

Effects of Armed Conflict on Children's Health: The Case of Libertad, Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte, Philippines

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Abstract

This study describes the effects of August 18, 2008 hostilities on the health of twenty-four selected children in Libertad, Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte. Derived through interviews, the quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Wilcoxon tied ranks test while the qualitative ones were thematically analyzed. While these children were not directly hurt, they have witnessed and experienced the consequences of bombing, burning, and looting of houses, human killing and mutilation, and rape of a pregnant woman by the politically-motivated MILF perpetrators of the August 18, 2008 attack in their community. The Wilcoxon tied ranks test of differences in children's health before, during, and after the attack yielded significant effects on their physical, mental and social health. Children experienced sleeping difficulties, showed signs of depression and learning difficulties. Findings suggest that the harrowing experiences of children during the MILF attack have resulted in stress and trauma affecting their mental conditions and social skills preventing them from interacting with people outside their family. The findings of this study validate the assumptions of Gerhardt's Psychosocial perspective and the Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Richard Lazarus which postulates that the emotional reactions of individuals experiencing traumatic events may depend on how they perceive the situation.

Keywords: *armed conflict, children, health, MILF attack*

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Introduction

Armed conflicts and wars are happening around the world, and they alter the life of children. UNICEF (2006) reports that conflicts in the last decade have killed an estimated 2 million children and have left another 6 million disabled, 20 million homeless, and over 1 million separated from their parents. The study of Wessells (1998) reiterated the report of UNICEF which states that more than 15 million children even experienced loss of family members, sexual violence, exposure to attack and disease. In the Philippines, armed conflicts have become a common scenario, particularly in Mindanao. Among them were the encounters between the military and the Muslim rebels which were attributed to the Bangsamoro's claim for identity and political independence.

In August 2008, a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) on Ancestral Domain between the Philippine government and the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front was proposed. It provides for the establishment in Mindanao with "a defined territory" and "a system of governance suitable and acceptable to [the Bangsamoro] as a distinct dominant people". The planned Bangsamoro homeland will have its own "basic law," its police and internal security force, and its system of banking and finance, civil service, education, and legislative and electoral institutions, as well as the full authority to develop and dispose of minerals and other natural resources within its territory (Williams, 2010).

The MOA was supposed to be signed last August 5, 2008. However, several resentments surfaced after its exposure questioning the legality of the provisions of the agreement. It is said that its provisions on territory and governance would require amendments to the "existing legal framework" and a plebiscite in areas to be included as part of the Bangsamoro. This was followed by protests and a series of rallies. Hence, the signing of the MOA was postponed and eventually was aborted resulting in the flare-up of hostilities in various parts of Mindanao (Ecoweb, 2008).

Among the places where hostilities occurred were in some parts of Lanao del Norte, particularly in Lapayan, Kauswagan. The alleged MILF people attacked the civilians which have left unforgettable scratches in the memories of the residents. They became either victims of burning and looting or hostages. In less than a month of the armed conflict, the number of families affected in Lanao del Norte had already reached more than 15,000. The residents were victimized and displaced including women and children (Ecoweb, 2008).

Topping the damages brought by the hostilities that took place last August 18 2008 is the psycho-social trauma and distress that were manifested in a large number of residents. Residents, especially children who had witnessed the incidents, or had accompanied those who fled from the area to escape to safer places now tremble at the sight of uniformed or armed men. Some children now are shocked even by claps of thunder. Many children have stopped schooling, their parents being not mollified by military assurances of security in their

areas, nor exhortations of local government officials to return to their homes (Sevidal Castro, Castro, and Labadisos, 2014).

A more holistic approach in examining the effects of hostilities on the most vulnerable group, the children, would be very crucial to determine or develop more responsive or functional local policies and programs. This will enhance the capacity to prepare and reduce disaster risks among local governments in collaboration with the affected communities, families and various non-government, government and private organizations or sectors.

This paper examines the impacts of August 18, 2008 armed conflict in Libertad, Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte on the health conditions of children victims in terms of physical, mental, and social conditions.

More specifically, it focuses on the following objectives:

1. describe the general profile of the barangay and the children respondents;
2. discuss their views on August 18, 2008, armed conflict, forms of atrocities, and their coping mechanisms;
3. examine how the effects of the attack on their health and wellness months and years after and the significant differences in their health and wellness conditions before, during, and after the attack along these dimensions:
 - 3.1. Physical
 - 3.2. Mental
 - 3.3. Social
4. determine the forms of assistance the victim children received (from Government, Non-Government Organization and Other Sectors); and
5. elaborate on the children's perceptions of their future life.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

The psychosocial perspective on examining the effects on children who are victims of hostility and their coping mechanisms was developed by Gerhardt (1979 as cited in Marcelino et al., 2000). According to Gerhardt, coping is effective in preventing disease if it is at a level compatible with the type of life event preceding it.

