



The Relationship between School Violence and Resilience in Palestinian Children in the Gaza Strip

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author AMT designed the study and wrote the protocol. Author SST performed the data collection and statistical analysis, managed the literature search. Author AMT wrote the first draft of the manuscript with assistance from author SST.

Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between school violence and resilience among Palestinian children in Gaza Strip.

Methods: The sample consisted of 449 children selected randomly from the five localities of the Gaza Strip. Children completed the School Violence Scale, and Resilience Attitude Scale.

Results: The study showed that 20.18% of children reported school violence, 23.5% reported physical violence, 12.29% verbal violence, 28.76% self-defense, 14.12% violence toward things, and 22.33% reported attitude to violence. There were statistically significant differences toward boys in total school violence and all violence subscales. Total resilience mean was 57.3 (40%), challenge mean was 17.3, commitment mean was 15.16, and control mean was 21.4. The results showed significant differences in total resilience, commitment, and control attributed to gender for the favor of boys. The results showed that total violence was not correlated with commitment. Physical violence and violence toward things were positively correlated with commitment. While, verbal violence was predicting negatively resilience.

Conclusions: The findings of this study showed that Palestinian children were exposed to school violence which is another risk factor for children living in area of war and conflict. Programs

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targeting children, parents, teachers should be multilevel, community-based, and culturally situated and intervention must address the influences of historical, cultural, social, and political factors inside the Palestinian society.

Keywords: Children; Gaza Strip; resilience; school violence.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are different types of violence exposure. Direct victimization includes assault, sexual assault, child maltreatment, and property victimization, whereas indirect victimization refers to witnessing violence. This paper's perspective of school violence is 'any behaviour that violates a school's educational mission or climate of respect' [1]. This would include the subtle manipulation and intimidation that takes place in a classroom among children (bullying) and between staff and children. Violence in schools has long been a global phenomenon in diverse cultural, social, economic and political spheres. It has been observed that 'school violence is a global phenomenon that affects one of the core institutions of modern society to some degree in virtually all nation-states [2]. In 2006, UNICEF highlighted aspects of these phenomena in its violence against children study, and recognised their complexities [3]. The report urged that there be 'a turning point – an end to adult justification of violence against children, whether accepted as "tradition" or disguised as "discipline" [4]. The term 'violence' includes a wide range of behaviours that vary in the way they are viewed according to time period and culture and have been extensively reviewed elsewhere, e.g. bullying [4], physical and sexual abuse [5], corporal punishment [6], and the psychological impact of conflict on schooling [7] and of the media [8]. The National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence in American youth (i.e., both urban and rural) in the 14- to 17-year age found that direct and indirect victimization was experienced by 22.4% of children and youth, with more than 41% experiencing a physical assault and 13.7% experiencing maltreatment at the hands of a caregiver [9].

Surveys from different countries indicate that the prevalence of bullying varies greatly, with estimates ranging from 8.6% to 45.2% among boys, and from 4.8% to 35.8% among girls [10]. What appears clear, from these and other studies, is that interventions embedded within the whole-school/community, as in the case of the Child Friendly Schools approach [11], are

most likely to be successful. Benabishy and Astor [12] have noted increases in school violence in several countries, such as Australia and South Africa. Chilcott & Odgers [13]. Gittins et al. [14] examined the incidence of violence in schools in 22 countries. In 16 instances, concerns were expressed about the physical abuse of children within the school. In Senegal, 30% of girls were reportedly subjected to sexual violence by the time they were 18, and in Mozambique it is said to be commonplace for teachers to award grades conditional on the receipt of sexual favours.

The term 'resilience' has in recent years acquired competing definitions, some emphasizing the personal strengths of the person, and others referring to personal and environmental features that lead to successful adaptation to difficult situations [15]. Early definitions include: Manifestations of competence in children despite exposure to stressful events [16]; and stress occurring at a time and in a way that allows compensatory self-confidence and social competence to increase through mastery and the acquisition of responsibility [17]. Luthar and colleagues define resilience as the maintenance of positive despite experiences of significant adversity [18].

