



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

From aspirations to well-being: understanding Kashmir's education landscape

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ABSTRACT

The basic purpose of the paper is to look at the diverse terrain of education in Kashmir, a place distinguished by its intricate interplay of tangled aspirations, enduring armed conflict, and the holistic well-being of its students. The research critically examines the nuanced dynamics shaping educational prospects and their potential to contribute to a better future. Using a descriptive qualitative survey approach, this study investigates the educational experiences of diverse stakeholders and explores the factors that impact them. The study seeks to unravel the intricate connections between education, conflict, and the well-being of students in Kashmir. This study highlights a multidimensional approach to assess the diverse effects of armed conflict on education, encompassing aspects such as security concerns, academic stress, educational aspirations, and the psycho-social well-being of students. The findings underline the need for policy dialogue to address the challenges faced by students and educational institutions in maintaining a conducive and enriching learning environment amid adversity.

KEYWORDS

Armed conflict; Children's well-being; Education; Aspirations; Mental health; Kashmir

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Introduction

The region of Kashmir has long been marked by its unique blend of complex dynamics, where the pursuit of aspirations, the enduring presence of armed conflict, and the holistic well-being of its students converge in intricate ways [1]. Armed conflicts represent detrimental external shocks to the well-being of households. They disrupt the daily lives of families, instill persistent fear of violence and loss of life, and devastate local infrastructure. In situations of heightened violence, households may be compelled to relocate. Armed conflicts encompass a spectrum of situations, including wars, civil wars, and insurgencies, each distinguished by variations in conflict intensity, exposure to violence, and duration [2]. This study delves into the multifaceted landscape of education within this context, recognizing the pivotal role it plays in shaping the region's future. Education in Kashmir is not merely a routine process but a profound and intricate journey, significantly influenced by the interplay of various factors. It is an arena where the dreams and hopes of the young generation are carefully nurtured, even amid the persistent challenges posed by conflict. Amidst this backdrop, this research aims to critically analyze the nuanced dynamics that mould educational prospects in Kashmir and their potential to contribute to a brighter and more stable future [3]. To achieve this goal, a descriptive qualitative survey approach is employed, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the experiences and perspectives of a wide range of educational stakeholders.

Aspirations for education, intrinsic to human nature, often become tangled amidst the adversities of armed conflict. This complex interplay is underscored by the United Nations' assertion that education is a fundamental human right and an essential tool for achieving sustainable development and lasting peace [4]. In conflict-affected regions like Kashmir, however, the

pursuit of education is frequently hindered by a multitude of challenges, ranging from disrupted schooling and curtailed access to psychological distress and trauma [5,6]. The well-being of students, encompassing not only their cognitive development but also their emotional and social welfare, assumes heightened significance in conflict-affected contexts. Exposure to violence, displacement, and uncertainty can have lasting effects on students' well-being and hinder their ability to engage effectively in educational pursuits [7]. Since 1995, the number of children residing in conflict zones has more than doubled, according to UNICEF Annual Report [8]. The prolonged nature of many of these conflicts also means that some of these children have spent their whole lives in the shadow of violence and the environment of conflict. Direct repercussions of conflict on children include increased rates of injury and death, sexual assault and abuse, displacement, unlawful recruitment as soldiers, and psychological stress [9-11]. Long after a conflict has ended, children may still be affected by the trauma they endured and the resulting disruptions to their economic, social, and political development [12]. Behavior issues (including risk-taking and disobedience at school or home), anxiety, depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and many other emotional and developmental disorders can result from exposure to violence and trauma [13,14]. Conflict is a contributor to poor mental health in children [15,16].

Relationship between conflict and education

The relationship between education and armed conflict is a complex and multifaceted one, characterized by both profound challenges and potential opportunities for intervention and mitigation. Education, as a fundamental human right and a key driver of social and economic development, is often

