The Impact of War
On Population Health

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Wars are known to be violent, destructive, and, at times, inevitable. Due to war, the world is currently suffering from instabilities, with countries constantly fighting for land, money, and independence. This is a major concern because armed conflict jeopardizes the safety and health of the population, causing people to live under constant stress and fear. There are various types of wars, all fought to different degrees, with genocide as an extremely horrific manifestation of them (Center on Law and Globalization, 2014, p.1). The purpose of this paper is to show the lasting effects of genocide within a context of war on the health of populations. It will explore the impact of war on the social and physical environments including its impact on the accessibility of healthcare services. Additionally recommendations to improve the health status of the populations already exposed to war, and strategies on how to prevent future occurrences of war will be provided.

My Story

Iraq is known to many as a place of ongoing wars, including the genocide attempt of 1987-1989, also known as the anti-Kurdish Al-Anfal campaign, by Saddam Hussein against the Kurdish population concentrated in northern Iraq (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 1993, para.3). Genocides are an extreme form of war, and during this time many nations turned a blind eye to these unethical acts of violence against the Kurds (UNHCR, 1993, para.4). Survivors of the genocide tell their stories, and explain how nothing can replace the sight of families identifying the bodies of loved ones, who, with a bulldozer, had been suffocated underground, or the sight of watching others burn alive only to hide in the hopes of saving themselves and other family members from the torture. Survivors describe being overcome with feelings of great sorrow, upon returning to their villages, only to find mass amounts of dead bodies lying there peacefully, because deadly gases had been sprayed on them like water sprayed on crops. People were afraid to stand up for one another because they had seen what had happened to those who tried to be heroes. Although many believe that these are all just claims, of what may or may not have occurred, my father can verify those men were buried alive because many of them were his friends, and he was seconds away from being one of them. My mother can verify there were deadly gases because of the dead bodies she stepped over, and places she went in order to avoid it. These stories told by the survivors have changed my perception of war and has me questioning whether it is even possible for anyone to be truly victorious after performing such inhumane

and degrading actions to others. At one point, I believed wars were necessary in order to gain national freedom, and global safety. However, these stories have opened my eyes to the side of war that goes unseen, the side where innocent people have their lives taken as a result of being powerless. These stories are known based on experience; there is no sufficient evidence other than the bodies of the dead and words of the survivors to support it. However, what can be supported is that among the dead there were infants, mothers, fathers and grandparents. There was no one person intended as a target, just a nation-less minority: the Kurds. To some this may sound biased, but it is based on my family's experiences and from what I have seen, first hand, the impact this inhumane type of war has on an individual, and their family. My family, like many other Kurdish refugees, managed to escape the horrific conditions. Although the environment my parents live in is no longer a threat to them, they now suffer from high blood pressure, diabetes, pulmonary, and cardiac conditions caused by the emotional and physical stress brought on by war (Cummings, Sull, Davis, & Worley, 2011, p.161)**.**

Current Iraq War
The Kurdish people of Iraq who did not manage to escape during the genocide now find their environment as a daily threat to their life, due to the current war. For decades this population has had a life of turmoil and political unrest. The Sunnis and Shiite's, which are both religious denominations of the Muslim faith, have been in conflict for decades; however, the invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003 had triggered daily combat engagement between both groups, closely resembling a civil war (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2008, p.145). In 2011, the United States pulled their remaining soldiers from Iraqi soil, and tensions now exist between the armies of the central government and the opposition, armies of northern Iraq belonging to the Kurdish populations (The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC], 2011, para.1). This ongoing war is significantly impacting the social and physical environments of both the Kurdish community and the rest of Iraq (Winter, 1998, p.416; Hupy, 2008, p.406; Cummings, et al., 2011, p.159). Additionally, it is making it more difficult for these populations to receive the healthcare services they require (Webster, 2011, p.864).

Social Environment
The negative effects of war contribute to an unhealthy social environment because many populations are forced to seek refuge or become internally displaced. Discrimination, brought on by social inequities, causes genocide which harms populations based on their culture, beliefs, and ethnicity. There has been much genocide across the world: such as the Kurds of Iraq, the Holocaust,

Rwanda, and various others (Lemarchand, 2002, p.499).While many people in these situations are forced to change important aspects of their lives and live in fear and oppression, others flee to safety. Approximately 470,000 of the people, who are internally displaced in Iraq due to war, live illegally in poor and broken down housing where they are threatened by eviction, and lack access to adequate basic needs (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2011, para.5). In addition to physical conditions of being displaced, new immigrants and refugees also face psychological problems, due to past trauma, and current stress in adjusting to a new environment (Cummings et al., 2011, p.159). After escaping the war, many refugees have "extensive post-migration stressors including distressing life events and poor physical health" (Cummings et al., 2011, p.16). In a recent study on Kurdish refugee population, Cummings, et al., (2011), revealed that 67.1% of the Kurdish participants suffered from depression associated with feelings of displacement (p.164). Participants in the study stated feeling; "lost in [the] country," by not being able to understand the culture and language of a new environment, simple daily activities become difficult and stressful (Cummings et al., 2011, p.166). To a refugee the environment itself is seen as a stressor, by contributing to a sense of confusion, loss of culture, and social isolation. Refugees must adjust to their new environment by adapting to the customs and belief of others, while maintaining their own cultural identity. This may bring on the fear of having the new generations lose sight of their true culture (Cummings et al., 2011, p.161).

