

CHILDREN AND YOUTH AS  
'SITES OF RESISTANCE' IN  
ARMED CONFLICT

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SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES OF CHILDREN  
AND YOUTH VOLUME 34

**CHILDREN AND YOUTH AS  
'SITES OF RESISTANCE' IN  
ARMED CONFLICT**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To my son, Qais  
and  
to the children who are our future*

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# CHILDREN AND YOUTH AS “SITES OF RESISTANCE” IN ARMED CONFLICT

Tamanna M. Shah

*Ohio University, USA*

## ABSTRACT

*This volume transcends the traditional portrayal of children and youth as mere victims or combatants, highlighting their participation as agents of change and resistance. Through compelling narratives and empirical studies, the contributors examine ways in which children and youth engage in, and influence, the socio-political landscape in armed conflict. Emphasizing resilience, contributors to this volume detail how young people navigate the complexities of armed conflicts, contributing to peacebuilding and community reconstruction efforts. Through case studies spanning different geopolitical regions – including Sudan, Ukraine, Georgia, South Ossetia, and Pakistan – scholars highlight the multifaceted experiences of these young people. With a focus on these intersecting aspects, this volume amplifies the voices of affected children and youth, informing policies, and implementing programs that prioritize their well-being and rights in post-conflict societies.*

**Keywords:** Children in conflict; youth activism; sociopolitical agency; peacebuilding; resilience; resistance

## INTRODUCTION

*In the fell clutch of circumstance*

*I have not winced nor cried aloud.*

*Under the bludgeonings of chance*

*My head is bloody, but unbowed ...*

~ William Ernest Henley (n.d.)

Amidst the chaos and devastation of armed conflict, children and youth often emerge as powerful agents of change and resilience. “Children and Youth as ‘Sites of Resistance’ in Armed Conflict” is a compelling exploration of their roles as active participants, who often function as catalysts for change within the complex dynamics of warfare. They stand amid ruins and regrowth, not merely as silent witnesses but as formidable agents of change. The current conflict climate is brutal for the people within these spaces. As this volume of *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth* was coming together, issues of children’s safety and well-being were at the forefront of global conversations with the rising tensions in Ukraine and Palestine. This volume underscores the urgency of addressing these pressing concerns through international dialogue and action, aiming to foster environments where children can thrive despite the adversities they face.

Save the Children reports that approximately 468 million children worldwide live in armed conflict. This figure includes children affected by the crises in Palestine and Ukraine, highlighting the broader issue of child casualties in conflicts across Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, Myanmar, Haiti, Sudan, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kashmir, and Somalia. Last year alone, out of the 8,630 children reported killed or maimed in conflicts, as many as 4,000 were denied access to humanitarian aid ([End the killing of children in armed conflict, 2023](#)).

This book marks a departure from the dominant renderings of children in such contexts, often reduced to either victims or instruments of war – child soldiers. Instead, it shifts the discourse to celebrate the agency of youth – revealing stories of survival, resistance, and the indomitable human spirit. The scholarship within these pages is emblematic of a methodological shift, one that seeks to underscore the interconnectedness of youth-led movements and their substantial influence on global conversations and policymaking. Here, the contributors shed light on the vibrant resistance movements led by youth, movements that resonate with power and hope. Through their nuanced research and empathetic narration, these scholars unveil the realities of these young lives, portraying them not as passive entities but as dynamic actors in their narratives of resilience.

Crucially, this book delves into the role of children and youth as catalysts for peace and justice in conflict and post-conflict settings. It examines their significant contributions to reconciliation, community rebuilding, and addressing the root causes of conflict. Incorporating intersections of age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic factors, enriches our understanding of the varied experiences of children and youth in conflict zones, spotlighting their roles in forging a more just and peaceful future.

Exploring these lived realities, this collection explores themes of trauma, the role of memorialization, and the implications for human rights within these challenging environments. Detailed case studies from regions like Sudan, Israel-Palestine, Ukraine, Kashmir, and Kosovo provide deep insights into the resilience and coping mechanisms of young individuals confronting the aftermath of traumatic events. The significance of memorialization is underscored, serving not only to honor and commemorate the losses suffered but also as an essential step toward healing and reconciliation. Through these explorations, the contributing scholars elevate the voices of affected children and youth, guiding policies and shaping programs that safeguard their well-being and rights in the wake of conflict.

## CHILDREN AND YOUTH AS RESILIENT ACTORS

Children and youth living in conflict zones often carry the heavy burden of trauma due to exposure to multiple traumatic events. Finkelhor et al. (2005) introduced the term “polyvictims” to describe such deeply affected children. Ethno-political violence notably disrupts their cognitive and emotional processing of experiences (Barber & Schluterman, 2009; Betancourt et al., 2010; Cummings et al., 2010), leading to challenges such as an inability to adapt, antisocial behavior, and various negative mental health outcomes (Huemer et al., 2012).