Gerhardt's framework was elaborated by Marceino et al., (2000) emphasizing that stressful events lower a person's resistance to the illness which lead to both chronic and acute physical and mental health problems. For instance, among the negative effects of armed conflict, especially children, are the pervasive multiple symptoms of mental disturbance like trauma and mental morbidity. Individuals and families psychologically feel the "lack of sense of control and responsibility" over their lives (Marcelino et al., 2000).

To elaborate on the physical and mental effects of armed conflict on children, the Cognitive Appraisal Theory proposed by Richard Lazarus (1996) assumes that our emotions at a given time depend on our interpretation of the situation we are in at that time. The findings of the study of Lazarus and his colleagues indicate that subjective appraisal of the situation, rather than the objective situation itself, accounted for the subject's emotional arousal. Cognitive Appraisal Theory is an important assumption to describe the impact on traumatic stress reactions, as what Krantz (1988) said "the extent to which these individuals perceive this situation in a positive or balanced manner is related to their behavioral and emotional adjustment. The emotional reactions of individuals experiencing traumatic events may depend on how they perceive the situations.

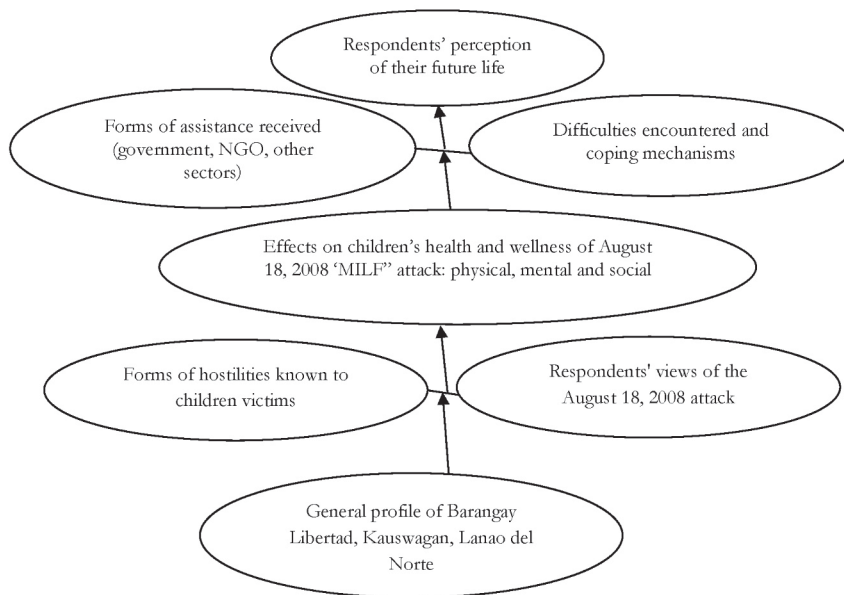


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of the Conceptual Framework of the Study

In the context of the psychosocial perspective by Gerhardt on the effects of armed conflict on children and their coping mechanisms and the cognitive appraisal theory by Richard Lazarus, this study assumes that the subjective appraisal of effects on health is influenced by the interpretation of the armed conflict among the victim children respondents. The perceived nature and degree of effect on their health are manifested in physical, mental, and social health. In the same manner, the subjective appraisal of the armed conflict and its perceived effects influence the kind of future life that the victim children envision for themselves, their family, and the community. The forms of assistance that they claim to have received from the government, non-government and other sectors are assumed to be responsive to their needs for physical, mental, and social health. The interplay of these variables in this study is shown in Figure 1.

Review of Related Literature

A study conducted by Jessica Hamblen and her colleagues (2001) on the terrorist attacks and children found that there is a wide range of emotional and physiological reactions that children may display the following disaster. Reviewing previous research, Hamblen and her associates learned that more severe reactions are associated with a higher degree of exposure (e.g. life threat, physical injury, witnessing death or injury, hearing screams, etc.), closer proximity to the disaster, a history of prior traumas, being a female, poor parental response.