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significantly impacted by armed conflicts. Conflict can lead to the disruption of educational systems, including the destruction of infrastructure, displacement of populations, and the closure of schools [17]. These disruptions not only deprive individuals of their right to education but also have far-reaching consequences for the social fabric of communities and societies. On the one hand, armed conflict can perpetuate cycles of violence and instability by depriving individuals, particularly young people, of educational opportunities. Lack of access to quality education can limit economic prospects and exacerbate socio-economic inequalities, potentially contributing to the recruitment of youths into armed groups [18]. On the other hand, education can serve as a powerful tool for peacebuilding and conflict prevention. It can promote critical thinking, tolerance, and understanding, fostering a culture of dialogue and reconciliation [4,18]. Education can also empower individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to engage constructively in post-conflict reconstruction and development efforts. Efforts to mitigate the impact of armed conflict on education and harness its potential for peacebuilding require comprehensive strategies that address both immediate challenges and long-term goals. Interventions may include the establishment of temporary learning spaces in conflict-affected areas, the development of conflict-sensitive curricula, and the provision of psycho-social support to students affected by trauma [4,19]. Moreover, international organizations, governments, and non-governmental actors play pivotal roles in advocating for the protection of education during conflicts and investing in educational programs that foster resilience and social cohesion. The relationship between education and armed conflict is deeply intertwined, with conflict impacting education and education offering a means to address conflict's root causes and consequences. Recognizing and addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by this relationship is crucial for promoting peace, stability, and sustainable development in conflict-affected regions.

Mental health of children and the conflict

There is a lot of interest in using art and creative activities to improve one's well-being [20,21]. Yoga is just one of the many cultural art forms and practices that are part of the Indian Subcontinent's extensive legacy of healing arts, which also includes dance, theatre, music, and other cultural forms of arts. Venkit et al. discussed some of the methods in which the art forms are being used for specific mental health and therapeutic benefits, such as painting and drawing [22]. They emphasize that even if such treatments are gaining more popularity, there is still a need for additional evidence of their advantages, as well as training and accreditation programs, in order to broaden involvement throughout India. There is a developing interest in the use of art, creative activities, and art therapy in the context of conflict, especially for individuals who have endured traumatic events [23]. This interest can be seen all over the world. Participation in arts interventions may encourage greater expressive capacity, resilience, and a shift in an individual's sense of self-worth, according to the findings of two recent studies [24]. Both of these investigations were conducted by a different group of researchers. On the other hand, the existence of persistent difficulties and traumatic experiences can restrict the potential for measurable gains in well-being. Because arts interventions are not carried out in a vacuum but rather as a part of day-to-day life, it is highly

possible that a protracted and ongoing conflict, such as the one that exists in Kashmir, will have an effect on the outcomes and the degree to which they are successful. Schools and the relationships that develop there are extremely important for the overall well-being and mental health of youngsters. Schools have the potential to "increase access to suitable interventions over and above existing mental healthcare systems" [25], which is particularly pertinent in India, where mental health facilities are fragmented and underpaid [26,27]. In addition, this is especially true in the case of India. According to Ul Hassan et al., schools located in areas of violence should be actively involved in the process of boosting children's mental health [28]. They bring to light the possibility of fostering an individual's resiliency and sense of well-being through various psycho-social treatments, such as participating in activities such as art, athletics, and other pursuits that contribute to a supportive and caring atmosphere. However, the execution of such activities is significantly hampered by numerous impediments and challenges in Kashmir, such as a lack of financing and inadequate training, to name just two examples. Additionally, schools are responsible for addressing the widespread non-awareness and information regarding mental health, as well as the stigma attached to it, which is sometimes connected with engaging in activities that promote wellness. In addition, according to Parikh et al., some people may view mental health programming in schools as a distraction or as being of a lower priority than the traditional academic curriculum [25].

The study seeks to unravel the complex and often intertwined connections between education, conflict, and the overall well-being of students in Kashmir. It endeavors to understand how the presence of armed conflict influences security concerns, academic stress, educational aspirations, and the psycho-social health of students. The empirical findings of this study underscore the pressing need for policy discussions and interventions. The challenges faced by students and educational institutions in maintaining a conducive and enriching learning environment in the midst of adversity must be addressed through thoughtful policy dialogues. These dialogues can pave the way for innovative strategies and approaches that not only mitigate the negative impacts of conflict but also enhance the educational experience for Kashmir's youth. In sum, this research ventures into the intricate tapestry of education in Kashmir, recognizing its potential as a catalyst for positive change in the lives of students and the broader community despite the formidable challenges posed by conflict.

