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**Forum:** Social and Human Sciences (SF1)

**Issue:** Establishing measures for the well-being of orphans and abandoned children in zones of conflict.

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## Introduction

War causes serious trauma for any human being who is exposed to its horrors firsthand. However, as expected, experiencing war firsthand takes a much bigger toll on children than adults. For orphans and children who have been abandoned, the trauma is even greater as they do not have an adult to support them through such traumas. It has been proven time and time again that experiencing such traumas in childhood majorly affects the psychological well-being of human beings later in their lives with problems such as PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders). Moreover, as non-state actors become more involved in war and violence, the lines between soldier and civilian are getting more and more blurred. As non-state actors such as terror groups have no respect for the line between the two concepts, civilians are just as much under attack as state militaries. This means that civilian children are often exposed to conflict right in their own homes and streets. Therefore, it is extremely important to protect children under such circumstances. Every child has the right to survival and development. However, it seems as though the rights of orphans and abandoned children in conflict zones are rarely addressed or acknowledged. This report will attempt to summarize the major points of this issue, touching upon the psychological effects of being an orphan or an abandoned child in a conflict zone, the physical health, education and other basic needs of such children.

## Definition of Key Terms

*Orphan:* “a child deprived by death of one or usually both parents He became an orphan when his parents died in a car accident.”

*Abandonment:* “to give up with the intent of never again claiming a right or interest in”

*Health:* “the condition of being sound in body, mind, or spirit”

*War zone:* “a zone in which belligerents are waging war” or “an area marked by extreme violence”

*Trauma:* “a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury”

*Street child(ren):* Vulnerable children who end up living on the streets and are subject to manipulation and abuse from ill-intentioned adults in war zones



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## **Background Information**

### **Causes of the Issue**

The reason why orphans and abandoned children live in conflict zones in the 21st century is mostly the violence of terror groups in several regions of Africa and Asia. As people's homes are terrorized and attacked by extremists, they have to either fight as civilians or flee their hometowns. Naturally, both of these options lead to an increase in the number of children left having to fend for themselves. For example, in active and past conflict zones in countries such as Syria and Iraq, adults join anti-terror groups or other armed organizations to fight extremism. Many untrained civilians lose their lives in direct conflict with terror groups or even their state's own military. Consequently, many children in these zones are left without parents and families. And in conflict zones where even basic healthcare is difficult to reach, a support system for these children is almost impossible to establish. Some children also get abandoned by their families, either with the hope that they can return in the future to retrieve their children or with the knowledge that they have no way of supporting their children. Both orphans and abandoned children face great traumas as they have to experience losing their parents and also deal with the reality of war and extreme violence at very young ages.

The core reason why such issues have risen recently is the rise in non-state actors all around the globe. Groups such as ISIS, Boko Haram, and others are terrorizing land where innocent civilians live in attempts to claim land for their own groups. Non-state actors that are extremist groups have no respect for laws of war and cannot be engaged by other nations through diplomatic relations. This leads to previously unobserved atrocities inside of war zones. Moreover, the recent rise in terror has led to the newest refugee crisis. Immigrants from terror-stricken countries are forced to go through unimaginably horrible journeys. The need to escape the current circumstances of an area leads to more abandoned children as families lose or leave behind their children.

### **Orphans' and Abandoned Children's Later Lives**

Many children who are subjected to such situations have to find a way to survive on their own. Most of them eventually become what is known as "street children". They might be recruited by the same groups which terrorize their homes and kill their families as young children are easily controlled and manipulated. Some are recruited as child soldiers while others are used for other roles such as cook, cleaner or spy. Others become involved with drug cartels or other illicit smuggling organizations. However, most tragically, such children go through extreme trauma, many times involving sexual assault or substance abuse. They have a high chance of being raped in the streets, often times getting serious STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) or dying from other health complications. Because young children are so easily manipulated, they can be pushed to prostitution or used for trafficking by adults with cruel intentions. Additionally, children on the street become political and legal victims as they are labelled as "thugs" or "gang members" and instead of being helped, are punished by the law.

It is very difficult for children to survive such situations. Without their families or guardians, young children can lose their lives, get permanently injured or suffer from extreme trauma in conflict zones. Without education or healthcare, they lead lives in relatively low standards and usually get involved with crime. If they are not victims of crime, they become criminals themselves through manipulation. They practically lose all of their opportunities to lead a prosperous life because of the circumstances they are left to live in.



