

# Demographic Characteristic Differences and Levels of Resilience Influencing School Adaptation among Children in Post War Context

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Age and Gender characteristics are indispensable in influencing resilience among children acting as a buffer that protect them from psychological distress. This study explored the effects of Age and Gender on resilience and protective factors for school adaptation among children in post war context. Resilience Models and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) were used to guide the study. Age and gender was measured by Interviews, Focus groups and teacher reports to capture children's narratives on war experiences and school adaptation. Children's resilience levels were assessed using Resilience Scale for Children and Adolescents (RSCA), adapted and modified. Independent T-test procedure for means comparison was used to compare the resilience scores for male and female. Chi square was used to test resilience with age and gender. Descriptive t-test was used to analyze Quantitative data while qualitative data was analyzed thematically by use of interpretative phenomenological analysis and presented in verbatim. Although there were differences in resilience scores, a Chi Square test results showed that age had no significant relationship on the overall resilience factors with  $\chi^2 = 2.92$ ;  $p=0.56$ . The independent t-test results showed that the females had a mean of  $M=18.04$ , as compared to males who had a mean of  $M=15.24$ . The independent t-test difference was statistically significant at a t-value of  $-2.03$ ,  $p=0.04$ . The results seem to suggest that females are more resilient than males in relation to adversity. Low resilience levels can be attributed to prolonged exposure to traumatic experiences that seem to have derailed them from positive developmental path by denying them the environmental support that is key to resilience.

**Keywords:** Age, Gender, resilience, school adaptation, Trauma, children.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

War-affected children represent a vulnerable group that has long been neglected in postwar context research. In situations where war conflicts are aimed at achieving political and military ends, children, who are among the most vulnerable groups, are often subjected to a multitude of experiences, and are deliberately targeted for torture (Shalev, Yehuda, & McFarlane, 2000; Analyti, 2012). Additionally, when children are exposed to the effects of war, they are likely to develop problems that are social, emotional and behavioral in nature. As a result they have been found to struggle academically and eventually drop out from school compared to children not in war zones (Joshi and Lewin, 2004). This exposure to war conflicts may pose considerable threat to the optimal development of a child thus likely to affect school adaptation.

Children differ in the way they respond to traumatic events. Some children recover more easily while others have significant difficulties working through the trauma based on their protective personal factors (Kelley and Guill, 2013). Therefore, responses to war may range from adaptive resilient to non-pathological distress that leads to maladaptive behavioral patterns, and diagnosable psychiatric disorders. Accordingly, each child experiences external devastating events in a very individual way that depends on a number of different risk and protective factors (Pierorazio, 2009). Risk factors include external environmental context (family, community, culture, school, peer group), while internal resiliency factors include cognitive, emotional, spiritual, physical and social competencies (Pierorazio, 2009).

Resilience is a theoretical concept that has evolved as a way to describe and analyze success of people and groups with a broad spectrum of challenges that indicate they should fail (Heatan, 2013). For example, the negative effects of war are adversative to development, but some children emerge strong to succeed in their development milestones such as school adaptation. In children, resilience is defined as the ability to continue to progress in their positive development despite being exposed to risk (Benard, 2004). Children who are resilient have been found to manifest competence in the context of significant challenges to adaptation or development

(Kimaumann & Rosser, 2011). In a school setting, resilient children may find it easy to interact as well as engage in curriculum and co-curriculum effectively despite the effects of war. They may perform well since they remain the same despite the devastating effects of war.

Most past studies have focused on how resilience is conceptualized and the characteristic of resilient children, however few studies have addressed how age and gender influence resilience levels of children in relation to school adaptation in war torn areas (Bennet,2013).

Available research shows that children and adolescents exposed to war, experience trauma (Gartrell, 2011). Trauma has been found to have a significant relationship with school adaptation(Akello,2008). In addition, a study by Ndetei, Khasakhala, Mwayo, & Mutiso (2010) on epidemiological patterns of Anxiety Disorders in Kenya found PTSD and other anxiety disorders prevalent among children after post-election violence of 2007/8. PTSD has many debilitating effects, such as communication difficulties, poor interpersonal skills, and lack of self-regulation, which are crucial for school adaptation. For example good communication skills is an essential task of childhood and an important dimension of school adaptation.