Schick (2019) suggests a deeper self-reflective examination of the *self* and the other to foster an imagination where emotions merge with political realities, leading to an alternative understanding of a political community (Zhang, 2022). Everyday culture plays a crucial role in shaping the emotional narratives of citizens toward the state, influencing their affective engagement with politics (Wolak & Sokhey, 2022), or even resisting dominant structures by establishing “sites of contestation” (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020; Bilgic & Gkouti, 2021; Koschut, 2019). Scholars place significant emphasis on the non-linear characteristics inherent in the analysis of emotions (Beattie et al., 2019). It involves a complex, multi-layered process in which interactions at various levels either strengthen or limit specific emotional narratives and understandings. Emotions are integral to our “common-sense structures” (Beattie et al., 2019, p. 138) and significantly shape our perception of the world.

It is within the overt expression of emotions that a narrative of resilience emerges. The resilience displayed by children and youth transforms potential vulnerabilities into sources of strength, enabling them to navigate and overcome the challenges of their environments. This shift from vulnerability to resilience underscores the importance of recognizing and supporting the inherent capabilities of children and youth as active agents in their communities, capable of contributing meaningfully to peace and recovery in post-conflict settings.

Resilience is traditionally defined as the capacity of a system to adapt and recover from disturbances that threaten its stability and development (Masten, 2014). Alternatively, resilience is also depicted as “competence” (Masten, 2014), “constructive change” (Ridgway, 2001), or as “capability” (Bartley, 2006). Resilience, as an observable phenomenon, is key to understanding children’s trauma and how they rebound from such events. Yet, viewing resilience merely through “objective

measures of health” (Ungar, 2004) can sometimes miss the rich diversity of cultural interpretations and personal meanings.

This volume seeks to challenge and expand the conventional understanding of resilience, which often relies on a predominantly Western framework (Ungar, 2006). It argues that resilience should be seen not just as a personal trait but as a complex construct that emerges from social suffering and is deeply embedded in community and cultural contexts. For instance, in various conflict zones, resilience takes on locally specific meanings: in Palestine, it is expressed through *sumud* – a term that conveys steadfastness and a profound connection to the land (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008). In Kashmir, it manifests as *Tehreek*, symbolizing the struggle and movement for freedom (Shah, 2020, 2021, 2023). These examples illustrate that resilience is more than an individual’s ability to bounce back; it is a collective expression of endurance and adaptability. It is (re)constituted across communities as a social representation, reflecting broader narratives of survival and resistance. Understanding resilience thus requires a dual perspective that appreciates both the individual and communal dimensions, acknowledging how cultural, societal, and political factors collectively shape the resilience of children and youth in conflict zones.

We emphasize the *thickness* of individual narratives and experiences to explore how children and youth construct meanings from their traumas and engage in resilient behaviors. In conflict zones, children’s resilience is intricately woven with acts of resistance (Massad et al., 2018), stemming from their proactive mobilization of resources and skills to safeguard their psychological well-being (Veronese et al., 2018). Within such violent contexts, children break away from the conventional, static image of passive suffering to emerge as active agents deeply embedded within their social environments (Veronese & Cavazzoni, 2020).

The concept of childhood agency has attracted significant scholarly interest, highlighting several critical aspects such as social interaction (James, 2009), competence, self-determination, and practical action (Shah, 2024b; Stoecklin & Fattore, 2018). However, there remains a critical need to focus more on the significance of place. The local environment is a foundation for children’s well-being and a fundamental structure shaping their lived realities (Hart, 2002; Jack, 2010). Acknowledging this dimension can provide richer insights into how these young lives navigate and influence their worlds, particularly in contexts of adversity.

## CHILDREN AND YOUTH AS “SITES OF RESISTANCE”

The significance of *place* is fundamental to identity formation (Proshansky et al., 1983), as it serves as a conduit linking individuals with their ancestors and communities. Places – land, homes, or specific locations – forge connections that extend from the past through the present and into the future (Low, 1992). Agency manifests as a powerful expression of individual and collective capability (Giddens, 1984). Children are not passive in this process; they actively shape the spaces around them (Oswell, 2013), and their agency is realized through their

engagement in socio-spatial activities such as play, participation in educational and religious institutions, and their connections to the land and family dwellings (Ergler et al., 2017; Moore, 2017). In disrupted environments, the interactions that children engage in with schools, homes, places of worship, community centers, and outdoor spaces, where they explore and play, can be seen as a tangible manifestation of their agency and resistance within their social contexts (Harker, 2005). These interactions also contribute to the formation of a therapeutic landscape (Sampson & Gifford, 2010).