Masten comments that "the extraordinary resilience and recovery power of children arise from ordinary processes" and those children who "make it" have basic human protective systems operating in their favour [19]. Given this growing interest in scalable definitions, resilience can be defined broadly as "*the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten its function, viability, or development*" [20]. Others define resilience as the observable, often measurable, processes that are helpful to individuals, families and communities to overcome adversity' [15]. Many children living in environments in which they face chronic stressors cope with such stressors and adapt [21,22].

The aim of our study was to investigate the relationship between school violence and resilience among Palestinian children in Gaza Strip.

2. METHODS

2.1 Participants

The target population for this study consisted of 449 randomly selected children aged 7 to 18 years (Mean 12.61; SD = 3.12), who lived in five localities of the Gaza Strip (north Gaza, Gaza, Middle area, Khan Younis, and Rafah area). There were 233 boys (51.9%) and 216 girls (48.1%). The sample size was chosen according to Epi Info which is public domain statistical software for epidemiology developed by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Demographic information

The demographic questionnaire included questions about the participant's age, gender, locality of residence, parents' monthly income, and type of residence.

2.2.2 School violence scale [23]

This scale consists of 38 items with the following subscales: 1) physical violence towards others (8 items), 2) verbal violence towards others (7 items), 3) violence in self-defense (7 items), 4) violence toward objects (8 items), and 5) attitude toward violence (8 items). Children had a choice of three responses: 1) no, 2) sometimes, 3) yes. The Arabic version of the scale has been used before and has shown high reliability and validity in Palestinian children and adolescents [23,24]. The inter-rater reliability IS THIS CORRECT? of the scale for this study using Chronbach's alpha was 0.90.

2.2.3 Resilience attitude scale [25]

Resilience was measured by The Resilience Attitude Scale by [25]. The scale contains 47 items covering the resilience characteristics such as commitment (items: 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, 25, 28, 31, 34, 37, 40, 43, 46), control (items: 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 23, 26, 29, 32, 35, 38, 41, 44), and willingness to undertake challenge (items:3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 21, 24, 27, 30, 33, 36, 39, 42, 45, 47). Children were instructed to evaluate on a three-point scale how well the items corresponded with their own: not at all (0), to some extent (1), and very well (2). The total score ranges from 0–141, with higher score reflecting greater resilience. Three

subscales were constructed: Commitment (16 items, e.g., "I care about problems and events that happen around me"; "I care about all possible initiatives that may help my family and community", Control (14 items, e.g., "I think luck and accidents play a major role in life"; "I think people's lives are influenced by external forces that they cannot control") and Challenge (17 items, e.g., "I am curious to know the unknown"; "When I have solved one problem, I enjoy moving on to solve another one". The Resilience Attitudes Scale has been validated in Arabic culture in Egypt [25] and in the Gaza Strip [26], and the internal consistencies were good (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$). Also it was used in another sample of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and showed high validity 27. In this study the internal consistencies were good (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$).

2.3 Study Procedure

The sample was selected randomly according to a prepared list of boys and girls from each of the five areas of the Gaza. Of the total children of 462 who were contacted, 449 agreed to participate in the study, following informed consent by their parents and themselves - a response rate of 97%. This high response rate is due to the circumstances of Palestinian society in Gaza, with limited movement away from home and family, stable place of residence, and the persistence of data collectors who visited families 2-3 times. The data collection was carried out by eight trained psychologists and social workers, under the supervision of the first author. Staff were trained for six hours in data collection and interviewing techniques. The study was approved by the local ethical committee (Helsinki Research Committee), part of Ministry of Health in the Gaza Strip. The data was collected during 2010. Children completed self-administered questionnaires at home with the assistance of researchers after obtaining consent from their parents. The completion of the self-administrative measures took at least one hour for each child. Sociodemographic information was collected from the parents, while school violence and resilience scales were completed by the children.

2.4 Statistical Analysis

All analyses were carried out using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences SPSS version 20 for data entry and analysis. Frequencies and percentages of school violence items and resilience were calculated. Independent *t* test

was conducted to find differences between groups such as gender of children. Pearson's correlation coefficient tested the association between violence and resilience. Linear regression investigated the prediction of violence for resilience in which each item of the school violence was entered as independent variables and total resilience was entered as dependent variable.

