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Should the definition of the term “children born of war” and vulnerabilities of children from recent conflict and post-conflict settings be broadened?

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Dear Editor,

The term “child born of war” (CBOW) refers to a child whose one parent is a member of military or peacekeeping forces and the other parent a local citizen (usually the mother), and it includes the following categories of children: (a) children fathered by enemy soldiers (war and civil war) and (b) occupying forces, (c) children of stationed, peacekeeping forces, and (d) children of female child soldiers (1). As Mochmann (2) suggested, the term can be applied regardless of type of conflict, historical context, geographical

setting and background of procreation. It is known from the literature review that terminology used to describe this population of children varies across countries and specific periods of time (e.g., “occupation children”, “war babies”, “peacekeeper’s babies”, “children of hate”, “child of rape”, etc.). Despite a growing evidence that these children are exposed to stigma, discrimination, neglect, social exclusion, health risks, and other forms of violation of the rights of the child, there is no scientific consensus about recognition and involving “children born of war” into the existing classification of vulnerable children in and after conflict (3-7).

However, while conducting our research, through the process of indentifying and recruiting the potential study participants, we found that there are children that share specific living conditions and experiences with CBOW in the narrower sense, such as:

a) children whose mothers were victims of the international human trafficking being „sold“ throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina (BA) (8), and of fathers who are local (BA citizens, some of which belonged to local military/police forces) or belonged to foreign stationed forces; b) children who recognized themselves as being a child of “enemy’s soldiers” from fratricidal war taking place in 1993-1995 in the “Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia” (APZB), a self-proclaimed

autonomous entity, whose parents are both local citizens, but it was common that a father fought not only against members of their ethnic group but also opposing their brothers or a mother's family side. These children responded to our public invitation to participate in the study on „children born of war“ in BA, reporting that although they are not guilty for their fathers' political and/or ideological views, they have been treated as children of „enemy soldier“ and consequently exposed to a huge stigmatization, discrimination, and violation of the rights of child that took place in the aftermath of fratricidal war in Western Bosnia, and c) children born out of inter-ethnic („mixed“) marriages, involving local parents from different ethnic backgrounds, who were considered to be „national apostates“ both in war and peace (9), but a father often combated against the side of the mother's family. These children, also respondents to our public call, recognized as „children of opposing parties“ reported that as such they have been affected by war since a continual ethnic politics are causing them a variety of problems associated with their mixed background (prejudices; stigmatization: „products of failed ideologies“, „mixed meat“, „good for soap production“; intolerance, discrimination, segregation etc.)

We think that human trafficking related to conflict and post-conflict zones, and fratricidal war – common characteristics of recent wars - are very important psycho-social issues, and that vulnerabilities of children born and raised in the above socio-political contexts (including intolerance and prejudices towards children with interethnic background) should also be addressed in the research on „children born of war“. We would appreciate an input of colleagues on this topic; specifically regarding the question if understanding of the term “children born of war” should be broadened and vulnerabilities of children from various

homogenous and heterogeneous non-integrated post-conflict communities be linked to this group? We see a first step towards a broadened definition by collecting empirical evidence that supports our hypothesis that these groups of children, as described above, are comparable to CBOW with respect to the core psychosocial issues of “children born of war” in general (10).

Authors' contributions: Conception and design: AD; Acquisition, analysis and interpretation of data: AD; Drafting the article: AD; Revising it critically for important intellectual content: PK and HG; Approved final version of the manuscript: PK and HG.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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