



# Gender differences in mental health consequences of exposure to political violence among Israeli adolescents



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the role played by gender differences in the relation between political violence exposure and mental health during adolescence. Understanding these differences is particularly pertinent during the period of adolescence characterized as it is by processes of identity formation and gender role consolidation. Participants were 154 high school students recruited from two high schools in central Israel (78 males, 76 females; average age 16.54), who completed the Political Life Events Scale for measurement of political violence exposure, the Brief Symptom Inventory-18 for assessment of psychological symptoms and disorders, a risk-taking behavior scale, and the Posttraumatic Stress Symptom Scale – Interview (PSS-I) for assessment of posttraumatic stress symptoms. Results reflected high levels on many psychological indicators. The dose–response hypothesis was partially confirmed with adolescents' higher reported political violence exposure related only to higher levels of somatization and greater severity of posttraumatic stress symptoms. Contrary to the literature, only a few gender differences emerged and these showed mixed patterns. Females showed higher levels of anxiety than males, and males showed higher levels of risk-taking behavior. Females exposed to low political violence exposure showed significantly less substance abuse than males but those with high exposure reported significantly higher levels of substance abuse, equivalent to those of males. Findings show a complex constellation of gender effects on relations between political violence exposure and different psychopathological outcomes. Findings of this study indicate the necessity for more refined examination of gender differences in psychological processes in reaction to living in conditions of protracted conflict and war.

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## 1. Introduction

The normal developmental tasks of adolescence with its rapid physiological, cognitive, social and emotional transitions are amplified in traumatic environments such as that of armed conflict, protracted hostilities and war. Empirical evidence indicates that exposure to war and conflict during adolescence can result in developmental impairment and psychiatric disturbances that range from isolated symptoms to profiles of disorder (Allwood, Bell-Dolan, & Husain, 2002; Slone & Shechner, 2009; Thabet, Abed, & Vostanis, 2002). Examining the effects of these adverse and dangerous environments to adolescents has particular pertinence because traumatic events experienced by adolescents may shape adult growth and development.

### 1.1. Psychological outcomes of exposure to political violence

In general, most populations affected by armed conflict show elevated levels of mental health difficulties (Mollica et al., 2004) and many youths exposed to war and conflict will experience some psychological

morbidity (Shaw, 2003). Together with this, living in a conflict environment is not automatically associated with dysfunction and impairment and many children and adolescents show surprising resilience and adaptive functioning (Barber, 2013; Slone & Roziner, 2013). Both short and long term negative consequences of armed conflict and war have been recorded by a rapidly growing corpus of research. Short-term effects include distress, shock, fear, phobic avoidance of public places, anger (El Zein & Ammar, 2011; Joshi & O'Donnell, 2003) and aggressive behavior (Guttman-Steinmetz, Shoshani, Farhan, Aliman, & Hirschberger, 2012). However, the evidence for long-term effects is more complex. Symptoms and disorders can vary from severe syndromes to minimal impairment, while some children show healthy development. Wide-ranging individual differences in symptoms range from externalizing behaviors (Barber, 2001; Muldoon, 2004) and sub-clinical symptoms (Slone & Shechner, 2009) through to anxiety and depression (Gupta & Zimmer, 2008; Lonigan, Phillips, & Richey, 2003) to posttraumatic stress and full-blown Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Finzi-Dottan, Dekel, Lavi, & Su'ali, 2006; Pat-Horenczyk et al., 2009; Rosner, Powell, & Buttollo, 2003; Masinda & Muhesi, 2004).

Research is replete with reference to gender differences in emotional reactivity to different types of disasters and traumatic circumstances (Norris et al., 2002). With reference to political violence, although

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much research reports gender differences in psychological response, evidence is inconclusive with findings stretching the full span. In many studies, girls exposed to political violence have reported higher levels of distress than boys on several outcome measures (Giaconia et al., 1995; Qouta, Punamaki, & El-Sarraj, 2003; Smith, Perrin, Yule, Hacam, & Stuvland, 2002; Thabet & Vostanis, 1998). Other studies have found no effect for gender (Dyregrov, Gjestad, & Raundalen, 2002; Dyregrov, Gupta, Gjestad, & Mukanoheil, 2000; Espi'e et al., 2009), and some have reported the opposite pattern of less distress on some outcome measures (Slone, Adiri, & Arian, 1998; Khamis, 2005). The present research explores the role played by gender during adolescence in type and severity of psychological consequences and the relation between political violence exposure and psychological outcomes.

### 1.2. Gender and political violence exposure

Research evidence shows an intrinsic link between gender and potentially traumatic events in situations of political violence with males generally reporting greater exposure. Data deriving from conflict areas such as Northern Ireland (Muldoon & Trew, 2000) and the Middle East (Giacaman, Abu-Rmeileh, Husseini, Saab, & Boyce, 2007; Macksoud & Aber, 1996) indicate higher reported frequency and variety of conflict-related events by boys than girls. Similarly, in a study in Gaza, Barber (2008) found that boys experienced more direct political violence than girls, possibly as a result of their greater involvement in political activity in comparison to girls. Approximately 60% of boys sampled reported that they had been struck by soldiers and many reported that they had been imprisoned. Explanations offered for these gender differences suggest that girls may be more amenable to protection, have a greater tendency for avoidance of dangerous and violent situations, or be more obedient to safety instructions.