The notion of *situated agency* deepens our understanding of how children’s development is influenced by the dynamic interplay between their actions and their environment (Oswell, 2013). This concept reveals how places contribute to more than just well-being; they also shape experiences of trauma. The capacity of locales to act as channels for healing and as arenas of resistance significantly impacts youth and adults (Sousa et al., 2019). Places not only forge our identities but also define the potential for our physical and social existence. At the same time, through our engagement with these spaces - what might be termed our *spatial agency* - we not only navigate but also actively reconstruct these environments and their influences on our lives.

Marshall (2013) observed that children’s interactions with their environment enable them to perceive and appreciate the esthetic qualities of their daily activities, thus reclaiming a degree of autonomy over their conditions. This engagement facilitates the mobilization of both personal and communal resilience strategies, allowing them to navigate the unpredictable settings characterized by political and military conflict. Furthermore, Marshall (2015) interprets children’s playful activities in zones controlled by military forces as deliberate acts of resistance. Resistance displayed by children can take many forms and strategies. Indirect forms of resistance, through actions, expressions, and responses, are manifest within the everyday realm of emotional politics. Here, individuals, groups, and institutions, often considered peripheral to global politics, exert their agency (Schick, 2019). Some scholars understand agency to constitute emotions of the individual and the collective, and its relationship with the structures of political power (Šadl, 2021). At the basic individual level, emotions are the subjective, conscious reactions to specific circumstances, projected outward as personal feelings (Shah, 2012, 2024c).

Young people mobilize through social movements as well and in doing so claim the public and political space. From the Arab Spring protests to global Occupy protests, young people joined others and were often leaders in responding to injustice (Shah, 2013, 2019). Beyond mobilization is yet another strategy – peaceful “performed” resistance – that often transpires in the form of poetry, art, and music. These activities oppose the oppressive conditions and contribute to the children’s subjective well-being and life satisfaction. Such “wounded” environments (Till, 2012) transform into *sites of resistance* and defiance, shaping significant aspects of their developmental pathways in these conflicted landscapes. These spaces, therefore, are not merely backdrops but active elements in the resilience and resistance narratives of children living under such extreme conditions.

## CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN PEACEBUILDING

Children's participation in development programs is a central component of numerous United Nations initiatives (UNICEF, 2022). Globally, children and youth are crucial stakeholders in peacebuilding efforts, from planning to evaluation. Their involvement is considered essential for the effective formulation and implementation of peace and humanitarian aid strategies. Acknowledging their roles contributes to knowledge production that can lead to their emancipation (Jabri, 2007). This perspective places young people at the forefront of crafting solutions that directly impact their lives and underscores their role in shaping sustainable peace processes.

The concern here is that the contributions of young people are often "perennially overlooked or viewed with suspicion" (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015, p. 119). This oversight extends into the fields of International Relations (IR) and conflict resolution, where there is a notable scarcity of theoretical engagement with youth (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015). Frequently, young individuals are burdened with the responsibility for emancipation and breaking the cycles of conflict. At the grassroots level, there is a need to integrate the voices of children and youth into the master narrative of peacebuilding and humanitarian initiatives. Too often, young people are categorized as "damaged," "inexperienced," and "victimized" and thus perceived as incapable of contributing to peace (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015).

However, locally, they participate in efforts that aim to restore some measure of peace. Viewing them solely as victims and sufferers of violence diminishes and negates their varied experiences as peacebuilders who navigate complex systems of risk and oppression to advocate for peace at local, national, and international levels. Such delegitimization of youth often relegates them to private spaces, such as the home, further isolating them from public and political engagement. This exclusion from active participation in peace processes undermines their potential roles as agents of change and perpetuates their marginalization within broader societal and political contexts.

Hart's distinction between instrumental and transformative participation is crucial for understanding the roles young people can play in peace initiatives. Instrumental participation typically focuses on achieving predefined objectives, often dictated by external agendas, without aiming for wider societal impact. In contrast, transformative participation, as Hart describes, seeks not only to achieve certain outcomes but also to empower marginalized groups and catalyze significant structural changes within society (Hart, 2002, p. 9). This form of participation recognizes the agency of young people, valuing their input as vital to the process and outcome of peacebuilding activities.

To genuinely enhance the impact of peace programs, they must be deeply embedded in the everyday realities of young lives. This approach involves integrating their experiences, perspectives, and aspirations into the design and implementation of these programs. It acknowledges that young people are not just recipients of aid but critical contributors to the peacebuilding process. By doing

so, programs can move beyond mere engagement to actual empowerment, enabling youth to take on leadership roles and advocate for changes that address the root causes of conflict in their communities.