4. RESULTS

4.1 The Demographic Variables

The study sample consisted of 449 children, 233 boys (51.9%) and 216 girls (48.1%). Ages ranged from 7-18 years with a mean age 12.61 years ($SD= 3.1$). According to place of residence, 34.3% were from the Gaza area, 19.2% from Khan Younis, 18.3% from the Middle area, 16.3% from the northern Gaza Strip, and 12% from the Rafah area. Most children lived in cities (64.2%), while 25.5% lived in camps, and 10.3% lived in villages. As for family monthly income, 73.4% of families had a monthly income of less than US \$ 300, 22.6% had a monthly income US \$301-\$625, and only 4% had a monthly income more than US \$626. In terms of employment, 46.5% of fathers were unemployed, 8.1% were not working but were paid a salary, and 13.6% were government employees. 93.8% of mothers were housewives. See Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristic of the study sample

Items	No.	%
Sex		
Boys	233	51.9
Girls	216	48.1
Age 7-18 years (Mean = 12.61)		
Place of residence		
North Gaza	73	16.3
Gaza	154	34.3
Middle area	82	18.3
Khan Younis	86	19.2
Rafah	54	12
Type of residence		
City	274	64.2
Village	44	10.3
Camp	109	25.5
Monthly family income in American dollar		
Less than \$300	292	73.4
\$ 301-625	90	22.6
\$ 626 and more	16	4

4.2 Mean and Standard Deviations of School Violence

The reported total mean exposure to school violence was 23.01 ($SD=12.89$), mean exposure to physical violence was 5.64 ($SD =3.57$), mean exposure to verbal violence was 2.58 ($SD=2.80$), mean self-defense was 6.04 ($SD= 3.16$), mean violence toward objects was 3.39 ($SD=3.35$), and children general attitude to school violence was 5.36 ($SD =2.99$).

4.3 Prevalence of School Violence

Using previous cut- off points for the scale, 20.18% of children reported exposure to school violence, 23.5% of children reported exposure to physical violence; 12.29% of children reported exposure to verbal violence; 28.76% of children reported exposure to self-defense; 14.12% of children reported violence toward objects, 22.33% of children reported that they had attitude to violence.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviations of school violence

	Mean	Std. deviation	%
Total violence	23.01	12.89	20.18
Physical violence	5.64	3.57	23.5
Verbal violence	2.58	2.8	12.29
Self- defense	6.04	3.16	28.76
Violence toward things	3.39	3.35	14.125
Attitude to violence	5.36	2.99	22.33

4.4 Sex Differences in School Violence

The results showed that mean exposure to school violence reported by boys was 25.75 vs. 20.05 for girls, exposure to physical violence by boys was 6.34 vs. 4.89 for girls, exposure to verbal violence by boys was 2.93 vs. 2.21 by girls, boys had more self-defense than girls boys 6.7 vs. 5.31 by girls, boys reported more violence toward things 3.82 vs. 2.94 than girls, and mean attitude to violence by boys was more than in girls 5.99 vs. 4.69.

4.5 Means and Standard Deviations of Resilience Scale

Means and standard deviations of resilience and its domains were calculated, the total resilience mean = 57.35 ($SD = 10.55$), challenge mean =

17.33 (SD =4.23), commitment mean =15.16 (SD= 4.05), and control mean= 21.49 (SD= 4.74).

4.6 Level of Resilience in Palestinian Children

Using previous cut-off points [26], the results revealed that 40.67% of children were classified as resilient (36.10% for challenge; 36.10% for commitment, and 42.14% for control).

4.7 Sex Differences in Resilience

T-test for independent samples was used; the results showed significant differences in total resilience. Boys were more resilient than girls ($t= 2.27, p =0.02$) totally and in all subscales [challenge ($t = 2.27, p = 0.02$); commitment ($t = 1.99, p =0.05$), control boys ($t = 2.27, p =0.02$)].

4.8 Bivariate Relationships between School Violence and Resilience Variables

Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed to detect the strength of the relationship between each violence item and resilience. Results are reported in Table 4. The results showed that total violence was not significantly correlated with resilience ($r (447) = 0.03, p < 0.45$). Total violence was correlated with the subscale of resilience commitment ($r (447) = 0.10, p < 0.01$). Commitment was also positively correlated with physical violence ($r (447) = 0.10, p < 0.01$) and violence toward objects ($r(447)= 0.16, p < 0.01$). The greater the exposure to violence, the higher the reported commitment to one's family and community.