The evidence is still equivocal with some studies showing no differences in exposure to political violence based on gender (Haj-Yahia, 2008). In addition, with the inclusion of sexual violations on the list of horrendous events perpetrated in many war situations, girls often report greater political violence exposure (Alcorn, 2014) emphasizing the context-based nature of empirical findings. Further complicating this data are findings showing that gender does not operate always as a single main effect but rather interacts with other factors such as ethnic group and socioeconomic status (Muldoon & Trew, 2000).

### 1.3. Gender differences in psychopathology during adolescence

Adolescence includes numerous transitions and changes in pubertal development and the psycho-social context. The complex challenges raised by these rapid physiological, cognitive, social and emotional transitions can become magnified in a multi-stress environment. These developmental changes, alongside other normative stressors, often result in increased negative affect and few resources to regulate these emotions, which can precipitate vulnerability to the onset of psychopathology (King & Chassin, 2008; Sontag, Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Warren, 2008). Importantly, however, not all adolescents experience adverse consequences in response to distress, suggesting that there are key individual difference factors underlying the relation between response to negative affect and psychopathology among adolescents.

Evidence indicates that there is a rise in sensation seeking during adolescence (Romer & Hennessy, 2007) which is associated with an increase in depressive symptoms, suicide ideation and attempts, substance abuse, and risk-taking behaviors (Arnett, 1992; MacPherson, Magidson, Reynolds, Kahler, & Lejuez, 2010; Ortin, Lake, Kleinman, & Gould, 2012).

The challenges of adolescence, defined by intra-psyche energy expended predominantly at establishing personal identity from among alternative identities, manifest in the quest for self-autonomy and social role consolidation (Marcia, 1994). Preference for different strategies in

establishing identity impacts the extent to which adolescents are successful in finding their own uniqueness and self-definition (Berzonsky, 2011).

Gender role consolidation during adolescence could explain gender differences in vulnerability to types and severity of disorders. Several studies have documented that males are more likely to report externalizing psychopathology, such as conduct disorders or substance abuse disorders, alone or with comorbid conditions, whereas girls report higher rates of internalizing disorders, such as anxiety and depression (Grant et al., 2004; Tolin & Foa, 2006). Empirical evidence suggests that gender differences in managing affective distress contribute to differences in the prevalence of these disorders (Hankin, Mermelstein, & Roesch, 2007). Adolescent females tend to manage distress using negative self-evaluation and rumination (Galaif, Sussman, Chou, & Wills, 2003; Hankin & Abramson, 2001; Piko, 2001), whereas adolescent males tend to use external responses, increasing their propensity for externalizing psychopathology by engaging in risk behaviors such as substance abuse and delinquency (Hankin et al., 2007).

Gender differences have been consistently found for a wide variety of psychopathology categories. The prevalence of any anxiety disorder is substantially greater among girls than boys in childhood (Anderson, Williams, McGee, & Silva, 1987) and adolescence (McGee et al., 1990). This is echoed in the higher risk of PTSD among girls than among boys, regardless of the type of study, population, type of assessment, or other methodological variables (Tolin & Foa, 2006).

### 1.4. Interaction of political violence exposure and gender on outcome

Necessary developmental tasks of rebelliousness as a crucial process in identity consolidation (Marcia, 1994) and normative proactive agency on the environment for self-exploration, identity formation and social role testing are facilitated in stable social conditions and may be compromised in a conflicted or insecure social environment (Slone & Shoshani, 2014). According to the dose-response hypothesis, level of exposure to war and political violence traumas is a significant risk factor for a wide range of mental health problems in children and adolescents (Morgos, Worden, & Gupta, 2007; Smith et al., 2002; Thabet, Tawahina, Sarraj, & Vostanis, 2008). Empirical evidence yields a relatively coherent pattern indicating an association between severity of political violence exposure and psychological consequences in general for both genders (Slone & Shechner, 2009). However, when these global data are disaggregated into specific symptoms and disorders, the pattern for differential gender effects of exposure to political violence is similar to general prevalence rates of these disorders for boys and girls. For example, among Palestinian children, male gender was found to serve as a predictor for externalizing disorders including temper tantrums, stealing, fighting, lying and other aggressive symptoms, but not for posttraumatic stress, hyperactivity and internalizing symptoms (Qouta, Punamaki, & El-Sarraj, 2005). Some studies have found girls to demonstrate higher rates of stress, posttraumatic stress symptoms and PTSD and less posttraumatic growth as reflected in positive changes resulting from adversity (Kimhi, Eshel, Zysberg, & Hantman, 2010; Qouta et al., 2003). These findings suggest that boys and girls respond differently to political violence, perhaps related to gender-based norms and patterns of society. Nonetheless, these data suggest the need for further, and more refined, study of the ways in which gender might moderate psychological and psychiatric consequences of exposure to protracted political violence. Understanding gender differences in the effects of political violence exposure is particularly pertinent during the period of adolescence characterized as it is by processes of identity formation and gender role consolidation. In addition, the present study extends examination of outcome variables beyond psychopathology, employing more broad-based measures than have traditionally been used. Further, the study examines the variables at close resolution to expose subtle effects of gender differences in political violence exposure among adolescents.

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