Embedding peace programs in youth realities ensures that these initiatives are responsive to the challenges and opportunities of the unique conflict contexts. It allows for the development of more tailored, effective strategies that resonate with the needs and goals of young participants. By fostering an environment where young people can contribute meaningfully, such programs enhance their immediate effectiveness and contribute to the long-term sustainability of peace efforts, building a resilient foundation for future generations.

This integration of Hart’s theoretical framework into practical applications underscores the need for a shift from traditional top-down approaches to more inclusive, youth-centric strategies in peacebuilding. Such a shift not only enriches the programs but also amplifies the transformative potential of young people as key agents of change within their societies.

## SCOPE OF CONTRIBUTIONS

In moving beyond the treatment of children and youth as subjects to central figures – both as sites of resistance and as creators of knowledge about conflict and peace, this volume brings together diverse perspectives. Each chapter draws from rich, field-based insights involving youth from regions as varied as Sudan, Ukraine, Georgia, South Ossetia, and Pakistan. Beyond mere narration, some contributors advocate for a dynamic, action-oriented approach to peacebuilding and humanitarian efforts, integrating human rights considerations in Sudan and weaving gender identities into peace processes in Kashmir. A particularly evocative chapter revisits the historical significance of child quilters during World War I, extracting valuable lessons applicable to contemporary conflicts. Collectively, these contributions elevate the often-overlooked voices of youth in global dialogues about conflict and peace, especially resonant amid the ongoing crises in Ukraine and Palestine. The narratives compiled here not only spotlight the diverse forms of violence and marginalization these young individuals endure but also celebrate their remarkable resilience in liminal spaces. These children and youth emerge not just as survivors but as formidable agents of resistance, actively shaping the politics of peace at both local and global levels.

In the opening chapter, Myriam Denov and Régine Debrosse examine the hardships endured by the Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan during their arduous journey to the Global North (Chapter 1). The authors delve into the kinship and mutual support that developed among these unaccompanied minors, underscoring their resilience and agency as they navigated the challenges of flight and resettlement. The narrative redefines the experiences of these children through the lens of their evolving relational dynamics and community bonds. Denov and Debrosse advocate for a nuanced approach to peacebuilding and intervention, stressing the

importance of addressing the relational needs of unaccompanied youth – a facet frequently neglected by organizations and government bodies tasked with supporting these individuals. They argue that such entities must extend their focus beyond the immediate survival needs to include the social and emotional support systems that are essential for the long-term well-being and successful integration of unaccompanied youth into new communities.

Children's resistance and adaptability are further explored through the current lived realities of displaced Ukrainian children like Veronika, as they navigate integration within new educational systems amidst the disruptions caused by conflict. Roxanna M. Senyshyn's detailed analysis of the narrative highlights the critical role of supportive educational environments that cater to the unique needs of displaced children (Chapter 2). These environments facilitate language learning and integration and contribute to their healing process. This focus on children's individual experiences, coupled with the advocacy for educational strategies that prioritize personal development and emotional well-being, embodies the essence of children as active participants in shaping their destinies despite the adversities imposed by conflict. The chapter contributes to the broader discourse on how displaced children leverage their agency in navigating new social and educational landscapes, thus echoing the volume's overarching narrative of youth as *sites of resistance* in conflict zones.

Chapter 3 delves into the world of memory and its influence on the youth of Georgia and South Ossetia amidst their ongoing conflict. Natia Chankvetadze outlines how young people from these conflict-divided regions hold conflicting memories shaped by their societies' dominant narratives. This internalization of collective memories often fosters negative perceptions of the opposing community, known as the "out-group," complicating conflict resolution efforts. Chankvetadze's work underscores the urgent need for interactive, inter-community dialogues to bridge these perceptual divides. This alignment reinforces the necessity of addressing the causes of conflicts through informed and empathetic youth engagement.

The intersection of tribal conflicts and the youth of rural Sindh, Pakistan is the setting for Chapter 4. Through the case study of Safeer, a young man entangled in enduring tribal disputes, Abdullah Khoso provides a vivid description of the impact of conflict on children and youth. Safeer's narrative illustrates the direct consequences of violence on the rural youth in Sindh. Additionally, Khoso describes how youth actively participate in resistance, negotiating social, economic, and political pressures. Khoso's detailed exploration of the socio-political fabric of rural Sindh through the experiences of its youth highlights their critical role as agents of change and underscores the importance of local contexts in discussions about children and youth in conflict settings.

Aisha Manus, an independent historian from Georgia, effectively integrates the concepts of resilience and resistance through the historical lens of the Junior Red Cross during World War I (Chapter 5). In a powerful example, the author reveals how children, particularly through the act of quilting, actively participated in the war effort, demonstrating significant agency despite their young ages.