Methods

The centering of experiences of educational stakeholders positions a grounded understanding of the conflict and the participant's perspectives. In agreement with Susie Scott, the aim of establishing education in conflict situations as the site of this study is to delve into the experiences of stakeholders and relate their experiences of living in small local settings to the larger dynamic of the conflict [29]. The paper focuses on the aspirations of students in conflict zones, their mental health and well-being amidst armed conflict situations, and analyses the perspectives of different stakeholders such as parents, teachers, educational administrators, and students. The study is based on empirical evidence using both primary and secondary sources of data. It dealt with broad research

questions that revolved around the concepts of armed conflict, educational aspirations, and the well-being of the students. The research employed a mixed-method approach, combining a critical literature review with in-depth interviews and the administration of questionnaires to key informants, including teachers, students, educational administrators, and parents within the research area. The study employed a descriptive survey method to gain insights into the overarching patterns of experiences and the factors that influence these experiences

among various respondents in the research context (Table 1). The study's descriptive nature was based on data collection and analysis of real-world experiences [30]. By integrating a qualitative approach, the researcher conducted a comprehensive exploration of both primary and secondary data sources, thereby minimizing potential limitations associated with primary data collection [31].

The study was centered on data collected using research instruments, namely questionnaires, and interviews, which captured the first-hand experiences of respondents within the

Table 1. Details of the respondents and tools administered on samples.

Serial No.	Respondents	No. of Respondents	No. of Questionnaire administered	No. of Interviews	Percentage of Respondents
1	Students	55	55	0	47.82
2	Teachers	30	25	5	26.08
3	Educational Administrators	5	0	5	4.34
4	Parents	25	15	10	27.73
	Total	115	95	20	100

Source: Field visits conducted by Author, 2022, Kashmir

designated research area. The research was geographically situated in Kashmir, with a specific focus on field areas. To ensure targeted representation, purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were employed. Data collection was executed in a phased approach over the course of the year 2022, preceded by a pilot study to refine the methodology. A total of 115 participants were purposefully selected to contribute to the study, encompassing 55 students, 30 teachers, 5 educational administrators, and 25 parents drawn from the identified target population. The study was carried out in Anantnag, a district situated in the southern region of Kashmir within the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

Ethical consideration

The study includes the stakeholders of education, such as teachers, students, and their parents, who have experienced conflict situations due to the armed conflict situations in Kashmir. It is a question of whether the participation of such respondents in research studies related to their experiences may represent additional stress and strain on them. However, research has documented that participants may find such involvement meaningful and even beneficial [32]. Researching such participants raises some ethical concerns, particularly those related to informed consent and confidentiality. Care was taken to provide all the participating respondents with simple and understandable information about the purpose of the present study and how collected data would be treated to ensure confidentiality. It was also conveyed to the participants that they have every right to choose not to participate in the study or withdraw from the present study at any stage or time without explanation. In this way, verbal consent was asked from the participants instead of written consent, as in the conflict zones, people are hesitant to provide anything in writing.

Results and Discussions

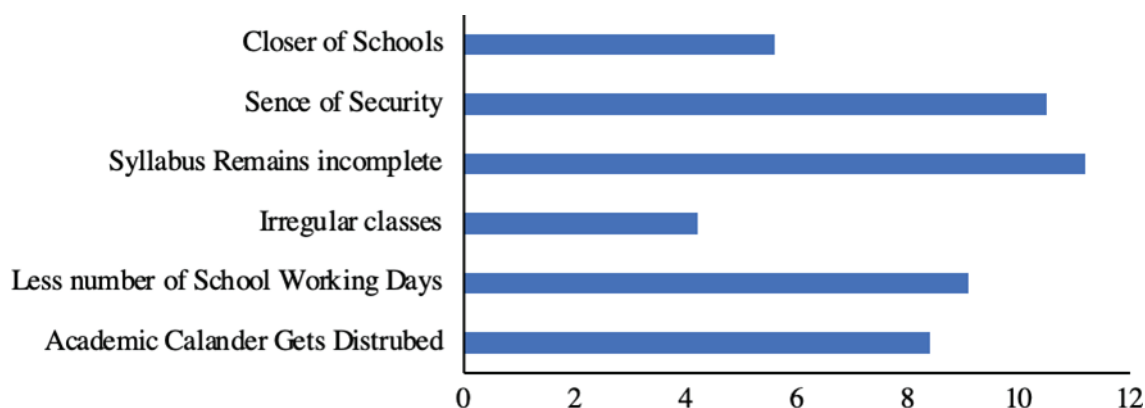
The findings and ensuing discussion unveiled critical insights into the educational landscape of Kashmir. The data collected through questionnaires and interviews illuminated the intricate interplay of experiences among students, teachers,

administrators, and parents. The purposive and snowball sampling methods facilitated a nuanced exploration of these perspectives. The study's focus on the Anantnag district shed light on the specific dynamics within South Kashmir, contributing to a localized understanding of the challenges and opportunities within the education system. Overall, the findings underscore the significance of contextual factors in shaping the educational experiences of individuals within conflict-affected regions like Kashmir.