Table 3. Sex differences in school violence

	Sex	Mean	SD	t	p
Total violence	Male	58.958	12.308	4.69	0.01
	Female	52.807	15.127		
Physical violence	Male	10.846	3.456	4.61	0.01
	Female	9.048	3.913		
Verbal violence	Male	15.287	3.181	3.07	0.01
	Female	14.21	3.988		
Self defence	Male	8.112	3.364	4.19	0.01
	Female	6.719	3.56		
Violence to things	Male	13.63	2.91	2.10	0.04
	Female	13.009	3.254		
Attitude to violence	Male	8.67	2.849	5.33	0.01
	Female	7.177	3.03		

Table 4. Means and standard deviations of the resilience scale and its domains

Domain	Mean	SD	%
Total resilience	57.35	10.55	40.67
Challenge	17.33	4.23	36.10
Commitment	15.16	4.05	36.10
Control	21.49	4.74	42.14

Table 5. Correlations between variables (school violence and resilience)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Total violence									
2. Physical violence	.79**								
3. Verbal violence	.81**	.54**							
4. Self defence	.83**	.56**	.63**						
5. Violence toward things	.83**	.54**	.61**	.58**					
6. Attitude to violence	.80**	.52**	.54**	.58**	.62**				
7. Total resilience	.05	-.01-	-.02	.06	.07	.08			
8. Commitment	.10*	.10*	.06	.08	.16**	.01	.39**		
9. Control	-.02	.01	-.07	-.05-	.05	-.04	.42**	.48**	
10. Challenge	-.03	.00	-.10*	-.03-	.00	.00	.61**	.44**	.56**

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

Table 6. Linear regression analysis for prediction of children resilience school violence

	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	p	95.0% confidence interval for B	
	B	SE	Beta			Lower bound	Upper bound
Physical violence	-.23	.18	-.08	-1.26	.21	-.58	.13
Verbal violence	-.48	.25	-.13	-1.93	.05	-.97	.01
Self defence	.26	.21	.08	1.21	.23	-.16	.68
Violence toward things	.26	.21	.08	1.24	.22	-.15	.67
Attitude to violence	.33	.23	.09	1.46	.15	-.11	.77

4.9 Prediction of Children's Resilience by School Violence

In a univariate linear regression analysis, resilience was entered as an independent variable in a multiple regression model, with total school violence and subscale scores as the dependent variables, verbal violence negatively predicted resilience ($\beta = -.13$, $t(449) = -1.93$, $p < .05$), the greater the exposure to verbal violence, the lower the resilience.

5. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to find the relationship between school violence and resilience among Palestinian children in the Gaza Strip. Our findings showed that approximately one fifth of the children reported being exposed to violence of some form at school. These results are consistent with findings of a previous study of violence exposure in Palestinian children [23]. They are also consistent with a study of 294 Palestinian adolescents living in East Jerusalem [24]. Our study showed that boys report significantly more violence than girls. This is consistent with previous studies in child victims of political violence [26-28]. Researchers have suggested a distinction between severe physical violence and minor physical violence, with boys shown to more often perpetrate severe violence and girls more likely to perpetrate minor or moderate acts of violence (e.g., slapping, throwing objects) as well as emotional forms of violence [29,30]. Our findings are inconsistent, however, with results obtained in methodologically similar studies from Sub-Saharan Africa, where Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS) have found the lifetime prevalence of childhood physical violence (CPV) to range from 42% to 66% in girls and from 53% to 76% in boys [31-33]. Studies in seven low- and middle-income countries found an average

lifetime prevalence of CPV to be between 6.7% and 33.8% [34]. Prevalence of violence varies widely according to the type of violence and to the country of residence. For example, childhood physical violence (CPV) involving hitting or punching has been reported to be 49.4% in Egypt and 15.8% in Lebanon [35]. Our findings are consistent with a study by O'Donnell & Roberts [36] of both refugee and Gambian youth indicating high levels of violence exposure in their communities and schools. Refugees reported significantly higher levels than their Gambian peers on more than half of the violence exposure indices, particularly on items tapping the most extreme forms of violence exposure, including getting shot or shot at with a gun, attacked with a knife or piece of glass, and being seriously wounded after an episode of violence. These findings support existing literature that has found high levels of violence exposure among refugees in resettlement communities [37,38]. Our gender difference findings are inconsistent with a study of Gambian youth where no gender differences in rates of violence exposure were found, although females exposed to violence reported significantly higher levels of traumatic stress compared to their male counterparts [39]. Leshem et al. [40] studied a sample of 1930 Palestinian highschoolers from the West Bank and East Jerusalem and, like us, showed that boys reported significantly higher frequency of exposure (witnessing and personal experience) than did girls, across all types of violence, except for hearing shots, where both genders reported similar rates of exposure.

