



Beneath the Drones: Untold Stories Under Watchful Skies

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the emotional experiences of the conflict-affected civilian populations, especially children, living beneath the drones in the Waziristan region of Pakistan, amidst war on terror. Using qualitative technique, the study examines the psychosocial experiences of the 10 children (aged 8-16 years). In-depth interviews and purposive sampling were employed to recollect the children's untold stories of loss, fear, and uncertainty. Data was analyzed employing the narrative approach, foregrounding children's stories rather than focusing on the dominant clinical approaches. Findings indicate that living beneath the drones generates chronic fear and uncertainty, disrupting sleep patterns, educational performances and daily social lives. Both direct and indirect, losses of lives, and damage to the property worsens emotional suffering, and undermining children's sense of safety and security. The prolonged exposure to the drone strikes creates a pessimistic sense of a future, which ultimately limit the children's ability to make plans, or feel optimistic. The findings emphasize the need for centering children's voices within the policy, social, and community networks to mitigate the psychosocial impacts of the drone warfare on the civilian populations. The study broadens the understanding of childhood in the conflict zones, and raise critical ethical considerations for the policy makers regarding the use of advanced warfare technologies in the modern-day conflict.

Keywords: Terrorism, Drone Strikes, Drone Warfare, Children, Emotional Experiences, Psychosocial, Fear, Uncertainty, Loss, Anticipatory Anxiety, Conflict Zones.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the scientific revolution in the 1500s, the technological advancement has influenced all sectors of the human life, with no exception to military domain. In recent years, the use of emerging military technologies in the conflicts has changed the character of warfare (Abbasi & Uzzaman, 2023). New and disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), cyber systems and drones have been used extensively in the conflicts across the world. These new technologies are designed to launch swift and precise operations with political objectives such as targeted strikes, surveillance, and force protection, at very low risks to friendly forces (Chauhan et al., 2025). Today, one of the most important advanced warfare technologies is drone, which can conduct remote surveillance, and conduct military operations to neutralize targets.

In the wake of war on terror, counterterrorism initiatives worldwide have employed drone machines to a remarkable degree. The United States (U.S.), for example, has conducted over a thousand drone operations in different countries in the Middle East, and Africa, to neutralize targets deemed threatening to national security (Kreps & Rogers, 2025). The U.S. drone strikes in the tribal areas of Pakistan is a contentious phenomenon. Primarily, the U.S. launched drone attacks to target the leadership and militants of Taliban and al Qaeda. The U.S. President George W. Bush ordered first drone strikes to target al Qaeda in Northwestern Pakistan in June 2004. The succeeding U.S. President Barrack Obama continued the drone strikes policy with even increased frequency and accuracy to target the terrorists (LeJeune, 2023). As per the Brookings Institution, the U.S. drone strikes strategy successfully targeted key leadership of the terrorist outfits operating from the tribal areas of Pakistan. Washington and Allies used to justify drone strikes for their success in the war on terror campaign. For instance, members of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United Kingdom (UK) and Turkey, and U.S. partners like Israel, have also incorporated the use of drones into military strategies and military operations (Veilleux-Lepage & Archambault, 2022; Gormus, 2025). According to the supporters, the use of drones leads to operational efficiencies, diminishes the dangers to military personnel, and is a cheaper alternative to achieving a disproportionate level of control over a particular theater (Ahmad et al., 2024; Vlad & Hardy, 2025). While the critics argue that the efficacy of the U.S. drone strikes is exaggerated (Okpaleke, 2023). Further, the exact number of civilians killed in the drone strikes in Pakistan remained contested (Deri 2012; Human Rights 2012).

Despite the presumed advantages of drone strikes, researchers continue to outline some complicated implications of the drone warfare on the civilian populations. Studies have shown that the people living under constant aerial surveillance become exposed to psychological stressors, and adjust to new psychosocial patterns in daily living (Hassan, 2024). Such accounts of the drone machines are associated with a concept of “distance warfare,” where the warfare happen in a geographically remote, often in unseen combat-zones (Richardson, 2022). Many of these military drone operations involving Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) results in losses of human lives and damage to property, though this may not

be their primary aim.

Scholars have been focused on the areas such as legal, ethical, and strategic implications of drone strikes. Existing body of knowledge navigated the issues of sovereignty problems, gaps in accountability, and protection of civilian populations in the conflict zones (Hägg, 2021). These scholarly works related to policy and academic domains build the foundational frameworks to analyze the psychosocial impact of the drone warfare on the people living in the conflict-affected areas. The drone machines that dominate the skies, steadily and constantly monitor a designated conflict zone, thereby transforming the people's daily social life and generates a sense of 'hypo-anticipatory anxiety' (Hamourtziadou, 2024). The drone's presence, even during non-kinetic operations can influence, how individuals interact with their social environment.