Also, Carlton-Ford (2004) discussed the contributions of war on the increasing rates of child mortality. Due to war, as mentioned in his study, many children died of malnutrition and disease as water became contaminated and with very poor sanitation. These children quickly became ill from what was supposed to be a treatable illness similar to measles and diarrhea. Contributing to the increase of mortality of children at war is the lack of food. This is the case of the victims' children in Iraq, Liberia, and Congo.

A similar concern on the emotional effects of major trauma on children was the focus of the study of David Riggs, Edna Foa, Elizabeth Hembree, and Martin Franklin conducted at the Center for the Treatment and Study of the Anxiety, Department of Psychiatry, University of Pennsylvania (1995). It pointed out that a traumatic experience produces emotional shock and may cause many emotional problems. Many changes after trauma are normal. Most people who directly experience major trauma have severe problems in the immediate aftermath. Many people then feel much better within three months after the event, but others recover more slowly and some do not recover enough without help.

More than the physical and emotional effects, the social effects on the children's health were also affected. This is one of the concerns of the study of Ahmad Dar and Sebnath (2020) which focuses on the experiences of children in Kashmir, India. The authors wrote about how education has been seriously affected by conflict situations like frequent suspension of classes, delays on exams, and incomplete syllabuses. Many children participants worried about their future due to these experiences. The respondents even mentioned about their parents often fear their lives at school worrying about not coming back alive. This is how the 680 participants describe the harrowing conditions in Kashmir causing stress to all people living there.

In the local scene, Cabaraban (1996 as cited in Ponce, 2005) has documented how the children victims of armed conflict were adversely affected by social displacement or forced evacuation. This was noted by Ponce (2005) in her study on the effects of the 2000 armed conflict in Lanao del Norte where children were mixed up in more life-threatening circumstances of escaping gunshots, bombings, or airstrikes from the conflicting parties. Furthermore, they had to maintain their sanity amidst fear, confusion, and anxiety considering their experiences of emotional and psychological trauma during the incident.

In a similar vein, Maria Theresa S. Linog and Sulpecia L. Ponce (2005) conducted a case study focusing on children's mental health in the aftermath of conflict. Utilizing focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, findings revealed that before the conflict, children experienced a stress-free life, no anxiety in terms of military presence, full of energy and happiness. During the conflict, life among the children became so chaotic as they lived with constant fear and panic, constant crying, and feeling of being rattled during the time of evacuation. Children experienced traumatic events during the March 17, 2000 attack in Poblacion, Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte, and April 24, 2003 attack in Maigo, Lanao del Norte. On average, these children were 7 years old when they experienced the conflict, an age so young to encounter extreme psychological trauma. After the conflict, children had more experiences of discomfort in the physical aspect which include loss of appetite, shakiness, and exhaustion, mental which includes fear of going to school, sleeplessness, fear of strangers, and aggression disturbances and in their social these children were adversely affected as their parents restricted activities with friends, they refused to work household chores and some of the experienced troubles at school.

Moreover, the study of Noguera, R. (2013) validated the discussions of Linog and Ponce (2005) using his method on Dinadala (The burden), Nagdadala (The burden bearer), and how the burden-bearer carries the burden or the Pagdadala, etc. This psycho-social study shared the narratives of the experiences of the children victims in the armed conflict including their thoughts and feelings and findings revealed consistent results that children emotionally uttered the strong presence of fear, cry because of fear brought by war/armed conflict which indicated trauma experienced by these children victims. This was the experience of the 160 children participants in Kalamansig, Sultan Kudarat which belongs to Mindanao.

The current review shows that the bulk of studies on the effects that armed conflict may have on the health of children are mainly concerned with mental effects. One such study is that which was conducted by Linog and Ponce. Little attention has been accorded to the physical effects. This is as true as well the case of the social aspect which seems to have been ignored in the scientific discourse. The study conducted by Kamlian et. al. (2003) for instance draws attention to the displacement of vulnerable groups, including children and their mental and physical health situations in the evacuation centers during the armed conflict in Lanao del Norte and Cotabato Province.

Children are said to be the hope of our nation and yet they are the ones who suffer most in conflict situations. The research, therefore, has to give enough attention to their security and entire wellbeing to be able to provide empirical bases for appropriate policy intervention towards bringing them back to normal life—physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially.

Available studies, however, seem to have become limited, if not reductionist, in dealing with the dimensions of effects of hostilities on their life. This study is an attempt to address this particular call.

Methodology

This study was undertaken in Libertad, one of the barangays of the Municipality of Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte which had 3,200 residents by the end of 2007. Data were generated through a combination of the researcher-made scale and interviews. This is a case study supplemented by quantitative methods in examining the effects of the August 18, 2008 attack on children in Libertad, Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte.