In general, war conflicts appear to interfere with these developmental tasks that enhance adapting to school environment. However, studies by Akello (2008) and Ndetei et al., (2010) do not explain how the experiences of war could affect levels of resilience, which could be significant in describing children's' adaptation to school. Resilience empowers children to successfully navigate academic setbacks, stress, and study pressures during the learning process.

The development of resilience is influenced by gender. Gender affects the array of outcomes used to consider the effects of war violence. Saverimuthu (2015) reviewed a study by Collin-Vezina et al. (2011) which investigated resiliency in school. The sample was recruited from adolescent males and females. The study looked at the interactions between trauma experiences, trauma-related symptoms, and resilience factors in residential youth. The findings revealed gender differences with females having higher levels of clinical symptoms and lower scores on resilience features.

Evidence of gendered psychological resources (e.g., agency, mastery and worth) in favor of males, which may provide the requisite foundation to enable resilience characteristics, have been supported by studies showing higher resilience in adolescent males compared to females (Opondo, Ubah, & Nangiro, 2016; Gonzalel-Torrez and Artuch-Garde, 2014). Among older populations, males have also been found to report higher resilience (Wells, 2010).

Substantial empirical literature indicates that females have higher resilience than males in diverse groups such as children (Werner, 2001; Opondo, Ubah, & Nangiro, 2016), adolescents (Hernández de and del Olmo, 2014) and adults (Lerner et al., 2012). The equivocal findings on gender called for further studies to shed more light on the relationship between gender and resilience. This study endeavored to find out gender difference in resilience in school adaptation.

As regards age influence on resilience, Saverimuthu (2015) observes that empirical findings on age effects on resilience are mixed. Some studies have shown a positive relationship between age and resilience (Muhammad, Naemullah, & Nadeem, 2010; Zolkoski and Bullock, 2012) while others reported that resilience decreases with age (Broekman, 2011; Schoon, 2006; Riches et al., 2009). Evidently, most of the existing studies have noted that older children are more vulnerable than younger children to the psychological effects of war (Chukworji & Chukwuedozie, 2010). Green et al., 2002). Therefore, this study sought to address these discrepancies in research by focusing on not only how age is significant in resilient studies but how it could influence resilience of children in school adaptation.

In this study resilience was investigated to help determine the relationship between the role Age and gender play in development of resilience for school adaptation. This is critical in designing strategies that could help children cope in adversity

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a mixed method approach and relied on a questionnaire and semi-structured face to face interviews and selected interested children in focus group discussion. There were 100 participants who took part in the study. The sample of the participants was drawn from 4 schools in Mt. Elgon sub-County of Bungoma County Kenya. The Participants were between the ages of 9 and 21 years. And in classes 8 to form 2. All children studied responded to questionnaire mainly standardized tools on Children's' resilience levels using Resilience Scale for Children and Adolescents (RSCA), adapted and modified. 24 students participated in the interview schedule. The interviews schedules were also conducted with some teachers in the schools that participated in the study. The selection of the sample was informed by the critical theory that locates knowledge in the material lives of actors (Mittleman,2004). Descriptive statistics mainly frequency distributions and inferential statistics mainly t-test was used to analyze quantitative data. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to analyze the interview data collected. The choice of CDA was informed by conceptualization of the role

of language in a social system as advanced by Norman Fairclough (2013). Ethical issues specifically informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and respect to the participants were observed.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Resiliency Scale for Children and Adolescents (Prince-Embury, 2007), which is self-report scales was used to test the resilience level. The resilience scores were calculated based on the 9-item resilience scale (Prince-Embury, 2007). In testing resilience levels, only two categories were used (high and low) at an arbitrary point of 19, where high and low resilience scores were those above and below score 19 respectively. The summary of resilience scores levels are presented as shown in the Table 4.1.