Studenthood and defunct schooling

Every child worldwide has the right to an education [33]. The fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-4) reminds us that we must “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote opportunities for lifelong learning for all.” However, in conflicts around the globe, millions of children who are already in a precarious position are deprived of their right to education. As a consequence of conflict-related assaults on schools and the military use of schools, the future of entire generations of children in numerous countries is at risk [34]. The unrest in the Kashmir valley has profoundly disrupted the education of the present generation. Throughout the early 1990s, a significant number of schools experienced frequent closures, and even when operational, access for both teachers and students was often restricted. The region's atmosphere, marked by Cordon and Search Operations (CASO), incidents of stone pelting, and a notable presence of security forces, frequently resulted in traffic disruptions and lengthy delays at checkpoints. This situation forced students and teachers to abandon their plans and return home [35]. The proximity of military camps and bunkers to schools further curtails students' movements within and outside the school premises. Playground activities are restricted due to school administration directives, exacerbating student absenteeism stemming from these incidents. The consequences of such incidents on the education in view of the participants have been shown in Figure 1.

The suspension of educational institutions and the



Source: Field Visits, 2022, Kashmir

Figure 1. Opinion of participants on consequences of armed conflict on education.

subsequent disruption in regular classroom activities pose a significant impediment to a considerable cohort of students. The accessibility of education, encompassing consistent attendance and structured learning within the institutional setting under the guidance of educators, is notably compromised. This disruption in the academic calendar leads to postponements in examinations due to incomplete syllabus coverage. The compressed timeframe available for teachers to convey curriculum content within the school environment contributes to delays in syllabus completion, consequently affecting the timely progression of academic activities. In this regard, one of the teacher respondents stated that [At times, we find ourselves making compromises with the syllabus, and one such compromise is focusing our teaching efforts on only those sections essential for examinations. Consequently, teachers tend to skip chapters that are deemed unnecessary.] Field Visits, 2022, Kashmir

Armed conflict has created an environment of insecurity in society and educational institutions, disrupting traditional teaching and learning processes. This has led to aversion towards school attendance and parental unease about sending children to educational institutions. Regarding this one of the parent respondents narrated that, [The situation has cast a shadow of uncertainty over our children's education, creating a reluctance to send them to school and stirring up apprehension within us as parents. The once-anticipated routine of preparing them for school each morning has now become fraught with worry. As we watch them gather their belongings and head towards the door, our hearts are heavy with concern, questioning whether the environment they will step into is truly safe and conducive to learning. We grapple with the dilemma of balancing their academic growth with their well-being, knowing that their education is crucial yet feeling the weight of the prevailing uncertainty. The decision to allow them to attend school becomes a constant battle between their quest for knowledge and our instinctive need to shield them from harm's way] Field Visits, 2022, Kashmir.

The gloomy atmosphere in Kashmir has resulted in distractions in both home and classroom settings, hindering the development of a conducive academic environment. Adults in households are revolving in work responsibilities, prioritizing domestic affairs, which affects students' ability to navigate their educational trajectories. Essentials like tutoring, resources, and

materials are being diminished, and the obligation to participate in domestic chores further complicates academic pursuits. Achieving academic excellence and scholastic milestones is becoming a difficult task in these challenging circumstances.