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## **Orphans' and Abandoned Children's Health**

Children who are abandoned by their families and left to survive in conflict zones suffer from both psychological and physical extreme health conditions. Most of their psychological issues arise from the several traumas they might experience in their early childhood. Living in a conflict zone comes with many traumatic experiences of its own. Landmines, armed conflict on the streets, airstrikes and other bombings scar children for life. Observing death and destruction all around their homes create deeply rooted traumas in them. Furthermore, losing their families, either in examples of death or abandonment, is majorly traumatic for children. A majority of the time, these children do not have another adult to look after them and have to grieve their families on their own while simultaneously struggling to survive. Additionally, becoming a “street child” and suffering through many harmful experiences ranging from drug usage to human trafficking, leads to even more extreme traumas in children. All of these traumas lead to a wide array of psychological problems in these children.

PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders) have many symptoms and they all negatively affect a person for the rest of their lifetime. A person with PTSD could be paranoid, obsessive or insomniac. Many times, patients show symptoms such as panic attacks, depressive episodes, hypersensitivity, problems with memory and terrible flashbacks. These children are also usually very pessimistic, feel hopeless a majority of the time and have very low self-esteem.

Orphans and abandoned children in conflict zones also suffer from physical health problems as they rarely have a functional healthcare system to aid them. As stated previously, they have a high chance of being sexually assaulted or being pushed to prostitution. This means that they frequently catch STDs that could be deadly for them at a young age and with minimal healthcare. Moreover, many children who live in active war zones suffer from wounds and amputations, especially from landmines. Landmines are a major factor in children's health in conflict zones. Additionally, unexploded hand-bombs and other shells frequently harm children as they are drawn to unusual objects. Many children unintentionally set off such shells and harm themselves and other civilians around them. Even for areas which were conflict zones decades ago, landmines are a big threat to children and many others. Especially for children without guardians, such threats could be deadly. Being amputated in a zone with no aid could lead to death very quickly. Children need to be protected from such physical injury threats as well.

## **Children's Rights**

Children have basic rights just like any other human being. Children's rights are especially significant as minors are easily manipulated and taken advantage of by adults. Children's rights violations in conflict zones are perhaps the biggest problem concerning the issue of orphans' and abandoned children's well-being in conflict zones. Being forced to survive in extreme circumstances where they are regularly subjected to sexual manipulation, substance abuse, and human trafficking is already a huge human rights violation for these children. Moreover, they lose their fundamental right to education and healthcare. It is extremely important to consider the lack of educational support for such children. If they were provided with even basic training for a specific occupation, they could escape the seemingly inevitable life of becoming a “street kid”. Education saves children from trauma-ridden lives and helps them thrive, even in almost hopeless situations.



Moreover, children have basic human rights such as the right to be protected from abuse, violence or discrimination. They have a right to be provided with essential services any human needs. These rights are not respected by those around “street children”. Children’s rights, generally, should be a top priority in attempts to protect the well-being of orphans and abandoned children conflict zones and as long as these rights continued to be violated, a solution to this issue will be out of reach.

## **Timeline of Major Events**

### **Creation of UNICEF**

UNICEF was created in 1946 in order to provide essential needs to children in Europe after WWII. Since then, it has been successful in countless campaigns to aid children all over the globe and protect their rights. UNICEF is a major actor in providing aid to orphans and abandoned children in conflict zones. The creation of this organization is significant to every aspect of this issue.

### **Adoption of the Declaration of the Right of the Child**

In 1959, the Declaration of the Right of the Child was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. This Declaration was one of the greatest achievement in the effort to protect the rights of children universally. The Declaration included rights’ protection in many social and personal aspects. Currently, the Declaration can be used to point to children’s rights violations in conflict zones and support development plans to protect such children.

### **Establishment of The Convention on the Rights of the Child**

In 1989, The Convention on the Rights of the Child was established through the collective efforts of the international community. This was the first legally binding tool which could be used to better laws universally in order to protect children’s rights. The Convention covered a wide array of issues, from civil rights to economic ones. The Convention is a great development for the protection of the rights of orphans and abandoned children in conflict zones.

### **Mandate for UN SG to name a Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict**

In 1996, the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict position was created with the efforts of the United Nations General Assembly. A mandate was created by the GA and the Secretary-General of the UN was tasked with appointing someone to the position of Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict. Since then, the UN has had a body which specifically aims to protect children in armed conflict zones. This branch of the UN conducts great efforts to promote the wellbeing of orphans and abandoned children in armed conflict zones.