**Table 4.4: Resilience Levels (High vs. Low)**

<b>Resilience level</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Low resilience	69	69.0
High resilience	31	31.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

As it can be seen from the table, 69 (69%) were in the low resilience category as compared to 31 (31%) in the high resilience. From a general perspective, children in low resilience group appear to be more (69%), which might affect their school adaptation. This might not be surprising as children in Mt. Elgon have been exposed to protracted traumatic experiences that are likely to impact negatively on psychological resources. According to Broekman (2011) and Ahmed (2007) severe stress overwhelms children's coping skills and hampers the development cycle. It would be recalled from introductory chapters that violent conflicts in Mt. Elgon region were protracted. Children lived under chronic hyper arousal conditions that are likely to have interfered with development of resilience. This explains why majority of respondents were found to be in the low resilience category.

On the other hand, 31 (31%) of children who had high resilience were likely to be strong in the hypothesized factors, i.e., academic competence and self-regulation skills. According to Santos (2010), he observed that protective factors can be categorized in different aspects that enhance resilience of individuals. Adolescence resilience is dependent on resources such as competence, coping skills, and self-efficacy, which develop over time as children learn through experience. Academic competence, for example, boosts self-esteem and self-efficacy. A child who performs well in school will be confident in approaching various tasks; will seek support from teachers and peers, which enhances resilience thus contributing to school adaptation.

The two variables that were the focus of this study (academic competence and self-regulation) are known to be influenced by gender and developmental age. For example, Maureen and Kamloops (2015) observed that self-regulation, which is a personal construct that influences resilience, is a developmental phenomenon that progresses from birth to maturity and that manifests itself through developmental stages and milestones across the lifespan. Implicitly, children gain in self-regulation hence resilience as they progress in age. In the same vein, self-determination, which is an aspect of academic competence, changes and looks differently over a person's lifespan of childhood, adolescence and adulthood (Kimaumann and Rosser, 2011). Kirsch (2002) on the other hand associates academic competence in science and mathematics with gender. Studies in developmental change have found there is a correlation between individual resilience factors such as self-esteem with age and gender (Kelley and Guill, 2013; Arokiaraj, Nasir and Wan, 2011) Therefore, it was important to establish the age of the participants. Hence, having measured the overall resilience level, it was important to establish whether the levels were across the ages and gender.

#### 4.3.1 Age and Resilience Levels among children

As highlighted, developmental age has been found to be associated with variables that contribute to resilience, but environmental conditions were also found to mediate in developmental issues. It was, therefore, important to establish whether despite the harsh environment, if the children in Mt. Elgon gained in resilience as they developed in age. To find out the relationship between the two variables, levels of resilience were created based on the resilience scores. Low resilience category for children who scored 15 and below; moderate resilience for children who scored 16 to 19, while high resilient children scored above 20 as shown in the Table 4.5:

**Table 4.5: Cross-Tabulation of Age**

Resilience Level	Age			Total
	9 - 12 years	13 - 17 years	18 - 21 years	
Low resilience	4 (16.0%) (3.92)	15 (60.00%) (14.7)	6 (24.00%) (5.888)	25
Moderate resilience	10 (23.26%) (9.8)	25 (58.14%) (24.5)	8 (18.60%) (7.84)	43
High resilience	3 (10.00%) (3.94)	22 (73.33%) (21.56)	5 (16.67%) (4.9)	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>98</b>

$$\chi^2 = 2.92; DF = 4; N = 98; p=0.56$$

Table 4.5 shows the differences between ages 9-12 years, 13 -17 years, and 18-21 years for resilience scores. Within the category of high resilience, 22 (73.3%) of 30 respondents were between ages 13-17 years, 3 (10%) respondents were between ages 9-12 years, while 5 (16%) respondents were between ages 18-21 years. Within the category of moderate resilience, 25 (58.14%) of 44 respondents were between ages 13-17 years, 10 (23.26%) respondents were between ages 9-12 years, while 8 (18.6%) respondents were between ages 18-21 years. Within low resilience category, 15 (60%) of 25 respondents were between ages 13-17 years, 4 (16%) respondents were between ages 9-12 years, while 6 (24%) respondents were between ages 18-21 years.

