

"If my hand survives, this is my name"; Gaza's children under genocide

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The brutal truth behind the suffering inflicted on Gaza's children over the past fourteen months of genocidal onslaught is that in a settler colonial state, indigenous children are not supposed to have a future. Their growth – physically, emotionally and cognitively - must be stunted; they are to be driven from their homes and land, violated, murdered, incarcerated and tortured and now, in Gaza, subjected to wholesale elimination. To do this they must be excluded from the human – they are ‘little snakes’ whose very birth into their own families on their own land marks them as dangerous ‘other’, as a ‘demographic threat’ as actual or potential terrorists. The sheer scale of child murder and mutilation and of assaults on the bodies of survivors through starvation, disease and cold is utterly overwhelming. In virtually all societies, childhood signifies hope; children represent the future in which parents and grandparents invest their hopes and dreams; it is precisely because of this that children are being killed.

Born into a displaced population already suffering the intergenerational effects of the Naqba, clinicians can predict that the physical and psychological trauma inflicted on Gaza's children will have lifelong effects, regardless of the help offered them. They will face whatever future awaits them with a terrifying legacy of loss, trauma, mutilation and deprivation of every kind, of the treasured schools which have nurtured them intellectually and the mosques which have nurtured them spiritually. ‘There are no words’ as Tanya Haj Hassan recently said at the United Nations and the sense of there being ‘no words’ applies also to reactions to the active collusion in this genocide of Israel's allies.

Racism, an integral part of colonial violence and genocide drives this collusion, not least by the representations of those under attack. As long as Gaza's citizens, including its children, can be seen as 'other', as an amorphous mass, in Fanon's words as "*hysterical masses, those faces bereft of all humanity, those distended bodies..those children who seem to belong to nobody..*" they can be evicted from their place in discourse. Children being dug from the rubble, screaming in pain from their injuries, searching for missing parents, desperately crowding around feeding stations arouse pity and moral outrage but pity too can constitute a form of "othering" if children are seen only as helpless victims, passive, and without agency.

It may seem inappropriate to think of children as exercising agency amid this devastation. One might fear that even using the word *Sumud* or describing life-affirming acts of resistance could risk diminishing the enormity of what is being inflicted on children.

In therapeutic work with children and families I know how easy it is to feel that, because children should indisputably not have to suffer violence, abuse or take on unmanageable adult responsibilities, we must rescue them. If we cannot, we feel helpless. This sense of impotence can block exploration of how children themselves think about their predicaments.

Mental health practitioners can address this with children in various ways. How do children confront such an utterly dire situation? What meaning, however idiosyncratic do they attribute to it? In this way we can be alert to the individual narratives that children themselves employ and focus on the ways that even young children refuse the colonisation of their minds.

Children in the midst of a genocide, surviving in a death zone with destruction all around them, have to face their own premature deaths in ways that shock and appal us all. The title of this article refers to what some children write on their hands or arms should their bodies be found with no-one to claim them. Children pulled from the rubble might list the names of other family members they know are also

buried beneath the rubble. This insistence on naming, on affirming personhood in the midst of death and destruction can be seen as a form of resistance, a refusal to die nameless and faceless and to preserve the connection to the beloved parents who named them.

This stance is found in Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian's description (this volume) of a little girl, Lena, holding her cat and pleading with it not to eat her when she dies and is turned into *ashlaa* (shredded flesh). In this act, "Lena—a child—creates a space of respect for life and dignity during an ongoing genocide in which the colonial state and the global community are failing to protect even dismembered bodies."

Another aspect of therapeutic work which engages children's active minds is to invite them to pose questions to parents or other adults or to the world in general. I have used this therapeutically as a means for children to hold to account adults who have made decisions which affect them. It can be a way of interrogating an adult world which feels remote and uncaring. In the case of Gaza's children, there is of course ample evidence of the world's indifference.

An intervention designed to amplify Gazan children's voices to the wider world involved inviting children, via their parents, to send questions they had asked or wanted to ask. The questions fully reflect the horror they live with. Reactions to them from mental practitioners and concerned citizens, worldwide, include outrage that young children should even have to ask questions such as

Will the dogs that ate the dead bodies of the martyrs turn into humans? Or

Do children who have their legs amputated grow new legs?

Or that they should have confront so early in their lives the inevitability of death as they witness it all around them.

After we die, will I hear your voice? Or When a missile hits us, do we feel pain or die immediately?

However, alongside these narratives, other processes are at work, reflecting an ethical challenge which children are hurling at the world.

Why do they always bomb us? and Do the Israeli pilots who bomb children have children?

Most children have a profound sense of justice and need – expect even – to live in a moral universe. A colleague in Gaza reported in May 2021 that her daughter had asked her: “Why do they bomb us? Is it because we are bad people?” This moral discourse is evoked time and again by adults and children alike. “What did he/ she do to deserve this?”

Children’s questions reveal both the unbearable circumstances they are forced to endure and the creative minds they activate to confront these circumstances and attempt to give them meaning. Attention to these meanings goes some way to mitigate the dehumanising effects of viewing them either as a threat or a humanitarian ‘case’. Will highlighting the subjectivity of Gaza’s youngest citizens have the slightest effect on their suffering while this genocide remorselessly continues? Of course not.

But we cannot emphasise enough that they, like all children, have legitimate moral concerns to share. They are of course the victims of a genocidal onslaught designed to abort their future. But they are more than that. They interpret, respond and resist. And we need to stand by them, supporting and honouring their hopes and dreams, above all for justice, safety and the right to a future.