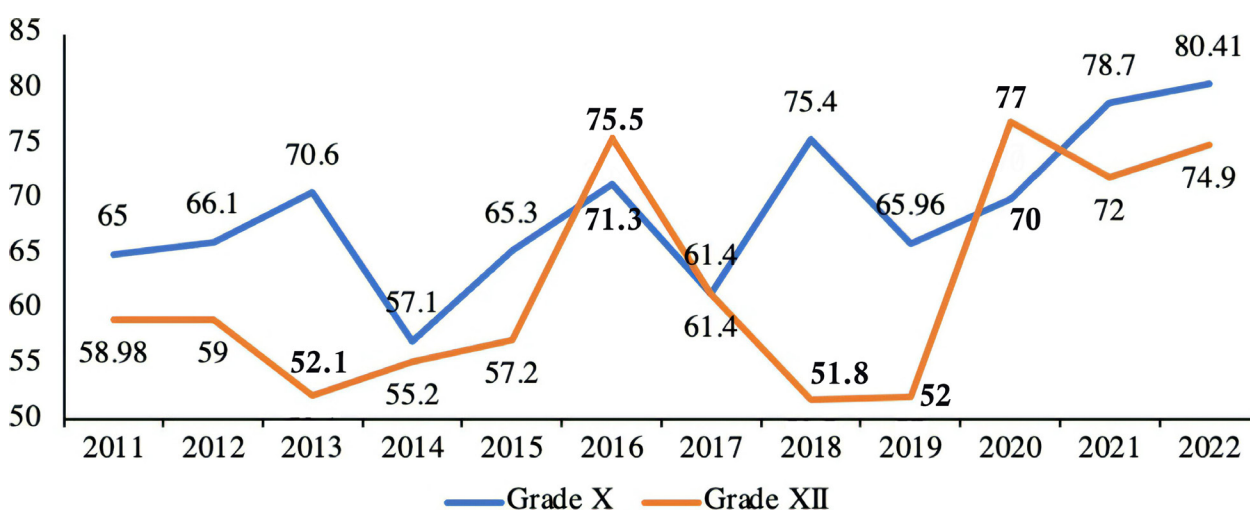
Insecurities, fear, and anxieties among children

The depiction of conflict does not suggest that it has become a normal part of everyday life. It is also not accurate to say that it no longer affects lives and well-being. Rather, it signifies a life where daily routines and rhythms are shaped by conflict situations and the looming potential for violence. This situation leads to a constant intertwining of real experiences with anxiety and concerns stemming from violence – a presence that is always there. One of the respondents, a mother narrates that, “my heart is lost”, conveying an underlying feeling of being unsettled. She experiences unease, anxiety, and fear daily while awaiting her son's return from school, with the fear escalating the longer she has to wait. Even when there is not any violence, people still live with these fears and the worries that go along with them [36]. Uncertainty becomes a defining aspect of the lives of young people growing up in conflict-affected areas. Those who have lost loved ones develop a heightened awareness of the fragility of life, constantly haunted by memories and a fear of further loss. Many of those affected were youth from working-class and middle-class families. Consequently, some express the aspiration to work hard and secure a better future, even contemplating relocation to safer regions to ensure their family's safety. Curfews and hartals create a long period of confinement and present everyday struggles. For a student respondent of class 12th, this involves an everyday struggle to manage studies, especially in the science and mathematics stream, but for another female respondent, a class 11th student at secondary school, her education journey is more difficult as she has chosen the Commerce stream. She states that [The teachers have advised me to do self-study and do not rely on the school teaching only...because of the untimely disruptions in school working days is becoming a new normal here. Besides, the only teacher in the Commerce stream in our school has some other official and academic duties to perform as well, so he's seemed more on official duties outside school than in school itself.] Field Visits, 2022, Kashmir.

The engagement of teachers in administrative roles, particularly the assignment of official responsibilities involving visits to educational offices, introduces complexities and inefficiencies into the pedagogical process, subsequently impinging upon the efficacy of teaching and learning. This, in turn, exerts a detrimental influence on students' academic accomplishments. Given the circumstance where a sole educator shoulders the responsibility for instructing an array of commerce disciplines within a particular educational institution, obligations such as electoral duties and other official administrative functions inherent to the school setting emerge as primary factors contributing to the compromised educational experience of students.

The persistent conflict in the Kashmir region has engendered profound repercussions on the region's educational framework. Additionally, students have been inadvertently subjected to both displacement and a paucity of suitable scholastic avenues, thereby being deprived of the requisite opportunities for comprehensive learning and skill acquisition necessary for their holistic integration into societal functions. The exposure to conflict-induced scenarios has induced challenges in students' cognitive focus, manifesting in

compromised concentration levels. This predicament is further exacerbated by educators encountering difficulties in adhering to prescribed syllabi within stipulated timeframes, culminating in adverse consequences for students' scholastic attainments. A pivotal measure of institutional efficacy, academic performance, exemplified by examination outcomes, emerges as an invaluable metric. Examination of data gathered from actively participating respondents underscores conflict-induced disruptions as a prominent causal factor contributing to inconsistency in academic performance. The prevailing irregularities in classroom engagement, substantiated by a considerable proportion of teacher participants, substantiate a correlation between inconsistent attendance and students' academic outcomes. In Kashmir, a good proportionate number of the teacher respondents strongly felt that irregular classes affect the performance of the students severely since the students miss most of the classes, it becomes difficult for them to clear their exams. In addition to this, fear and insecurity, lack of concentration, and anxiety due to the uncovered syllabus have also affected the academic performances of the students. The academic performances of class X and XII have been shown in Figure 2.