The most vulnerable group of people within any conflict-affected populations is children. Exposure to violence in the childhood is damaging for the emotional growth, self-regulation, and generates difficulties with interpersonal relationships (Oberge et al., 2022). In the conflict areas with persistent presence of the drone machines, the children often live their lives with instability, and unpredictability. This psychosocial environment impacts their access to learning, and abilities to think and participation in safe and secure daily routines. While clinical frameworks narrow their focus to categorized illnesses, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), more recent scholarship is adamant that the children's lived experiences include socially identifiable emotional issues that should be treated as a distinct category (Zoromba et al., 2024).

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013), PTSD is, 'the development of a trauma-related disorder after exposure to death, threatened death or violence.' This disorder is characterized by the disturbing thoughts, hyperarousal, avoidance, and mood changes. In a conflict zone, children experience trauma but as a secondary impact, demonstrating the symptoms through behavioral patterns such as emotional disengagement, emotional withdrawal, or extreme caution. Drones are a source of extreme and constant volatility. Prolong exposure to the presence of the drones negatively affects the child's emotional health, physiological growth and social well-being (Hazer & Gredebäck, 2023; Campbell, 2021).

Most of the research on the implications of war and modern warfare is focused on the strategies, military outcomes, and/or casualties of adult civilians and combatants. Little research has been dedicated to the implications of the drone warfare on the emotional experiences among the children in the conflict zones. Apropos, understanding children's emotional experiences living beneath the drones is important, as they are not passive observers rather active beings who have the ability to think and modify their behaviors to adapt to the abrupt and unpredictable environmental patterns. This paper attempts to address this gap by exploring the psychosocial impacts of the drone warfare on children living beneath the drones in the Waziristan region of Pakistan. The study captures children's untold childhood stories to explore, how the drone warfare affects their emotional worlds? This

research amplifies the children's voices to develop a comprehensive understanding about the humanitarian impacts of the drone warfare beyond the visible data and medical statistics that silence the most affected in the conflict zones.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Drone Operations and Civilian Life

The drone technology has transformed the military strategies, and military operations while reshaping the risks of surveillance and accountability (Hassan and Roger, 2025). Supporters of drone technology claim the efficiency, and low operational cost, whereas the critics highlight psychological stressors, including instability, unpredictability, and disruption of everyday life of the civilian populations living in the areas of persistent drone operations (Richardson, 2022). Military drone operations raise, legal, ethical and strategic concerns, such as questions related to sovereignty problems and gaps in accountability (Hägg 2021). Drone warfare influence functioning of the community, particularly their daily roles and routines. Civilians may exhibit more vigilance and stress in their everyday life (Hamourtziadou, 2024).

Psychological Effects of Conflict on Children

Children have heightened sensitivity to their surrounding environment in the conflict zones. The environmental stressors can negatively impact on children's emotional growth, behavioral regulation, and social relationships (Oberg et al. 2022). Research has found that children living in the conflict zones experience emotional and social problems such as amplified feelings of fear, anxiety, emotional withdrawal, and concentration problems. PTSD is just a clinical approach that encapsulates only a fraction of children's emotional experiences, as there are considerably more aspects that remain unaddressed (Zoromba et al., 2024). Behavioral changes among children in an unsafe and insecure environment and their adoption of adaptive strategies have been documented, as a means of coping with ongoing uncertainty and functioning in daily routine life.

Post-Traumatic Stress and Conflict Exposure

Continued exposure to serious stressors or a threat may develop PTSD as an outcome of the chronic stress. It is defined by the presence of intrusive thoughts, hyperarousal, avoidance and drastic changes in one's mood and/or cognitive function (APA, 2013). Children, by virtue of their developmental stage and coping abilities (or lack thereof), are the most at-risk category of people. Frequent disturbances in children's life increases the risk of the trauma-related suffering (Hazer & Gredebäck, 2023). In contrast to adults, children often express this trauma-related distress in shape of behavioral changes, sleep issues, or an increase in caution, rather than verbal expression.

