at as active agents who are not only important in their own right but whose accounts are taken as competent portrayals of their experiences (Qvortrup et. al. 1994).

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.

Most of the arguments stating children as social actors argue 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’.

Use of qualitative methodologies to study children brings out children’s own perspectives rather than that of others. This prioritises children’s voices and experiences. These subjective interpretations about their everyday lives are often drawn using ethnographic and narrative approaches. These approaches recognise 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 to pay less attention on ‘facts’ and ‘truths’ of a phenomenon but rather lay our focus more on the meaning that the phenomenon has on the child and 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 the patterns of interactions and communications that occur within the society, where children live, impact them. Scholars from the field of everyday life sociology have looked at interactions and communications in two directions. First, it is inwards, toward consciousness, deriving a model based on people’s everyday life attitude and behaviour. Here the relationship between consciousness and interaction is seen as reflexive wherein people are shaped and socialised by interaction as well as instrumental in shaping the character of interaction. On the other hand, one needs to acknowledge the fact that the social structures within society do not exist independent of the people that interact within them. Rather they are constructed and constituted internally. These structures, in-turn, influence the behaviour and interaction of people living in it (Adler and Adler 1987).
Studying 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 characterised 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 within it. There needs to be an attempt to explore how children living in conflict situations 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, which in the present context is characterised by violence, displacement and on-going conflict. Naturally occurring interaction is the foundation of all understanding of society (Adler and Adler 1987: 219). These interactions have an influencing effect on the the perceptions, feelings, and meanings that children experience as well as the own micro structures that they create in the process. Studying children in their own context also brings out the 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 within the context of conflict brings forth how children look at their lives in different ways at different times and what sense they make of their changing social world.
**Conclusion:**

This chapter attempted to highlight children as a social category living within the phenomenon of armed conflict. With a brief overview of the broad impacts of armed conflict on children, like *social disruption, lack of access to services, impoverishment, threats to the physical integrity of the child, transformations in children’s roles and responsibilities* and *differentials in children’s vulnerabilities*, the chapter tried to get an overview of the way in which children have been dealt in studies on armed conflict.

While conceptualizing children and childhood in situations of armed conflict, it is observed that there has been a long tradition to universalize the concept of childhood as a period of vulnerability, innocence and dependence. Literature suggests that children have been looked at as passive victims of armed conflict. Mostly dominated by adult interpretations, the interventions with children in armed conflict are based on quantitative, medical and psychological measures, methods and pre-coded instruments. The Psycho-medical paradigm has been dominant in this field and has looked at children as vulnerable, dependent beings, in need of constant nurturing, protection of adults and incapable of making sense of the socio-cultural context of which they are a part of. The way children experience childhood and develop actual competencies in times of armed conflict is often ignored under this approach. It ignores the structural causes and effects of the conflict that effect a child’s everyday life as he grows in situations of armed conflict.

There is no denial of the existence of pain, suffering, and sense of loss and profoundly debilitating experiences that children go through during the times of armed conflict. However, in the process of recognising the aspects of vulnerability, etc. one tends to undermine children’s wellbeing and their resilience and coping capability during adversities. The notions of children’s passivity and susceptibility tend to disregard the social, cultural, economic and political contribution made by these children within the family and community at large and also the coping efforts at an individual level during times of armed conflict. The practice of considering children as a vulnerable passive being often proves detrimental for children as it is these practices that lead formulations of policy and programmes by adults and they do not prove to be in the best interest of children.
This approach has been criticised by scholars from the field of social sciences. They argue that this approach has brought out a fairly mechanistic relationship between children and armed conflict. It is argued that this completely omits certain important environmental, societal and relational dimensions of children’s lives. Children have mostly been an object in such studies and it is the adults who have played an active role in interpreting them. Therefore, there arises a need to look at children as active agents in situations of armed conflict rather than passive victims. Children’s first hand experiences and insights into their own self, feelings, experiences and interpretations are thus, valuable insights into their lives and lived experiences. 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 giving meaning to the environment they live in, which in the present study is of violent conflict, can be best looked at by studying children’s everyday lives.

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