The instruments that were used to gather data were a researcher-made scale to measure the effects of wellness among victim children and an interview schedule that contains open-ended questions. The researcher-made scale was used as the basis in comparing the effects on the wellness of the children before, during, and after the August 18, 2008 attack.

The gathering of both primary and secondary data was undertaken from August 2011 to October 2011. Entry protocols were observed during the data-gathering phase. A preliminary visit to Barangay Libertad, Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte was undertaken to ask permission from the barangay officials to conduct a study in the area. As soon as the permission was approved the researcher proceeded to identify the prospective respondents using a snowball sampling technique.

Qualitative data were analyzed mainly through thematic analysis, which involves identifying ideas or themes and organizing them into patterns and categories as shown in data matrices. Analysis of quantitative data was accomplished with the aid of descriptive statistics such as the frequency distribution, weighted mean and the Wilcoxon tied rank's test. To determine the differences in the extent of children's discomfort or suffering before, during, and after the hostilities to which the children were exposed, the Wilcoxon tied ranks test was utilized.

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test is a non-parametric statistical hypothesis test for the case of two related samples or repeated measurements on a single sample. All tests were 2-tailed with $p < 0.05$ as statistically significant.

Ethical considerations were observed upon the conduct of this research. These include asking permission from the mothers or guardians of the children respondents to interview their children with their presence during the duration of the interview, permission from the barangay captain and officials of Barangay Libertad, Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte about the schedule of fieldwork and the intent of this research. Most importantly, the researcher assured the respondents and their parents about tapping experts on psycho-social intervention whenever children experience trauma during interviews.

Results and Discussion

General Profile of Barangay Libertad

Libertad politically belongs to the Municipality of Kauswagan. The original settlers of the barangay were Cebuanos, however, Muslims, particularly Maranaos, Siquihodnons, and other ethnic groups in Mindanao and Visayas migrated to the area. Barangay Libertad has been severely devastated by the three (3) successive natural and man-made disasters: the flash flood in February of 1999, the armed conflict in March of the year 2000, and the "MILF" attack last August 18, 2008, resulting in massive displacements of severely affected families who are still currently struggling for survival.

The socio-economic condition of the barangay before the "MILF" attack on August 18, 2008 may be generally characterized as relatively vibrant. The residents survived on farming of coconut and banana, fishing, and operating eatery or sari sari store. Abundant with natural resources residents remained financially and economically stable. With the emergence of the atrocities, however, livelihood and good relationships between Non-Muslim and Muslim residents were eroded.

In terms of local barangay governance, most of the informants describe their barangay officials on a positive note of practicing transparency. When the MILF attacked the barangay on August 18, 2008, the local officials were responsible enough to give the residents advance information about the possible attack of the MILF. However, due to their apparent unwillingness to render as plausible such a warning, most of the residents were not able to adequately gird themselves up for the battle when it hit them. Despite the tensions felt by the residents, officials were able to manage to call the Mayor of Kauswagan to ask for help from the military and the police. Having experienced such tragedy, the officials have become more alert since the residents were scared by the possibility of another MILF attack. But the military had been there to help guard the entire barangay and ease the tension. Light after the attack, the military installed more barricades and posts and guarded the barangay 24 hours daily.

The worst in the history of Barangay Libertad peace and order condition was the August 18, 2008 MILF attack which was not a surprise to the barangay officials and residents. The main problem was their failure to adequately prepare themselves for the hostilities. They were unable to foresee the extent of losses and damage that a more intensified attack could create in their lives and properties. As if learning from their mistakes, the barangay council implemented certain policy measures to avoid further losses or damage. It passed an ordinance imposing curfew hours starting at 10 pm. The residents were likewise cautioned to be on guard for their safety and security. Outposts were likewise installed in strategic places, to serve as a station for *tanods* who make patrol rounds in the area.

Socio-demographic Profile of the Children Respondents

The respondents' ages range from 7-16 years old. Fourteen (14) of the twenty-four respondents were female while ten (10) were male, the former thus outnumber the latter in the sample by 4. The majority of the informants were in their elementary education while the remaining nine (9) were in their secondary school. In terms of the number of siblings, the majority of the respondents were in the range of 3-5 siblings. Ten (10) of them are the youngest in the family. The majority were Roman Catholic, six (6) were Islam while only one was a Baptist by religious group affiliation.