Source: Jammu and Kashmir Board of School Education (JKBOSE)

Figure 2. Board Examination Result of Grade X and Grade XII in Kashmir (in percent).

The trajectory of board examination results for both Class 12 and Class 10 demonstrates the collective pass percentage of students undertaking these examinations. The outcomes across the years since 2001 exhibit fluctuating patterns. Notably, there have been instances of elevated pass rates in the annual examinations of 2013, 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2021. This was attributed to governmental syllabus relaxation, a response to the broader socio-political landscape characterized by the 2012 valley-wide uprising and subsequent upheaval post-July 2016, leading to disruptions in the education sector within Kashmir. Beyond these conflict-induced influences, the educational landscape faced the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in nationwide curfews and lockdowns that profoundly impacted the learning experiences of countless students.

Troubled childhood and its impact on the personality of students

A troubled childhood can exert a profound and lasting influence

on an individual's personality development. Early adverse experiences, such as neglect, abuse, or familial instability, can significantly shape the way a person perceives and interacts with the world [15,37]. These experiences often disrupt the formation of secure attachments and hinder the development of crucial social and emotional skills. Consequently, individuals who have endured a troubled childhood may exhibit a range of personality traits and behaviors, such as heightened vulnerability to stress, difficulty forming trusting relationships, and a propensity for emotional dysregulation. Understanding the intricate interplay between childhood adversity and personality development is crucial for devising effective interventions and support systems that can aid individuals in overcoming these early challenges and fostering healthier and more adaptive personalities. Conflict serves as a societal and political construct that shapes an individual's behavioral responses. As elucidated by Durkheim, conflict

stands as an undeniable social reality, while social facts transcend individual influence [38]. Among a community's integral constituents, children occupy a pivotal role. However, residing within a conflict-ridden zone obstructs their ability to experience normal, safe, secure, and happy childhoods. Regarding this, one of the student respondents narrated that, [In 2021, when the schools started opening after the breaks of COVID-19, while I was traveling to school with my friends. We were stopped by the security forces and our school bag packs were searched... we were there for more than half an hour and after that we were told to go back home as search operation was going on in the next village... whenever there are any security things happening around we do not step outside our home] Field Visits, 2022, Kashmir.

The populace of Kashmir, particularly its juvenile cohort, grapples with a recurring sense of vulnerability, which finds its roots in the ongoing turbulence. Although the toll of warfare and conflict engenders suffering across all demographic strata, it is imperative to acknowledge that children emerge as disproportionately susceptible within such contexts. The security forces in the Kashmir region tend to regard ordinary Kashmiri citizens as potential subjects of suspicion [37]. They have been made to endure constant pat-down searches anywhere and at any time, which has had a psychological impact on children who are forced to watch this ongoing source of humiliation. The repercussions on children manifest both directly and indirectly throughout the continuum of the conflict, exerting profound influences not only on their physical well-being but also on their psychological welfare, developmental trajectories, and overall holistic state of health. The people of Kashmir, especially the children, frequently experience feelings of insecurity. While wars and conflict situations victimize people of all ages, it is children who are more vulnerable in such kind of situations. Schools are the targets of attacks, and as a result, they are often destroyed or, in certain cases, taken by military forces. One of the parent respondents in this regard said that, [My son is studying in class XI, he is not studying in school of his choice and subjects of his own choice, as the school in which my son wanted to study is too far from our home, and we cannot send him there because of the safety concerns as Kashmir is unpredictable anything can happen at any point of time...] Field Visits, 2022, Kashmir.