Although there were differences in resilience scores, a Chi Square test was conducted to establish if there was a significant relationship between age and resilience. The findings show that age had no significant relationship on the overall resilience factors with  $\chi^2 = 2.92; p=0.56$ . The results differ from the findings of previous studies that have shown that factors that relate to resilience such as self-esteem, problem solving, self-efficacy, and cognitive skills are age dependent. Perhaps this is due to environment under which the children of Mt. Elgon have been nurtured.

Several studies show that when children are subjected to distressing environments that are considered significant risk factors without a functional social support system are unlikely to develop resilience (Lee, 2012). However, as argued in the introductory chapters, children in this study were exposed to unpredictable violence (war) in their early years (perhaps ages of 1-4 years) during the post-election violence of 2007/8 in Mt. Elgon that led to the loss of some of their parents either through death or abduction. From the interviews, most of the children were also left homeless and impoverished. Research shows that if the maternal figure is absent as a result of either death or abduction or emotionally unavailable, the stability of a child is interrupted.

As a result, the infant is deprived of the secure ties of affection that may affect the development of their self-concept, therefore affecting their resilience levels (Chung and Robert, 2017). It appears that the children were deprived of the parental bond that is probably the single most important safety against long term damage. Similarly, Moore (2013) observes that children living in a war zone suffer double cost of extreme vulnerability especially when they are forced to migrate from

#### 4.3.2: Influence of gender on resilience levels among children

In order to explore the mean difference by gender for low and high resilient children, t-test conducted to compare the resilience scores for male and female. The results are presented in Table 4.6:

**Table 4.6: T-test for resilience scores for males and females**

		Male			Female			
Variable	N	95 % CL		N	95 % CL			
		Lower Limit	Upper Limit		Mean	Lower Limit	Upper Limit	
†Resilience score	53	15.24*	12.99	17.4	45	18.04*	16.62	19.46

<sup>4</sup> \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

†Resilience score is calculated based on 9-item resilience scale.

The independent t-test in Table 4.6 shows that the females had a mean of  $M=18.04$ , as compared to males who had a mean of  $M=15.24$ . The general description of the mean difference between the two groups shows that the females had a higher resilience score of  $M=18.04$  as opposed to male with a score of  $M=15.24$ . The Independent

T-test shows that the difference was statistically significant at a t-value of -2.03,  $p=0.04$ . The t-value does not appear on the table because according to APA t-value is discussed within the text.

The results were corroborated by qualitative data from interviews, teachers and FGDs. From interview a teacher had this to say:

...Namarome lost her father and brother during the skirmishes.  
She works in groups fairly well and is good in class.....she also  
consults the teachers. ...

Teacher (male)

From her non- verbal cues, Namarome (not her real name) didn't seem as if she had been affected much by the difficult circumstances surrounding her life. She has lost close and significant people but still works hard and does well as reported by the teacher. This is also evidenced in the follow up interview in the quote below:

...my dad was killed by SLDF while I was watching,...my brother was taken  
away and we hoped he will return...we waited.....later it was said that he died  
and was buried at a place we don't know.....it's been hard but ....what do  
you do? Just accept it. I know God still cares for me. I am working hard and I  
will succeed...its good the class teacher put us in groups ....teacher Immanuel  
helps me a lot .....Maria is my friend and she helps me a lot and ...I also thank  
God for my auntie ...

Namarome, 14 yrs (female)

From the quote, it could be expected that Namarome will be withdrawn, lonely, and fearful, perhaps exhibit aggression and perform poorly in class work because of the experiences of loss. However, as it can be observed from the quote, she was able to form close friendship with Maria, able to join a group, engage in peer relations and verbalize about her faith in God. These are behaviors that build resilience in children thereby promoting school adaptation.