Most of their parents' monthly incomes range from 6,000 to 8,000 pesos. Seven (7) respondents' fathers were fishermen, six (6) were government employees and four (4) were farmers. The rest were drivers and construction workers, a laborer, businessmen and another one was a sari sari store owner. Most of the respondents' mothers were housewives. Other mothers were fish vendors, a farmer, a government employee, and a sari sari store owner. Majority of the respondents' ethnic affiliation was Cebuano, six (6) were Maranao and two (2) were Ilocano.

Respondents' Views of the August 18, 2008 Attack in their Barangay

The children respondents perceived that the MILF perpetrators attacked their barangay at about 4 am on August 18 in their desire to claim as their own the community of Libertad, Mindanao, or even the entire Philippines. The respondents were able to recall the approximate time of attack indicates that they were not only aware but conscious as well about what was going on in their community despite their tender age at the time of the event. This indicates that even children already can decipher such socio-political issues as rebellion.

Moreover, respondents perceived that the leading cause of such atrocities was the MILF's intention to claim Mindanao. However, their responses vary as to their ideas on the scope of the land the MILF wanted to occupy –from their barangay to the whole Mindanao and even the whole Philippines. One even articulated that the MILF was not able to get what they wanted from the government, and for this reason, they showed their disgust by attacking their barangay.

Indeed, the persistence of the conflict in Mindanao is, among others, rooted in the desire of certain sectors, particularly members of the Muslim rebel group, MILF, to reacquire by force the land which they lost to the settlers from other provinces in the Philippines through the enforcement of the state power or other means. This validates the claim of Leguro and Rudy (2010) that among others, the persistence of Mindanao Conflict, particularly as manifested in the recent hostilities, is the aborted signing of the Memorandum of Agreement in Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) in August 2008.

Forms of Hostilities the Children Respondents Have Known

There are four themes reflected in this portion: fear/scare; violence/atrocities; chaos; and political factors. While the respondents were asked about the types of hostilities they have known, half of the respondents identified their emotions in response to the hostilities. Some respondents described the kinds of violence at atrocities they knew which took place in their community. Other respondents recalled the chaos which ensued. More respondents cited factors that are political in nature.

Even at their young age, respondents have known of some serious political reasons some viewed that hostilities occurred because the government did not give in to the demands of the perpetrators. Besides, another one said it was about the issue of the MOA-AD Agreement between the government and the MILF which was barred by the Supreme Court by issuing a Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) thus creating wreck havoc Faith also affirmed that MILF wants to get Mindanao.

The forms of hostilities that were known to the child victim respondents include harassment, bombing and burning of houses, killing, robbery or looting of houses, mutilation of bodies by cutting off ears and even worst is the rape of a pregnant woman. The chaos brought about by the attack sowed intense fear among the children respondents. They, together with their families had to flee from their homes to escape the hostilities of the perpetrators. Most of them ran to the coastal areas of the barangay, the sea being an escape route to other places of safety.

Difficulties and Coping Mechanisms of Children Respondents

The difficulties experienced by the children respondents were expressed in the lack of necessities such as food, clothing, safe shelter, difficulties in dealing with their fear of various sorts, and being timid. There were indications of loss of security which they had once experienced. Whatever level of economic and psychological security that had before August 18, 2008, was affected adversely.

However, children had ways of coping with the difficulties they experienced. Just as their difficulties were varied, so were their coping strategies. Finding support from family and other people, praying, working, engaging in leisure, and choosing to forget were among the commonly resorted to mechanisms.

Effects on Physical Health

Based on the mean results (See Table 1), most of the children respondents did not experience problems with their physical health before the MILF attack, although others were uncertain about their physical condition. During the attack, the mean scores indicate that

these children respondents felt the palpitation of their heart, trembling, and sudden loss of appetite. Several months and years after the hostilities their weighted means show that these children still experienced palpitation of the heart and loss of appetite.

Table 1. Mean Distribution of the Extent of Effects on Respondents' Physical Health