Kashmir's unrest and violence have significantly impacted the children's childhood, leaving them without a peaceful environment and unable to attend their preferred institutions. Their psychological problems significantly impact their ability to function in peers, homes, and classrooms. The problem is expanding into new dimensions, with children caught in the middle of conflict more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, and trauma. The risk factor for this environment is the individual's history of exposure to traumatic experiences. The negative impacts of conflict trauma, particularly for children, include developmental difficulties that damage family and peer relationships, academic achievement, and general well-being. The negative impacts of conflict trauma are not limited to a single mental health diagnosis but involve a wide spectrum of developmental difficulties. In conflict-affected regions like Kashmir, students' well-being encompasses a multifaceted spectrum of challenges.

The psychological toll of exposure to violence, loss, and disrupted routines can lead to heightened stress and trauma, affecting cognitive engagement and emotional resilience.

Physical health may suffer due to limited access to healthcare and basic necessities, while educational disruptions, including school closures and displacement, hinder consistent learning and future prospects [39]. Social isolation can impede peer interactions and a sense of belonging, further impacting their overall welfare. Students' ability to cope with these adversities while maintaining aspirations for higher education and meaningful employment is a testament to their resilience. To nurture their well-being, comprehensive support strategies are crucial, encompassing psycho-social assistance, trauma-informed teaching, and fostering safe and inclusive learning environments.

Academic aspirations and hope for a better future

Education and the educational system play an extremely important role in human development, and one of the most important roles is that of fostering a healthy future. Because of the ongoing conflict, the dreams and hopes of youngsters who live in conflict-affected zones have been entangled [40]. In the picturesque valleys of Kashmir, amidst the backdrop of enduring conflict and uncertainty, the flame of academic aspirations burns bright, igniting a resolute hope for a better future [41]. Despite the prevailing challenges, the youth of Kashmir persistently seek knowledge as a beacon of empowerment and change. Education stands not merely as a path to personal growth but as a collective aspiration to transcend the confines of strife and forge a brighter destiny. In a region where turmoil often shadows daily life, academic aspirations become a potent catalyst for transformation. The pursuit of knowledge is a testament to the resilience of Kashmiri students, defying the odds to carve a path towards progress. Through education, they envision a future where peace and prosperity replace the prevailing unrest.

According to Domenico and Jones, the definition of career orientation is "orientation towards a desired career goal under ideal conditions" [42]. Considering the situations of Kashmir which remains close more than open because of the one issue or the other, the aspirations of the students get impacted majorly. The goals they set to achieve in a desired time get diminished when there is any shutdown in the region. The closer of schools, high dropout among the students and the fear of not attending schools among the students and teachers have impacted the career aspirations of the students. According to the findings of the study, students living in areas of conflict had high levels of career aspiration, a strong desire to take on leadership responsibilities, and vocations with high levels of prestige associated with them. Many a student aspire to clear UPSC, having career in academics and some of the participants aspired for business management. The corridors of learning in Kashmir echo with the dreams of a generation yearning for opportunities to contribute meaningfully to their society. These aspirations are rooted in the belief that education can dispel the shadows of conflict, fostering a generation equipped with the tools to bring about positive change. As students in Kashmir strive to realize their academic goals, they are fueled by a hope that their efforts will contribute to the larger narrative of stability, growth, and unity in their homeland.

Primarily applicable to individuals hailing from financially sound households, this observation diverges notably concerning those originating from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Such individuals showed a

diminished degree of aspirational outlook and encounter restricted avenues for geographical mobility, notably beyond the geographical confines of the valley, in pursuit of ambitious objectives. The discernible moderation in students' aspirational constructs finds its genesis in several determinants. Firstly, an insufficient resource hampers their capacity to seek educational prospects beyond the valley, particularly within esteemed educational establishments. Subsequently, the landscape of conflict, impacted by recurring curfews and shutdowns, curtails the number of operational academic days within the academic calendar, thereby exerting a discernible influence upon their educational preferences. Consequently, these circumstances necessitate their migration to alternative states in the pursuit of higher education. Regarding this one of the student participants said that, [We are willing to study outside the state because of the exposure we receive at reputable institutions...We get to acquire new knowledge there. Here in Kashmir the number of professional and technical institutions are very low and highly expensive, so migrating to the other states in India seems the only way forward.] Field Visits, 2022, Kashmir.