Physical Environment
In addition to the negative effects of war on the social environment of an individual, there are also many negative consequences that occur to the physical environments, including: contamination, destruction of vital infrastructure, and loss of essential resources (Winter, 1998, p.416; Hupy, 2008, p.406). This can have a major impact on a population's quality of life, because what may appear to be battle grounds for some people are still considered the homes of others. The lack of safety due to unexploded ordnance left behind by soldiers puts civilians in great danger (WHO, 2008, p.23). In 2012, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) referred to this as weapon contamination and stated, "it deprives whole populations of access to water, farm land, health services and education," they go on to further explain how these abandoned explosives and weaponry cause environmental degradation and death to individuals and wildlife (para.12). In 2011, the ICRC found and destroyed 1,600 unexploded ordnance in the southern province of Iraq (para.12). Previous wars in Iraq have contributed to major oil spills and the use of uranium bombs, resulting in water and air pollution, and the contamination of soil, mainly in northern Iraq where most of their agriculture is grown (Brown, 2004, p.A464). This pollution and contamination puts the population at greater risk for greater health

concerns. Water purification and sanitation are important factors in health and hygiene; such infrastructures are usually destroyed during war. In 2008, the World Health Organization (WHO) explained that in Iraq, the 1991 gulf war alone destroyed 230 billion American dollars' worth of infrastructure (p.13). In the past decade there has been a significant decline in access to water and sanitation, this is emphasized in findings by the United Children's Nations Fund (2011) explaining that, "40 per cent of the Baghdad water network is damaged" making it difficult for many people to receive clean water (para.8).

Health Services
Since the health of this population is at a greater risk due to pollution and contamination, it is important that they receive the healthcare services they require. Unfortunately, in Iraq, this is not the case. The population of Iraq has paid the ultimate price for war in the number of civilian lives lost. In 2010, the WHO found the adult mortality rate in Iraq to be 222 per 1000 exceeding both the regional average and the global average (p.1). It is possible that the lack of health services and inadequate resources for health were factors contributing to the mortality rate. Prior to the wars Iraq's health care system was one of the top quality services in the middle east; however, now the health care system has been disrupted and people have been unable to receive the care which they require. Many healthcare providers have been targets of kidnappings and murders, due to low national security, Governments of Iraq estimate that 628 physicians have been murdered; causing physicians to leave the county in order to avoid the conflict (Webster, 2011, p.864). This left 40% of Iraq's primary health clinics with a shortage of physicians, making it difficult for people to have quick access to healthcare (Webster, 2011, p.864). Additionally, the fear of war itself has kept many from accessing the available health care services, with unhealthy people refusing to leave the comfort of their homes and enter streets of war in order to seek care. Deputy head of delegations in Iraq, for the International Committee of the Red Cross (2010) Jean-Christophe Sandoz stated, "the insufficient numbers of medical personnel, the inadequate facilities, the difficulty obtaining access to certain places...and other factors have made it very challenging to provide health care in Iraq," this statement supports how the impact of the war in Iraq has led to shortages of medical supplies and healthcare providers (para.2).

  These health services need further interventions to ensure the protection of the population, less people receiving health care means there is a greater number of people in the state of vulnerability. Also, since the population's water supply has been affected by pollution and other factors, limited access to safe drinking water and water for agriculture has become a concern (UNCCTI, 2012, para.1). This inequitable access to health care and resources, which is due to the

arising conflict, is likely to drive the population into poverty. In 2012, according to the United Nations Country Team Iraq (UNCTI), close to 7 million Iraqi's, that is 23% of the population, live in poverty secondary to the war (para.1).

Recommendations

Although it may seem impossible for one person to make a difference in correcting the wrong doings of war, simply donating towards organization such as WHO, UNHCR ,UNICEF, and ICRC helps war torn countries build safe environments and provides them access to healthcare, clean water, and sanitation. This is seen with ICRC (2010) where "engineers continue to repair and upgrade water, electrical and sanitary facilities, especially in places where violence remains a concern" (para.19).While other organizations such as UNHCR (2013) " give the authorities strong support in the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan to End Displacement" and find adequate homes for internally displaced persons (p.27).

On an international level, in order to stop wars, countries must come to an agreement to disarm, this way no weapons could be used on the people of the country or other countries. Without weapons, it would be difficult to start a war or kill mass numbers of people in such short periods of time. However, this can be seen as a controversial issue, due to the fear living in a defenseless country. Therefore, if disarming is not an option, then globalization must occur but without being a threat to the independence and rights of the individual countries involved, and preventative diplomacy should be used to resolve conflicts without harming populations.

When it comes to preventing genocides, these crimes against humanity must not go unnoticed, like what happened with the Kurds. Everyone should have the right to live free of oppression and violence. People should not be denied these rights on the basis of where they were born or what ethnicity they are. International leaders should prohibit these acts and take nonviolent action towards achieving social justice and equity in places where it does not exist.

Conclusion

Though it is evident through history that there are some positive aspects to war, such as times when it is used to defend the rights of humanity, or gain freedom and independence. It is important to consider the negative consequences armed conflict has on the health of populations. Wars lead to the prevalence of forced evictions, low quality of life, destruction of the physical environment, and limited access to necessary health care services. They are not to be taken lightly. Results have indicated long-term negative impacts on an individual's social and physical environment. People living in war zones are exposed to harmful biological and chemical warfare which, as seen with the Kurdish refugee population, continues to indirectly affect one's health status long after the war. Therefore, national

leaders should determine whether war is morally justified, and consider if the victory of war is ultimately worth the concurrent and residual effects it has on the health of populations.

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