## **Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

### **UNICEF (The United Nations Children’s Fund)**

UNICEF is a major actor in protecting children’s rights and promoting education and healthcare for children in need. UNICEF currently operates in 190 countries, including those who host active conflict zones and conducts aid programs in areas such as “Child protection and inclusion”, “Child survival” and “Education”.



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This person is an expert appointed by the Secretary-General of the UN who studies children's lives in armed conflict zones and develops plans to support them. This person is tasked with producing a mandate which explains the effects of armed conflict on children and how these issues can be fixed. The person currently in this position is Virginia Gamba.

## **The Middle East Region**

Many countries in the Middle East, especially Syria, Iraq, and Yemen are currently home to extremely large numbers of orphans and abandoned children in conflict zones. Regions frequently attacked by terror organizations have an abundance of abandoned children and orphans with no support system to provide these children with essential services.

## **The Sub-Saharan Africa Region**

Similar to the Middle East region, Sub-Saharan Africa is covered in active conflict zones. The terror group Boko Haram still has a strong reign in certain parts of the region. Furthermore, conflicts continue in countries such as Somalia and Central African Republic. The orphaned or abandoned children of these regions are either recruited by extremist groups or manipulated and abused in various other ways.

## **Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue**

There have been various attempts at solving the issue and while none of them have been truly successful, some have partially reached their goal. Most of these attempts involve the initiatives mentioned in the "Timeline of Major Events" of this report. Many initiatives also include charities such as "Save the Children" or "Children's Rights Alliance". There have been initiatives to conduct research and collect more data as well as initiatives to provide healthcare or education to abandoned or orphaned children living in conflict zones. However, the main reason why the international community cannot reach these children is that of the active conflict surrounding them. Most extremist groups do not let foreign powers infiltrate their territory. As long as borders are put up and conflict ensues in these regions, it will be near impossible to reach the children who help need the most and prevent the violations of their rights.

## **Possible Solutions**

There are several possible solutions to the issue of the protection of orphaned and abandoned children in conflict zones however they all rely on basic human rights. Perhaps the most discussed and developed solution is providing education to such children. Education is internationally accepted as a human right and is believed to majorly help a person evolve and improve themselves. By providing proper education, the UN could save these children from the streets and protect them before they start getting manipulated by ill-intentioned people. Education is seen as a road to an occupation and a higher standard of living. However, to educate orphans and abandoned children in conflict zones, an organization must overcome many obstacles. The circumstances in war zones are not ideal for a standard educational environment. For some areas, even transporting educators is a major issue. Therefore, it could be a better option to attempt to move such children away from conflict zones.

Finding, grouping and transporting orphaned and abandoned children in conflict areas brings many problems on its own. However, it is still a possible solution which should be considered. Children could be located and picked up by officials trained in child health and psychology. If they could be transported to safer



areas which are still in close proximity to their former homes, they could be provided with essential services and most importantly, education. In safe zones, both basic and advanced healthcare stations could be set up specifically for such children. They could be provided with accommodation and slowly introduced to basic education. For such services to be provided, many volunteers would need to be transported to such safe zones. Moreover, international relations between states would affect where the safe zones are set up and how they are managed. These are all both obstacles and tools to consider when trying to reach a solution for this serious issue.

Another option for abandoned children living in conflict zones would be returning them back to their families. There are already programs in Southeast Asia working on this procedure. Abandoned children could be traced back to their families and returned to them. This possible solution contains ethical aspects which must be taken into consideration because of the possible living conditions of the children's families. For example, if there were better facilities for these children to stay at, should they still be returned back to their families? In the end, the most important principle that should not be lost when bringing solutions to this issue is the protection of children's rights.

Lastly, any organization or movement attempting to solve this issue must take into consideration the mental health of children who lost their families or were abandoned by their parents and additionally were left to survive in a conflict zone on their own. As mentioned previously, such children face an abundance of psychological problems in their future. For the extremely negative effect of such experiences on a child's health to be minimized, the necessary measures have to be taken. For any rescue or educational team, there must be several people educated and trained in child psychology included. When managing the lives of such children, mental health has to be taken just as seriously as physical health. All possible solutions considered for the well-being of orphans and abandoned children in zones of conflict must include solutions addressing their mental health.

## **Useful Links For Further Research**

<https://www.unicef.org/graca/alone.htm>

<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/press-release/15Oct02/>

[https://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_100857.html](https://www.unicef.org/media/media_100857.html)

[https://www.unicef.org/protection/57929\\_46494.html](https://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_46494.html)

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