Certain students exhibited a vocational interest in bringing about positive change in their communities. In accordance with this goal, their hopes expanded to include systemic reform, with a focus on lowering unemployment rates and combating the inherent uncertainty of the situation in Kashmir. Deliberations among participants focused on identifying and analyzing constraints that have historically hampered, or are expected to hamper, the realization of their chosen occupational paths. The disenchantment with the current education system, the scenario of educational institutions, and the education provided to students in these schools is insufficient to achieve the intended outcomes. The absenteeism among the teachers and the non-participation of non-state actors in the education of the children also impacts the education in general and aspirations of the children in particular in the regions like of Kashmir. Students in regions where they were required to help support their family throughout their early years of schooling by working alongside them in the fields or in shops are less likely to have high aspirations because of the financial circumstances of their families and the limited options available in the region. While the road ahead may be fraught with challenges, the unwavering spirit of Kashmir's student kindles a flame of hope that refuses to be extinguished. Their pursuit of education stands as a testament to the enduring human capacity to envision a better future, even in the face of adversity. As academic aspirations continue to thrive in the hearts of Kashmiri students, they exemplify the power of education to transcend circumstances, inspire progress, and illuminate the path towards a more promising tomorrow.

This study holds immense potential as a significant extension of previous research efforts in the field of armed conflict and its impact on households. It builds upon existing knowledge by examining the multifaceted consequences of armed conflicts on educational stakeholders' livelihoods, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of daily disruptions, the pervasive fear of violence, and the destruction of the educational fabric of the region. The implications of the findings from this study are far-reaching, offering valuable insights for policymakers and humanitarian organizations striving to better understand the challenges faced by affected educational administrators, students and teachers of conflict affected regions. Furthermore, this research could serve as a foundation

for future studies, encouraging scholars to delve deeper into the nuances of armed conflicts and their repercussions. Ultimately, the goal is to contribute to the development of more effective conflict mitigation strategies and humanitarian responses. However, this endeavor is not without its challenges, as it requires a comprehensive understanding of conflict dynamics, socio-economic contexts, and the intricacies of multifaceted educational complexities. In the broader field, this study adds to the growing body of research that seeks to address the humanitarian crises wrought by armed conflicts. Overall, the importance of this line of research lies in its potential to inform policies and interventions that can mitigate the negative impacts of armed conflicts and improve the lives of affected regions.

Conclusions

In the light of the above discussion, students discussed the ways in which they felt that the education they gained in school gave them hope for their bright futures. The children made a clear connection between getting an education and being able to have high hopes for a brighter future. Being in the school and the continuity in education without any disruptions brings hope among children to fulfill their aspirations. Students shared how their teachers inspired them to maintain consistent school attendance and to work diligently in their classes, as well as how their teachers made the connection between this behavior and positive personal qualities and a bright future. Students have said that their teachers presented before them inspirational stories that highlighted how those children who attended regular educational institutions and worked with zest and zeal had bright and secure future chances, whereas those children who rarely attended school did not have these good future prospects. The internalization of messages of learning leads to a brighter future and does not restrict students' perception of "learning well" as their primary way of schooling improves their well-being. Rather, it is just one component of this recognition. It sheds light on students' motivations for furthering their education, which may include serving others in the communities. The paper agrees with earlier studies' findings that schools in conflict areas are vital places to improve children's health and well-being, and the interventions from the policymakers and the educational administrators can provide meaningful benefits. Children and people of the community as a whole were frequently fostered to be afraid, insecure, and lacking in confidence as a result of the prevalent situations. A great number of families have expressed their inability to offer proper care and safety, and a great number of teachers have expressed their discontent with the situation as a result of the constant stress they are under.

The pervasive impact of armed conflict has been vividly illustrated through the lens of Kashmir, where students grapple with disrupted academic calendars, disillusionment with pedagogical frameworks, and the pervasive shadow of instability. Aspirations, although resilient, are profoundly influenced by the prevailing socio-political environment, as well as by the opportunities and resources made available to students. Despite these adversities, the unwavering determination exhibited by students in their pursuit of a better future speaks volumes about the indomitable spirit of youth. To address these challenges and unlock the potential of these aspiring minds, a comprehensive approach encompassing educational reform, psychological support, and conflict resolution measures is imperative. As we navigate the complex

nexus of education and conflict, it becomes evident that fostering a conducive environment for learning is not only a matter of pedagogy but a vital step towards securing a more promising and equitable future for generations to come. Going forward, there will always be a need for well-being-focused education and schooling, especially in conflict zones and areas like Kashmir, where well-being conversations are unusual.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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