In our study, the total resilience mean was 84.07, challenge was 28.66, commitment was 27.39, and control was 26.51. The results showed significantly greater resilience scores in girls across subscales except for the control subscale, which was higher in boys. This is consistent with a previous study by McGloin and Widom [41] who found that for abused and

neglected children in adulthood, more females met the criteria for resilience and females were more successful across a greater number of domains than males. It is also consistent with a study by Thabet et al. [26] of 386 Palestinian children and adolescents from Gaza that showed that 25.0% of the participants were classified as resilient and indicated the presence of high exposure to traumatic events and a marginal gender difference in resilience characteristics; girls reported more feelings of control than boys. Thabet et al. [42] in a study of 502 randomly selected children from the Gaza Strip showed that girls reported significantly more resilience than boys.

Our study results showed that total violence was not correlated with resilience; commitment was positively correlated with self-defence and violence toward objects. Total violence did not predict resilience; verbal violence negatively predicted resilience.

Resilience researchers have studied how children and families respond to many kinds of adversity, including mass trauma (for example, war, terrorism, or natural disaster), situations arising within a family (for example, child maltreatment or domestic violence) or a neighborhood (for example, poverty or high levels of violence) [43]. Our study showed that even when children are victims of school violence, it does not build resilience. In war conditions, Masten and Narayan [44] suggest fundamental adaptive systems that are vital to resilience: children's own problem solving, self-regulation and social connection, supportive and effective caregiving, and societal hope and belief systems. Our results of no effect of violence on children's resilience may be due to the characteristic of the Palestinian society of social and family support of victims of violence and other traumatic events. The evidence is convincing that social support from both family and peers can protect children's mental health in war conditions. For instance, a study on Sudanese refugee children showed that good social support was associated with low levels of posttraumatic and depressive symptoms despite severe trauma exposure [45]. Among Palestinian children, high intimacy and low rivalry could protect mental health from negative impacts of military trauma [46]. Similarly, [47] in a study of determinants of resilience during ongoing war conditions in a sample of 482 Palestinian school children, showed that 33% of children were categorized into the resilient group and 20% into

the spared group, 20% into the vulnerable group and 27% into the traumatized group. The quality of friendships was associated especially with boys' resilience. The boys in the resilient group had significantly better friendships than boys in the vulnerable and traumatized groups.

6. STUDY LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study was conducted among a sample of children in their homes and results are applicable to school violence and resilience. Further research into school violence should include teachers' views of school violence, and measures of social and family support. Living in an area of war and conflict must influence multiple levels of violence exposure in children and future research should consider variables from multiple ecosystem layers.

7. CONCLUSION AND CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study showed that Palestinian children are exposed to high levels of school violence. The levels are higher in boys than in girls. The evidence presented in this study is indicative of a violence experience during the school years, which is deserving of policy responses that implement early and effective interventions within Palestinian schools. Preventive efforts are necessary to target young people who experience violence. School-based interventions need to focus on the prevention of verbal and physical violence among children and between children and teachers. Home based interventions need to prevent violence between parents and children. There is need for local Non-governmental and Community Based organizations to provide training to community-based organizations to increase the capacity of their staff to serve students and families. We recommend interventions that target all children, irrespective of risk and protective factors (eg, increasing of awareness of mental health issues for all children in a school); selective interventions for subpopulations at high risk of disorder development (eg, because of parental mental health problems or exposure to potentially traumatic events); and interventions that target a small population of children with identified mental health problems (eg, severe psychological distress that foreshadow potential psychiatric disorders). To be effective,

interventions need to address the influences of historical, cultural, social, and political factors inside Palestinian society.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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