Effects on physical health and wellness	Before		During		After	
	Mean	Interpretation	Mean	Interpretation	Mean	Interpretation
Cuts	2.67	Uncertain	2.33	Disagree	2.33	Disagree
Bruises	2.62	Uncertain	2.75	Uncertain	2.12	Disagree
Fractures	1.71	Strongly Disagree	1.75	Strongly Disagree	1.88	Disagree
Bullet	1.29	Strongly Disagree	1.25	Strongly Disagree	1.29	Strongly Disagree
Shrapnel Blasts	1.54	Strongly Disagree	1.46	Strongly Disagree	1.50	Strongly Disagree
Sprains	2.25	Disagree	2.21	Disagree	2.0	Disagree
Asthma	1.96	Disagree	1.83	Disagree	1.96	Disagree
Palpitation of the Heart	2.79	Uncertain	4.38	Strongly Agree	3.62	Agree
Trembling	2.96	Uncertain	4.21	Agree	3.08	Uncertain
Fainting	2.17	Disagree	2.00	Disagree	1.67	Strongly Disagree
Stomachache	2.96	Disagree	3.21	Uncertain	2.62	Uncertain
Difficulty in Breathing	2.21	Disagree	2.92	Uncertain	1.92	Disagree
Difficulty in sleeping	2.21	Disagree	3.38	Uncertain	2.75	Uncertain
Loss of appetite	3.12	Uncertain	3.92	Agree	3.62	Agree

Table 2. Test of Differences on the Effects on Physical Health of the Victim Children Before and After August 18, 2008 MILF Attack

Effects on physical health and wellness	Computed Value (Z)	Tabular Value	Level of Significance	Interpretation
Cuts	-2.332	0.020	<0.05	Significant
Bruises	-1.711	.087	>0.05	Not Significant
Fractures	-.676	.499	>0.05	Not Significant
Shrapnel Blasts	-.108	.914	>0.05	Not Significant
Sprains	-1.029	.304	>0.05	Not Significant
Asthma	-.187	.852	>0.05	Not Significant
Palpitation of the Heart	-1.734	.083	>0.05	Not Significant
Trembling	-.575	.566	>0.05	Not Significant
Vomiting	-1.435	.151	>0.05	Not Significant
Fainting	-1.894	.058	>0.05	Not significant
Headache	-1.081	.280	>0.05	Not significant
Stomachache	-1.116	.265	>0.05	Not significant
Other pains	-.527	.598	>0.05	Not significant
Difficulty in Breathing	-.956	.339	>0.05	Not significant
Difficulty in sleeping	-2.332	.020	<0.05	significant
Loss of appetite	-1.072	.281	>0.05	Not significant

Table 2 highlights the results of the Wilcoxon tied ranks test of differences in the effects of the hostilities on the health and wellness of the victim children, particularly on their physical aspect at a .05 level of significance.

After more than three years, the victim children still have experienced cuts and difficulties in sleeping, although the weighted means indicate a decrease in perceived effects between the periods during and after. This means that all other physical discomforts that they may still have experienced after the attack were not anymore as intense or severe as they were during or before the attack. Concerning cuts, these have significantly reduced after the attack over that before. Similarly, their sleeping difficulties have significantly lowered in a range of uncertainty (See Tables 1 and 2).

Effects on Mental Health

Before the hostilities happened, most of the respondents did not have mental disturbances in these areas: having short-term memories, recurring nightmares, sensitivity to sounds. During the August 18, 2008 attack, however, their mean scores reveal that their mental wellbeing was adversely affected. Almost all of the forms of mental discomforts on the scale were experienced by the respondents, except short-term memories and stuttering. Months and years after the MILF attack, depression, lack of attentiveness, and learning difficulties were still significantly prevalent among children respondents. And their uncertain attitudes pervaded significantly (See Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Mean Distribution of the Extent of Effects of the Attack on the Respondents' Mental Health

Effects on Mental Health and Wellness	Before		During		After	
	Mean	Interpretation	Mean	Interpretation	Mean	Interpretation
Difficulty in deciding as to what's the next thing to do	2.54	Disagree	3.96	Agree	3.25	Uncertain
Having short term memories	2.12	Disagree	3.25	Uncertain	3.12	Uncertain
Depression	3.12	Uncertain	3.92	Agree	3.62	Agree
Scared of seeing uniformed men in the locality	2.42	Disagree	3.75	Agree	2.96	Uncertain
Recurring nightmare	1.96	Disagree	3.08	Uncertain	3.42	Uncertain
Sensitivity to sounds A. Siren	2.25	Disagree	4.08	Agree	3.08	Uncertain
Sensitivity to sounds B. Thunder	2.54	Disagree	3.67	Agree	3.17	Uncertain
Stuttering	2.25	Disagree	3.21	Uncertain	2.62	Uncertain
Lack of Attentiveness	2.08	Disagree	3.54	Agree	3.50	Agree
Learning Difficulties	1.96	Disagree	3.71	Agree	3.62	Agree

Table 4. Test of Differences in the Effects on Mental Health of the Victim Children Before and After the August 18, 2008, MILF Attack