Drone operations create an imbalanced form of chronic stress amongst the civilian populations living in the conflict zone. The constant presence of drone machines creates a state of warning and alertness, that are few of the symptoms of PTSD (Campbell, 2021). Nevertheless, restraining considerations of such an

approach to a clinical framework is to ignore, how these children and adult cope-up with and adapt to fear and the unknown in their daily lives. This is why to understand children's lived experiences who are exposed to such stressors are of particular importance. It reveals the adaptability of children's emotional systems to the stressors, the development of coping mechanisms, and the implications of such systems for their sustained mental orientation and well-being.

The Psychological Environment Created by Drones

The emotional experience attributed to the presence of drone machines is unique but complex. It can generate an anticipatory anxiety, a situation that is particularly intensified among the people living beneath the drones, due to the continuous drone machines auditory presence. In fact, the tedium of drone's audio generates an intensified level of anxiety in the people (Saini et al., 2021). Studies focusing on children's living beneath the drones in conflict-affected regions of Pakistan, Yemen, and Gaza highlight the fact that the presence of drone machines acts as a stressor on their personal and social environment. Drone machines presence is especially relevant for children living within the context of specific military operations (Teijeiro Garcia, 2025; Cox, 2025). The implications of drone operations on a child's ability to freely engage in the essential activities of daily life such as participation in social activities, are critical for their personal growth and development.

Loss, Insecurity, and Future Orientation

Civilian populations in the conflict zones are subjected to persistent psychosocial disruptions which complexes the feeling of loss stemming from the forces exogenic to the individual. These emotional impacts are quite significant for the children who are witness to the disruptions, even minor one. For children, chronic uncertainty can derail and demotivate even educational engagement, foster intensified pessimism about stability and personal development, and negatively influence the children's ability to plan future (Skiba, 2024; Nykyporets & Stepanova, 2024).

To sum up, although psychosocial effects of the drone operations have become the focus of an increasing number of studies, very few have considered the lived experiences of the children living beneath the drones. The vast majority of research that touches on children in these contexts continues to treat them as secondary victims, failing to recognize children as the social actors with lived experiences and their own particular frames and interpretations of conflict and violence. This study addresses this gap by focusing on children's lived experiences and narratives to understand the role of fear, uncertainty, loss, and environmental stress on the ordinariness of everyday life in Waziristan region of Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed qualitative technique and, in particular, narrative research to understand the impact of drone warfare on children's psychosocial experiences. Given that children in this context have been affected by the death due

to combat, uncertainty, and the fear of conflict, the research focused on their interpretations and narratives to understand, how drone warfare restructures and reconfigures the psychosocial life of children.

Participants and Sampling

All participants have lived in communities where drone machines have been employed, and they included ten respondents between the ages eight and sixteen. Purposive sampling made it possible for the researchers to ensure all respondents have stories to tell regarding their lived encounters with the drone technologies. Great care was taken to achieve diversity in the participants with respect to their socio-demographic characteristics.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews were designed in such a way that children were invited to respond to the questions in their own words and to share their feelings and/or recollections, including their experiences that involved death, loss, and/or the presence of drones, that they were required to think about every day. The children were also asked follow-up questions after they had completed the narration of their memories to clarify their coping strategies and their perceptions about the future.

Ethical Considerations

Considering the nature of the study, ethics were the main focal point throughout the research process. Consent was taken from the respondents of the study. Although the respondents were told that they would not be identified and their involvement was voluntary, respondents were made aware of their ability to withdraw from the study at their convenience. Researchers made every effort to alleviate the participants' emotional discomfort and interviewed them.

Data Analysis

The data analysis employed the narrative research, concentrating on the substance, formation, and subtexts of children's stories. Analysis was devoid of any clinical symptom coding or classification of the children's responses to determine a clinical diagnosis. The analysis focused on the ways children described the sentiments of fear, felt secure or a lack of safety, dealt with their losses, and described their hopes for the future. Children's narratives contained intense emotional resonance, from which the dominant threads of loss, other experiences and/ or unique emotional variation of the loss for each was clearly indicated. Special attention was given to the children's meaning construction from their lived experiences, including emotional and social coping mechanisms, as well as framework of their lived community.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Fear as a Daily Emotional Condition

Respondents' experiences indicated not only the psychological implications of fear, but also how fear could impact an individual's daily routines. The data

revealed the cases of *dronophobia*¹ where the drones were not even shooting at the subject but the fear that one would shoot at any moment triggered panic and kept people in a psychological state of fear. Almost all respondents stated that the drones psychologically and emotionally disrupted their everyday activities like sleeping outdoors under the open skies and engaging in everyday activities.

