

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

## Impact of Wars and Disasters on Women and Children

*At 1st Malaysian International Medical Students Conference*

Saturday, 5 September 2009 • Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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20 years ago, the world came together to say YES to **children** by adopting the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The CRC states that children, defined as people 18 years and below, have the same basic human rights as adults.

The CRC protects the human dignity and basic rights of all children, regardless of where they are born, the race or ethnic group they belong to, whether they are a boy or girl, rich or poor, living with disabilities or with HIV.

The most basic rights are the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life.

Equality of rights for **women** is also a basic principle of the United Nations. The Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) promotes women's equality in all areas of life.

CEDAW deals with the civil rights and the legal status of women, such as the right of women to vote, to hold public office and to exercise public functions. It says that women have a legal capacity identical to that of men and the same opportunities to exercise that capacity.

CEDAW is also concerned with human reproduction as well as with the impact of cultural factors on gender relations – it grants women the right to be protected from traditional and stereotyped ideas of gender.

Everything that we do for humanity begins and ends with human rights – peace and security, equality, the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, and saving the environment.

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Every child and woman has the right to live in a peaceful society, so that they can have all their other rights fulfilled.

Without peace, children cannot have access to education, healthcare and an adequate standard of living, or be protected from violence. Without peace, the very principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child are violated.

**Conflict and disasters around the world**

It is estimated that 175 million children are impacted by disasters every single year. As of 2006, it was estimated that a total of more than 1 billion children under the age of 18 were living in conflict areas or areas emerging from war.

Of these, an estimated 300 million were under age 5, and more than 18 million children were refugees or internally displaced.

From 2006 to 2009, UNICEF has responded to more than 800 emergencies around the world, witnessing first-hand the trauma children endure due to conflict, war and natural disasters.

**Violation of rights**

Children and women do not start wars, yet they are most vulnerable to its deadly effects. They rarely grasp the complex causes of armed conflict, yet they are all too often forced to flee their homes, witness atrocities or even perpetrate war crimes themselves. Children and women are not responsible for war, yet it robs them of their childhood and their lives.

It is not just the direct consequences of war and disasters that affect children. The indirect consequences – the interruption of basic services, and increased poverty, malnutrition and disease – take a similarly devastating toll on children.

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Children's rights are violated in so many ways. Millions of children live with injuries and disabilities. Children are conscripted, kidnapped, press-ganged, terrorised, or otherwise forced into becoming child soldiers. Girls may be forced into sexual servitude;

Children are displaced from their homes and are exposed to violence, abuse, and separation from their families. Displaced children may have difficulty establishing their nationality or identity and may become stateless.

Children suffer from malnutrition, hunger, diseases, and psychological damage. Children living in war-affected contexts are less likely to be in school or have access to clean water and basic sanitation.

Worldwide, more than 38 million children are out of school because they are living in conflict-affected states, while millions more are living in situations affected by natural disasters. In conflict zones, 20 million girls are out of school.

These children have less chance of becoming adults able to play a constructive role in their societies.

Women and girls are particularly vulnerable, requiring significantly different protection than do men and boys. Prevention of and protection from gender-based and sexual violence need to be addressed from the outset of a crisis.

Women and girls, particularly adolescents, have been specifically targeted with violence such as torture, rape, mass rape, forced prostitution, forced termination of pregnancy and mutilation.

Many women and girls have become pregnant as a result of being raped. Many have been infected with HIV, dramatically altering their future, livelihood and prospects.

Victims of sexual violence become social pariahs. They are rejected by their husbands, families and communities, and face impoverishment and humiliation.

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Armed conflict causes more women to die during pregnancy or labour, with pregnant women being two to three times more likely than other women to die of violent causes.

Children and women's rights are intertwined. The lives of children are jeopardised when women are not protected and when women's contributions to peace-building are undermined and marginalised.

**Protecting children and women during conflict and disaster**

During and after conflicts, crises and emergencies, UNICEF focuses on meeting the basic needs of women and children, protecting their fundamental rights and preventing violations. UNICEF's mission is to provide special protection for the most disadvantaged children – those who are victims of war, disasters, extreme poverty, all forms of violence and exploitation and those with disabilities.

Children in the midst of armed conflict and natural disasters such as drought, floods and earthquakes have the same needs and rights as children in stable countries.

In disaster or emergency situations, children should receive essential health care, including measles vaccination, adequate food and micronutrient supplements. Breastfeeding is particularly important in emergency situations.

Continuing education is key during and after emergencies. Education helps reestablish normal routines and gives children a place to learn and play.

It is always preferable for children to be cared for by their parents or other familiar adults, especially during conflict situations, because it makes children feel more secure.

Violence in the home, war and other disasters can frighten and anger children. When such events occur, children need special attention, extra affection and the opportunity to express their feelings and to describe their experiences in ways that are appropriate for their age.

Child protection is a priority in emergencies. They need child-friendly spaces, medical and psychosocial care, and protection from sexual violence.

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Landmines and unexploded ammunition are extremely dangerous. They should never be touched or stepped over. Establish safe play areas for children and warn them not to play with unknown objects.

Children and young people should be seen as survivors and active participants in creating solutions in a crisis, not just as victims or problems.

**Rights = peace**

Peace must be achieved so that children can have their rights fulfilled. Conversely, we must also protect children's rights in order to achieve peace. A world without war can only be possible if today's children, all around the world, are given the opportunity to realise all their rights – to education, health, protection and equality.

Children who survive and thrive, who are healthy and well-educated, can learn values of respect and equality, become productive citizens, and become part of a larger society that is integrated, free and equal.

This is a society that will respect human rights and fundamental freedoms – and contribute towards a world without war.