

Impact of War on Lebanese Children and Youth

"The impact of war on Lebanese children and youth" formed the topic of a conference organized by the Lebanese Child Welfare Association which was suggested by Mrs. Zahia Salman, head of the Association (1). It lasted two days, 7th and 8th of December 1977, and a large number of organizations participated in it, some of which were: The Educational Center for Research and Development, the Lebanese Red Cross, Beirut University College — IWSAW, the American University of Beirut, and the Lebanese Family Planning. The following brief accounts try to summarize the studies presented by Dr. Jamal K. Harfouche (AUB), Dr. Ghassan Yacoub (ECRD) and Dr. Julinda Abu-Nasr (BUC), concerning the harm done by war to the physical and mental health of children.

Dr. Harfouche, in a 16 pp. study, presented documented facts about the impact of war on the children's health in Lebanon. After exposing the defects of health conditions in this country during the pre-war years and how they contributed to the general degradation during the war, she proceeded to an approximate evaluation of the losses which the war brought about in the number of children 1) who lost their lives, 2) who were physically injured, 3) who became permanently handicapped, 4) who contracted various diseases, 5) who died because of miscarriage, and 6) who became addicted to drugs.

Lost Lives

The statistics she gave were based on conjecture because, even now, accurate figures about the war losses are not available. The number of Lebanese children between birth and 15 years of age is approximately 1,350,000. She reckoned the number of those who lost their lives because of the war as reaching 13,500 (a proportion of 1%) or 6,750 (at the proportion of 1/2%) in a total of 3 million inhabitants. The total number of those who were killed, old or young, is estimated at 60,000, i.e. 2%.

Handicapped

The number of war-handicapped people in the whole population is estimated as 5-10% in addition to the formerly existing number of 3%. Thus the number of handicapped children and young people runs between 67,000 and 135,000.

Diseases which the war contributed to spread

They come in the following order: cholera, tuberculosis, jaundice, typhoid fever, venereal diseases, skin diseases

(mainly scabies) and diseases due to malnutrition.

All these diseases, except cholera, existed in Lebanon before the war but in relatively small proportions. Tuberculosis, for example, had been so successfully prevented that a number of TB sanatoriums were obliged to close.

Diseases due to malnutrition belong to the mild or moderate type but the frightfully ascending prices of food since the war may announce a gradual recrudescence of these diseases.

Drug addicts among young people

Since the sixties, educational institutions and mental health physicians have reported a rising degree of addiction to drugs in the new generation.

The war crisis and the general demoralization that followed contributed to increase this wave and to create a problem whose treatment consists in finding out and fighting its profound causes, which are moral corruption, unemployment and lack of security.

Dr Harfouche outlined the following possibilities for the provision of treatment:

Short-term treatment

1. Modernization of basic health services.
2. Application of the U.N. Charter concerning the Rights of the Child.
3. Mobilization of mass media for general health instruction through a plan elaborated by the Ministry of Health.
4. Carrying out a permanent cleanliness campaign throughout the country.
5. Creating a modernly equipped center for demography and other statistical information on drug addiction, war victims, epidemics, etc.

Long-term treatment

This consists of clarifying and unifying the general health policy, especially regarding children; creation of a comprehensive health plan including the training of human potentials, and reevaluation of the whole health sector in view of reorganizing its structures and its service programmes.

Psychic disorders resulting from war conditions:

Dr. Ghassan Yacoub, a researcher at the Educational Center for Development, presented a paper on this topic, ►

based on a field study and interviews he conducted with children, parents and physicians.

He said that the concepts of war and death vary in the child's mind according to age. At the "syncretic" stage, 3-4 years of age, the concept is hazy. Between 5-8, he links death with a cause like shooting but he does not consider it a final end. At the third or "realistic" stage, 9-11, he knows that death is a final end, caused by damage to the vital organs like the head, the heart or the internal parts.

The psychic effects of war on the children in his study differed according to age and the degree of their exposition to the war dangers. Briefly enumerated, they were:

1. Fear and anxiety leading to anorexia, aggressivity, enuresis, insomnia, hysterical symptoms, frightful dreams.
2. Sadism and violence.

Dr. Yacoub recommended the following methods of treatment:

1. Developing the child's love for life and joy against a possible desire for destruction and delinquency. This implies the development of his creative talents, his artistic capacities, in any of the following: drawing, dancing, musical ability, music appreciation, acting, sports, nature study, manual work and so on.
2. Creating mental health centers in all Lebanese districts, particularly those that were subjected to attack and bombardment.
3. Training psychiatrists and mental health experts, capable of diagnosing the psychic troubles of children and adolescents and giving them the necessary guidance.
4. Using the mass media, particularly television and radio, for the transmission of instructive and entertaining programmes, which would succeed in arousing the children's interest and developing their mental faculties.

(1) See Al-Raida No. 3, p. 8.