One respondent stated:

“Whenever I heard the drone sound, my heart started beating fast and I used to hide inside the house, even if no drone strike had happened in the last few days.” (Respondent 2)

Another child described how fear persisted during routine activities:

“We could not play freely because the drone could come anytime. Even while studying, I kept listening and searching the sky.” (Respondent 5)

The data indicated that fear among the people became a normal pattern of their life. Respondents stated that children modified how they lived, moved, staying clear of open areas, and were always on alertness. The internalization of fear indicates how the negative impact on emotional health and everyday living increases when exposed to and/or living under constant drone surveillance.

Table 1

Fear-Related Emotional Responses to Drone Presence (n = 10)

Fear Indicator	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Fear triggered by drone sound	9	90%
Panic or urge to hide	8	80%
Sleep disturbance	7	70%
Restricted outdoor activities	8	80%
Constant alertness/hypervigilance	9	90%

Living with Loss and Insecurity

Children’s sense of safety and security was severely impacted by the occurrence of disruptive events amidst drone strikes. Respondents experienced unsettling horrific drone strikes directly, or more passively, that had resulted into serious human casualties and damage to property. Even passive exposure added to chronic feelings of insecurity and emotional vulnerability.

One respondent stated:

“A family in our area was killed in a drone attack. After that, I always felt that the same could happen to us.” (Respondent 4)

Another child emphasized the emotional impact of civilian casualties:

“When people around us were killed in the drone strikes, we realized no one was safe. Even few of the children also became the victims in the drone attacks.” (Respondent 7)

Children described that the drone strike majorly impacted their sense of

¹ Dronophobia is the fear of drones, especially unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)

security and stability. The feeling of fear was always present even in the absence of the drones, showing that their experiences re-shaped the way of viewing their world to one of chaos and constant pressure.

Table 2

Exposure to Loss and Perceived Insecurity (n = 10)

Experience of Loss/Insecurity	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Witnessed drone strike directly	4	40%
Loss of neighbor	3	30%
Damage to homes/property	5	50%
Persistent feeling of insecurity	9	90%
Fear even in absence of drones	8	80%

Imagining an Uncertain Future

The children’s narratives reveal their pessimistic perception about the future lives. Almost all respondents expressed that the psychosocial disruptions in their lives, made it very difficult for them to think of a bright future, pursue their dreams and aspirations to achieve educational goals. The findings indicated to the impact of fear, uncertainty and displacement on educational growth.

One respondent explained:

“I didn’t know what will happen tomorrow. Sometimes I thought we may not even be alive to complete our studies.” (Respondent 1)

Another child reflected on emotional uncertainty:

“Because of drone warfare, we cannot plan anything. Life can change in one moment.” (Respondent 6)

The future oriented context was characterized by pervasive uncertainty and lack of control. The absence of a personally meaningful future demonstrates the impact of psychosocial disruptions on children’s ability to create a vision of growth and stability.

Table 3

Future-Oriented Uncertainty Among Children (n = 10)

Indicator of Uncertainty	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Difficulty imagining future goals	8	80%
Educational disruption	7	70%
Feelings of helplessness	9	90%
Pessimism about personal future	8	80%
Anxiety about sudden violence	9	90%

DISCUSSION

The impact of drone strikes on children's psychosocial environment in conflict zones, such as Waziristan, Pakistan, has been documented in this study. In traditional armed conflict, violence is episodic and constrained by time. In contrast, due to the unique nature of the warfare cycle, children experience chronic anticipation. Children's stories show that fear is not confined to the time of active drone strikes, but rather, is a pervasive background fear that is integrated within the temporality of everyday life and is part of the routine of daily movements and interactions. This echoes scholarly analysis of drone warfare as a form of violence of persistent surveillance where the anxiety of not knowing is a form of violence in and of itself (Richardson, 2022; Hamourtziadou, 2024).

One of the main achievements of this research is to exemplify the process of how children acclimatize to fear and internalize it. Instead of describing fear as a singular event that causes some sort of emotional reaction, children mentioned applying some behavioral changes, such as the avoiding of certain environmental conditions (e.g., open areas), the exercising of some form of vigilance (e.g., hypervigilance), and the undertaking of sustained behavioral activities (e.g., sky watching). Such behavioral changes exemplify the internalization of insecurity. The phenomenon of the normalization of fear is consistent with the literature indicating that the emotional responses of individuals subjected to extended periods of adversarial conditions are transformed into usual ways of living (Oberg et al., 2022). In this context, it must be stressed that the behavioral changes outlined above should not be viewed as mere manifestations of resilience. It is, in fact, a reflection of the children's safety and freedom, which are essential to their emotional and psychosocial development.