Effects on Mental Health and Wellness	Computed Value (Z)	Tabular Value	Level of Significance	Interpretation
Difficulty in deciding what's the next thing to do	-1.780	.075	>0.05	Not Significant
Having short term memories	-2.537	.011	<0.05	Significant
Depression	-3.277	.001	<0.05	Significant
Scared of seeing uniformed men in the locality	-1.435	.151	>0.05	Not Significant
Recurring Nightmares	-3.267	.001	<0.05	Significant
Sensitivity to sounds: Siren	-2.040	.041	<0.05	Significant
Sensitivity to sounds: Thunder	-1.685	.092	>0.05	Not Significant
Stuttering	-.963	.336	>0.05	Not Significant
Lack of attentiveness	-3.109	.002	<0.05	Significant
Learning difficulties	-3.332	.001	<0.05	Significant

Looking more closely at the results of the Wilcoxon tied ranks test of differences, data indicate that these children have remained ambiguous in their perceptions as to whether they have experienced having short-term memories, recurring nightmares, and sensitivity to sounds like a siren. They are, however, significantly in agreement that they still experienced depression, lack of attentiveness, and learning difficulties.

Effects on Social Health and Wellness

In terms of social health and wellness before the attack, victim children had healthy interactions with their family, friends, neighbors, and other people. They projected a socially healthy kind of children as indicated in their mean scores. At the height of the atrocities, however, their social health and wellness were adversely affected as indicated in their avoidance of participation in any social activity, including refusal to play with friends. Too, they became uncertain about their interaction with friends, neighbors, and other people as well as their refusal to do household chores. Several months and years after the attack such uncertainties regarding their social relations with people outside their family have persisted significantly. This indicates a severe effect on their social wellness (see Tables 5 and 6).

Interestingly, significant t values surfaced in all the measures of social effects, except in "refusal to talk/interact with family members". This means that for social interaction with people outside their families the victim children have significantly changed their attitudes from socially healthy to uncertainty. Uncertainty with one's attitudes or social interaction indicates some problems in one's mental condition. As the significant findings show, respondents have suffered from adverse mental disturbances (*see Table 6*).

Table 5. Mean Distribution in Social Health of the Victim Children Before, During, and After the August 18, 2008 MILF Attack

Effects on Social Health and Wellness	Before		During		After	
	Mean	Interpretation	Mean	Interpretation	Mean	Interpretation
Refusal to talk/interact with Neighbors	1.71	Strongly Disagree	3.38	Uncertain	2.83	Uncertain
Refusal to talk/interact with Family Members	1.54	Strongly Disagree	2.38	Disagree	2.08	Disagree
Refusal to talk/interact with Friends	1.58	Strongly Disagree	2.96	Uncertain	2.67	Uncertain
Refusal to talk/interact with other people	1.88	Disagree	2.92	Uncertain	2.96	Uncertain
Refusal to do household chores	2.21	Disagree	3.25	Uncertain	3.12	Uncertain
Avoid Social Activity	1.79	Strongly Disagree	3.46	Agree	3.21	Uncertain
Irritable behavior towards other people	1.96	Disagree	3.33	Uncertain	2.96	Uncertain
Refusal to play with friends	1.79	Strongly Disagree	3.58	Agree	2.75	Uncertain

Table 6. Test of Differences in the Effects on the Social Health of the Victim Children Before and After the August 18, 2008, MILF Attack

Hostilities	Computed Value (Z)	Tabular Value	Level of Significance	Interpretation
Refusal to talk/interact with Neighbors	-2.576	.010	<0.05	Significant
Refusal to talk/interact with family members	-1.924	.054	>0.05	Not Significant
Refusal to talk/interact with friends	-2.825	.005	<0.05	Significant
Refusal to talk/interact with other people	-2.880	.004	<0.05	Significant
Refusal to do household chores	-2.235	.025	<0.05	Significant
Avoid Social Activity	-3.274	.001	<0.05	Significant
Irritable behavior towards other people	-2.519	.012	<0.05	Significant
Refusal to play with friends	-2.543	.011	<0.05	Significant

Forms of Assistance Received by the Children Respondents

Most of the respondents received enough relief goods for their day to day needs, including food, items of clothing, mats, and kitchen utensils. In terms of services and interventions, respondents identified military groups, religious groups, MSU-IIT, Red Cross, Iligan City, and the local governments of Kauswagan and Lanao del Norte as the ones that provided immediate assistance to the affected residents of Barangay Libertad.

