

Ethnic Conflict and the Vulnerability of Women

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Abstract

It is widely accepted that ethnicity is a sort of affiliation to a group, a type of distinctiveness involving an array of characteristics or attributes such as a shared culture that may be seen in their shared history, and language that serve as the basis for this affiliation. Does it satisfy any vital need of individuals, given how fiercely people cling to their ethnic identities? Clinging to an ethnic identity is often seen to provide certain personal or societal benefits. Ethnicity is perceived by many scholars as an expression of individual or group agendas as well as political scheming. Therefore, it is not unlikely for other forms of allegiances such as that of class, to override ethnic allegiance. Owing to the worldwide gender inequality, women due to their shared experience of oppression and subordination, both economic and social, may be categorized as a distinct class in itself. It is difficult to fathom the extent to which women are subjected to atrocities during times of conflict, given how vulnerable their existence is during ordinary circumstances. This paper seeks to investigate how the patriarchal grasp on ethnicity is reinforced by designating women's bodies as symbols of ethnic purity and employing them as boundary markers. Abuse of women to portray a masculine display of power over a rival community becomes a method of warfare. As their quality of life and chances of survival seem to deteriorate during such conflicts, women tend to transcend ethnic allegiances and push for conflict resolution.

Keywords- Ethnicity, Conflict, Patriarchal, Women, Vulnerable

Introduction

Ethnicity is a social relationship in which individuals view themselves and others as a distinct community. Thus, identification with a particular ethnic community entails a conscious association with it. People collaborate with members of their ethnic group to the degree that they actually share interests or perceive that they do so. Therefore, ethnic conflicts are characterised as such because “they are concerned with relations between groups as defined by descent - real or presumptive” (Glazer et al.,1974). As ethnic groups are often graded in accordance with the corresponding levels of their socioeconomic position, the long-standing ethnic communities are beginning to feel more defensive of their status, and eager to claim new rights. However, since ethnic groups may include ‘sub-ethnic’ categories, ethnic allegiance is not considered rigid or unbreakable. For example, if there is potential for benefit, an individual from a lower socioeconomic ethnic group might opt to conceal his or her origins and attempt to be recognised as a member of a preferred ethnic group.

Scholars have sought to investigate the underlying causes of ethnic associations. Many argue that there is a reward component to these relationships. Ethnic ties, for example, are especially strong within the lower-status occupational groupings and are leveraged to establish a hold over employment. Members of minority groups being driven into low-wage employment, as a consequence of which the group gains a poor status, encourages ethnic unity since unity is an outcome of shared experiences and social interactions

and is influenced by class-based aspirations. The degree of ethnic solidarity is also affected by changes in how ethnic groups are represented internally in the state army and the administrative structures, as well as their accessibility to resources. Therefore, ethnic conflicts are those between mobilised groups. It does not explicitly address inequalities in the significance assigned to sub-ethnic categories. When specific structural conditions are met, ethnic mobilisation is more likely to occur, such as when ethnic populations have a sizable distribution inside a state's borders and when the dominant ethnic group's strong nationalism at the centre generates a corresponding ethnic reaction in the periphery (Olzak,1983). Any interpretation of an ethnic conflict as a phenomenon that arises collectively is likely to be based on an overly cultivated view of the participant as someone who consistently complies with the standards set by the group.

How are women positioned in ethnic conflicts?

Women can be classified as a sub-ethnic group within a particular ethnic community. This is because, even within an ethnic group, women hold an inferior position. Their access to resources and opportunities is negligible when compared to the men in their community. As a result, women may not identify strongly with their ethnic group since they do not perceive themselves as being rewarded for it. However, when an ethnic conflict breaks out, women are never the perpetrators, as the motivation for an ethnic war may be incomprehensible to the women of any of the groups involved, but they are the worst sufferers. Male involvement in conflict is seen as a key determinant of ethnicity, citizenship, and community membership. The vast majority of males experience horrific violence and death as combatants during conflict. That being said, women suffer dreadful harm as non-combatants (Handrahan,2004). The patriarchal aspect of ethnicity situates male honour within the female (Yuval-Davis, 1997), and women's bodies are utilised to demonstrate ethnic boundaries.