Children experience sleep disruptions, higher levels of vigilance, and avoidance behaviors (APA, 2020). These symptoms can help pathologists develop a potential diagnosis of PTSD. However, the findings of the study highlight the limitations of using only a clinical lens regarding children's lived experiences. The findings suggest that emotional distress can be triggered by more than one traumatic event. Emotional distress can be caused by the ongoing exposure to the unknown. The threat of violence and the experience of loss can all lead to emotional distress. These findings are consistent with the existing literature that critiques the use of trauma-centered models that can be overly pathological in their view of an individual child while ignoring the larger socio-political context of that child's suffering (Zoromba et al., 2024). As a result, the findings suggest the presence of chronic, everyday trauma that remains below the diagnostic thresholds for development and has a severe impact on development.

The children's emotional vulnerability was further deepened as a result of exposure to loss and death. The children's narratives show that proximity to death and violence through the witnessing of drone strikes, and the destruction of property, violence and death undermined their sense of security, even when they were not harmed physically. Such experiences contributed to a perception of the

world as fundamentally unstable and dangerous. Violence is often exposed to, and as in the current studies, even indirect exposure to violence can result in emotional distress, especially for children, as a result of their developing cognitive and emotional mechanisms (Hazer & Gredebäck, 2023). The data illustrates the psychosocial impact of drone warfare and its ability to remove the boundaries between combat zones and civilian life.

The ability of children to imagine a positive future and to plan for it is especially concerning. The participants in the study were unable to envision a future, and in some cases, future education, as they described it, as disrupted and not accessible due to a lack of social safety. The developmental impacts of children are at the core of the issue. There is a lack of motivation, goal-setting, learning, and engagement because of loss, fear, and uncertainty. There is also a lack of social and economic opportunities in the future because of a loss of learning (Skiba, 2024; Nykyporets & Stepanova, 2024). In this context, the most dangerous aspect of drone wars is that they affect not only the immediate experiences of children, but also the construction of their future experiences.

The most important aspect of using a narrative approach for this study was to articulate the range of feelings being described. In this case, children's stories enabled the researchers to flip the dominant paradigm of describing children as passive victims, to describing them as social actors who are actively and creatively engaged in their world, and are interpreting and responding to the issues at hand. Although children demonstrated agency using coping mechanisms, their adaptable behavior and creative agency was exercised in a context of extreme structural constraints. The overwhelming reality is that children are simultaneously agents and subjects of extreme vulnerability, and the need to put a strong emphasis on qualitative research in the study of conflicts.

Lastly, the results indicate the need for major ethical and policy considerations. Accounts from children suffering from psychological indicators speak directly to the claim that the drone warfare is the less harmful to civilian populations. The impacts of drone warfare on children's psychosocial development must be a consideration for military and policy planners. The psychological wounds of warfare that modern technologies will continue to inflict on civilian populations will require child-centered psychosocial initiatives, trauma-sensitive teaching, and the moral refinement of warfare technologies.

To sum up, this study shows that the modern warfare of drones inflicts a persistent emotional environment of fear, loss, uncertainty, and the fundamentally transformed nature of childhood. It helps to advance the understanding of modern warfare's humanitarian impacts, and calls for conflict theory and policy to be based more on principles of humanity and a focus on the children that are the most affected in the conflict zones.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the drone warfare constitutes a pervasive and

structurally embedded form of violence that reshapes children's emotional worlds beyond the immediacy of physical strikes. By foregrounding children's narratives from Waziristan, the research demonstrates that fear, loss, and uncertainty operate as continuous psychosocial conditions rather than isolated traumatic events. Children's adaptive behaviors such as hypervigilance, restricted mobility, and emotional withdrawal, reflect not resilience alone but the normalization of insecurity within everyday life. Crucially, the findings reveal how prolonged exposure to drone presence undermines children's future orientation, eroding educational engagement, and the capacity to imagine stable life trajectories. These effects remain largely invisible within dominant legal, strategic, and clinical evaluations of the drone warfare. By moving beyond diagnostic framings of trauma and centering children as interpretive social actors, this study exposes the enduring humanitarian costs of advanced warfare technologies. It therefore calls for a re-evaluation of drone operations that accounts for their long-term psychosocial and developmental consequences for conflict-affected children.

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