One of the teachers described girls to be more resilient than boys as reflected in below;

...girls are more disciplined than boys, you will find them asking  
teachers questions, most of the time likes on Saturdays they are  
found in groups discussing, in fact they do much better than boys.  
You will find boys on and off from school, they sneak to go and take  
alcohol from the market, some of them just leave school to go and  
ride a bicycle or motorbike and that has affected their performance.

Teacher (female)

From the FGDs the female participants also reported that they found it easy to interact with teachers and peers. They could also ask help from the neighbors as exemplified in the quote below:

...Mmmh.....we have gone through a lot. it's not been easy to lose a  
mother...father, your bros and sis and to lack a home, and to share a class  
with those whom you saw kill your brother....but this far God has helped  
us. For us girls we have no problem as girls...we talk to each other with  
ease, also to teachers and others about happened, like right now there  
seems to be trouble looming because 'the bad boys' are coming  
together....yaah...for example i live on the market having been chased  
from our land.....but we have good neighbors, like for me my scores are  
good, we borrow from each other, we just forgive them, that's life...

(Debbie, 12 yrs & Pauline, 15 yrs FGD 1)

From the above quote the girls underwent difficult circumstances that hurt them emotionally. The environment at the time of research was unpredictable but the girls could still talk about what happened with ease. Talking with ease may imply that the children had attained self-awareness and acceptance, and demonstrated belief in their inner strength, which is a critical aspect in psychological resilience.

Acceptance and forgiveness can also help to strengthen self-regulation that helps the child to manage emotions such as sadness, frustration and anger, and participate actively within their environment. Acceptance is the path to a deep understanding that can guide one to the part of him/her that is whole, free, and untroubled (Wade, 2010). Acceptance, therefore, means that the children were able to enter into the world of authentic living where they could see things as they are, consider options and choose wisely. Forgiveness on the other hand helps individuals release painful and debilitating negative effects hence get engaged in less depreciating thought pattern (Breienes, 2012). It should be noted that experiences of adversity often elicit anger or sadness or hurt, which needs to be deeply felt and expressed. Forgiveness is thus an important part of someone's recovery from trauma and through it people discover that they don't need to be victims of the past (Wade, 2010).

The findings of the current study buttress those of prior research by Davis, Burleson, & Kruszewski (2011), which found girls to be more resilient than boys. According to these past findings, girls exhibited high levels of resilience. Davis et al. (2011) further found that emotional health, self-rated cognitive function, optimism, days spent with family and friends, and self-rated successful aging were most likely to predict resilience levels among girls. From the excerpts, the girls are making friends and they also appear to relate well with the care givers. Indeed, according to Ben-Zur and Zeidner (2012), preadolescent and adolescent girls tend to be slightly better adjusted and less prone to problem behavior than boys of similar ages. Perhaps this is because female gender is characterized with help-seeking behavior.

From a general perspective, contemporary theories have portrayed females as pro-social and empathic copiers especially in interpersonal domain as compared to males who are competitive, task-oriented in problem solving, especially in work domains. For instance, Abukari, and Laser (2013) point out that girls are more likely to use mastery strategies, while boys tend to adopt performance goals (Bernard, 2005; Bonanni, 2013), consistent with the notion that boys are more ego- and competitively- oriented while girls favor cooperative efforts. Based on these findings, gender appears to be a significant variable in mediating resilience of children in school adaptation. Therefore, this study argues alongside other researchers who have found out about gender influence in resilience.

However, on the overall, children in Mt. Elgon are low in resilience and this can be attributed to prolonged exposure to traumatic experiences that seem to have derailed them from positive developmental path by denying them the environmental support that is key to resilience.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

The study has shown that Age and gender may play a significant role in the development of resilience among children exposed to traumatic situations such as war. However gender has greater influence on individual's resilience levels than Age.

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