During a conflict, rape and sexual assault are frequently used to display triumph, threaten the people, tear up families, and, in certain cases, influence the ethnic composition of the subsequent generation. Rape is used as a method to force women to conceive children, as ethnicity is inherited through male lineage in patriarchal societies, or to purposefully infect them with HIV in order to prevent the enemy community's women from being able to bear children (Hague, 2016). The abuse goes so far as to leave women permanently scarred, making it challenging for them to bear children in the future. Rifles or sharp instruments such as knives are shoved into their private parts, their wombs ruptured, and pregnant women are tortured and beaten ruthlessly to induce miscarriage (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002). Sexual assault on women belonging to other ethnic groups is also considered an attack on the honour of the community by tarnishing the reputation of women who have been tasked by the community to uphold the integrity of their lineage. Because women play a crucial role in institutions of culture, community, and family, focusing violence against them can also be a key warfare strategy. In ethnic conflicts, tearing down the cultural and social fabric of the opposing ethnic group is just as fundamental as gaining territory.

Ethnic conflicts frequently uproot people from their homes, forcing them to flee their native places and take shelter in temporary camps, either within the boundaries of the nation-state or in neighbouring nations. Women and their families frequently abandon particular areas and flee to other locations simply because they fear rampant rape (Plumper and Neumayer, 2006). "There are anecdotal accounts of miscarriages and deliveries while fleeing armed conflict and of stress impacting lactation" (International Crisis Group, 2015). The placement of displaced individuals in camps makes the female population particularly vulnerable. In the new regions, these displaced individuals are deemed a minority, and their

visible segregation from the mainstream population results in discriminatory access to basic goods and services such as better accommodation or employment. There are reports of personnel involved in relief work engaging themselves in sexual abuse. Numerous accounts exist of male peacekeepers, security troops, and NGO employees sexually exploiting women and children. Resources are withheld until women provide sexual services. The newly displaced people who lack political rights in the new territory feel powerless to oppose the actions of these aid workers, firstly because of their need for the basic commodities to sustain themselves, and secondly because of the influence possessed by these personnel (UNHCR, 2002).

Is the family home a safe haven for women during an ethnic conflict?

"Violence against women also takes place in the most intimate of places, the family" (Coomaraswamy, 2005). In any ethnic community, there is a propensity for an increase in domestic violence cases both during and after conflict. Men abuse their partners as a result of frustration caused by conflict. Frustration stems from economic insecurity, the loss of political power and rights, and an uncertain future. Men use aggression against women to make up for their lack of control outside the home. No matter what brutalities a woman has experienced during the conflict, she is expected to solely concentrate on the men of the family who have returned from conflict, and her personal experience is often suppressed. A man's physical wounds are a symbol of pride, are spoken about, and are taken care of. A woman's war wounds, on the other hand, become a source of shame. They find it difficult to speak of it openly or even confide in their family, let alone seek medical care for it. Women are obligated to serve in conflicts by upholding their sexual purity for the sake of their families and communities. A woman's sexual purity is attached to the honour of the men related to her. Maintaining the honour of the men in their family becomes the most essential component of being a woman during a conflict. If women resist, male kinfolk even go so far as to murder them. Because of the societal stigma associated with singlehood, women experiencing domestic abuse find it difficult to leave their marriages. Such stigma is also associated with widowhood. For instance, widowhood can signify a substantial social downgrade in a patriarchal society for women whose spouses do not return from a conflict, as a woman's identity is contingent upon her status as someone's wife rather than her own worth. This has an impact on her acceptance among the members of her immediate society and her financial stability. Her basic needs, such as healthcare, are frequently disregarded in the absence of a spouse to advocate on her behalf. This is particularly the case for women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, "it is not uncommon for women in these situations to be sexually abused by male in-laws" (International Crisis Group, 2015).

It has been found that being unable to leave such relationships is linked to greater occurrences of violence in general. A multitude of the detrimental impacts of conflict on women are therefore not attributable to biological factors but to preexisting social structures based on gender (Plumper and Neumayer, 2006).

Do women seek to resolve such conflicts that jeopardise their existence?

Almost every ethnic conflict around the world has seen women rallying for peace. If women do become participants in ethnic conflicts, it is not because of their strong ethnic affiliations. Rather, it is an outcome of what men consider acceptable conduct during a conflict. Given how vulnerable their position is in a patriarchal society, women rarely stand to gain anything from an ethnic conflict. Although males may benefit in some way from the outcome of a conflict, women nonetheless stay on the periphery. Gender identification is strengthened, and ethnic distinction becomes less significant because of the common

experiences women have had as victims of exploitation. Women may break free from patriarchal constraints during a conflict by taking charge of households and communities in the absence of men, but as soon as the conflict comes to an end, returning men take precedence over women, and they once again get pushed to the background (Handrahan, 2004).

Women perceive brutality at the core of conflict because they are cognizant of their own oppressed status and subordinate social standing. As violent conflicts never address or resolve their issues, instead disintegrate their lives even further, many women are inclined to denounce blatant male authority and instead of following them down the path of war, band together to establish multi-ethnic peace associations.

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