Relief operation is one of the immediate disaster responses of the government and non-government agencies. This entails providing the basic needs of food, clothing, medicine, and other household items. Extending relief goods to victims of armed conflict lasted for several months after the August 18, 2008 attack.

It is important to note at the time of this research, that not a single child-informant identified stress debriefing. This is one of the psychosocial interventions that victims of a disaster need to undergo. This is mostly needed by children so that they will overcome whatever trauma and stress they experienced because of armed conflict.

Respondents Perceptions about their Future Life

Children who suffered from the August 18, 2008 hostilities in their community had great dreams for themselves. Ten years from now, most of them foresee themselves as becoming professionals: men in uniform, teachers, nurses, finding work here and abroad. The visions they had for themselves in the future are indications that they were on the road to recovery from their traumatic experiences. However, three of them who saw themselves in the military wanted to take vengeance against the perpetrators of the attack in their community on August 18, 2008. This could be an indication as to how one-day exposure to harrowing events could determine one's possible career as a means of exacting revenge.

As to their views on the future of their community, a great majority were still optimistic that their community would be peaceful and progressive. A noticeable number, however, had a pessimistic forecast of their community as a place that holds no future for them. It is sad that as young as they were, these children foresaw their community as stagnant with no progress at all, and vulnerable to greater conflict with more individuals joining the rebel forces. Such negative forecasts may have resulted from the violence and atrocities these respondents had experienced and observed on August 18, 2008, in their community.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The August 18, 2008 alleged MILF attack left gruesome memories and consequences among children in Barangay Libertad, Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte. Data on experiences drawn from the children respondents, who are most vulnerable to great devastation of armed conflict, include fear/scare; violence; chaos; and even some political factors. It is believed that the conflict occurred because the government did not give in to the demands of the perpetrators based on the MOA-AD Agreement by and between the government and the MILF, a negotiation policy which was barred by the Supreme Court by issuing a Temporary Restraining Order (TRO). This aborted claim of the entire Mindanao had created great havoc in various affected localities in Mindanao including Barangay Libertad.

The Psychosocial Perspective by Gerhardt emphasizes how stressful events lower a person's resistance to the illness so that both chronic and acute physical and mental health problems increase. Results show that the harrowing experiences of children which include fleeing to coastal areas had affected them physically, mentally, and socially. Physical injury such as cuts, difficulty in sleeping, having short term memories, depression, recurring nightmares, sensitivity to sounds like a siren, lack of attentiveness, learning difficulties, refusal to talk or interact with neighbors, friends, and other people, refusal to do household chores, avoiding social activity, irritable behaviors towards other people and refusal to play with friends were observable among children during the MILF attack. This was measured and tested using Wilcoxon tied ranks nonparametric statistical tool, which uncovered the extent of the effects before and after the 2008 attack.

Based on the results of the Wilcoxon tied ranks test, the victim children were greatly affected in their mental and social health and wellness. Trauma resulting from the stress brought by the MILF attack may have been the precipitating factor, thus socializing skill was put at risk. This validates this study's assumptions that the traumatic experiences of the victim children depend largely on the extent of incidents that happened at the height of the conflict. As the Cognitive Appraisal Theory proposed by Richard Lazarus (1996) postulates our emotions at a given time depend on our interpretation of the situation we are in at that time. Elaborating further on the impact on traumatic stress reactions, Krantz (1988) said: "the extent to which these individuals perceive this situation in a positive or balanced manner is related to their behavioral and emotional adjustment. The emotional reactions of individuals experiencing traumatic events may depend on how they perceive the situations."

Children as well were prone to becoming displaced especially during hostilities such as that which happened last August 18, 2008. The findings of this paper proved that at the height of the hostilities many children were forced to flee together with their parents and transferred from one place to another. Evacuating is thus one thing that would at some point save their lives.

For further research on the effects on health and wellness of children of the ethnic hostilities in Libertad, Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte, the bigger sample size may be used, that is, not lower than 60 among children with varied exposures to the same hostilities to allow for better comparison in terms of presenting a wider range of perspectives on the extent of effects on the health and wellness of children victims of the armed conflict in Libertad, Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte. Consistent with the prescription of the RA 10121 (or the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act), the Barangay Libertad government must develop and implement a comprehensive, integrated, holistic and collaborative Barangay Risk Reduction and Management Plan/Program which include the health of the vulnerable sectors including children. Victim children should undergo stress debriefing to be conducted by expert psychologists to understand better the conditions they are into and to enhance their capacity to manage their stress towards eventually restoring their

overall health and wellness.

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