Women in Peace-building

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Theoretical Debates

The literature on women in peace-building evolves around several theoretical propositions about women and war. Some of these theoretical propositions take the following form:

a. men make war-women make peace

a. victimization vs. women's agency

c. causes not consequences

I now discuss each of these debates.

Much of the current literature on peace studies has focused on the gendered nature of war. These studies have unearthed the largely androcentric structure and male-dominated culture in the practices of soldiering and military conscription. This has led to the common assumption made by many scholars that men make war while women make peace. Many peace-makers have similarly claimed that while men are soldiers, women were the mothers. It was construed that women's social and biological roles as nurturers have generally made them adept at building relationships that bridge ethnic, religious and cultural divide. Feminist theorists however have ferociously challenged this notion. They claim that it essentializes notions of both masculinity and femininity and poses the latter as superior to the former

(York,1998:21). It has been noticed in different conflicts that women are not only victims of war but also active participants. Women can be involved not only as nurses, mothers of disappeared, keepers on the home front in times of war, but also in the role of those who commit serious atrocities and abuses (Karam, 2001:6-7). In Sri Lanka, some male fighters perceived women Tamil paramilitaries to be more violent than their male colleagues (de Silva, forthcoming). But beyond the critique of this dichotomy, the usefulness of this assumption is made apparent in its focus on the socialization process. Thus roles may not be biologically determined but the different socialization processes, which men and women undergo in their life processes, may certainly influence them. These studies are therefore useful to the extent that they throw a light on these socialization processes.

There is a larger debate in the literature regarding women's agency versus victimhood. Women are more readily conceived of as victims of war. A consequence of this has been the tendency to limit women's agency in the peace-building process. As a counter to this trend, a body of literature has grown in which women's agencies have been made the focus of attention (Manchanda, 2001). As an alternative to this binary thinking Roberta Juliana have advocated a somewhat different approach (1997) using the concept of the victimized self to argue that by taking action against victimization, women actually diminish it.

Most of the literature on conflict deals with the consequences of conflict, for example what happens to women men, people, societies, nations as a result of conflict. But feminist scholarship on women and security

has been among the first to foreground structures of patriarchy, capital and militarisation as a cause of conflict rather than a consequence. Scholars like Cynthia Enloe (1989, 1993) have demonstrated how gendered structures influence military establishments and practices.

The role of women in peace-building may be categorized as follows:

- women as actors

- women's agenda

- women's perception

Women as Actors

In the first category, women as actors, we consider the activities of those women who either as victims or survivors, or combatants have had a role to play in the conflict. It must be mentioned that these roles are not played by women alone, but through the socialization process of being brought to play the role of a daughter, mother or sister, they have been positioned to contribute in a way, which men could not.

First in keeping with their feminine roles as carers, keepers of home, counselors, and mourners women in various conflicts have been seen to take upon themselves these above roles. In situations of conflict it has been generally recognised that women are mothers who send their children to war. This role is often glorified by combatants themselves as is evident in this patriotic Chakma song sung by members of the Pahari Chhatra

Parishad of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, in their demand for autonomy.

> "We cannot survive without opening our mouths, how long are we to lock up our voices, the time has come to take to the streets. So Mother don't prevent us anymore"….

> Mother we have to go
> Join the demo on the street
> We have to face the bullets.
> Oh Mother don't forbid us
> Don't pull us from behind
> The streets quake
> With the slogans
> And the sound of protest.
> We all have to fight!
> Mother don't worry about us
> Stay calm and happy
> If we are killed
> Then think yourself to be the mother of a martyr.
>   (Guhathakurta, 2001)

During conflict situations women are also considered the last vestiges of civil society. When men take up arms, women are usually left to defend the homes and carry on with the day to day activities of feeding a family and caring for elders and children often in adverse circumstances. Feminist scholars have also linked this trend as making women more vulnerable to rape by opposition forces. One of the ways to intimidate a whole population is to perpetuate the fear of rape among them

and since women are guarding the last vestiges of civil and community life, by making them flee from fear they are also targetting the respective community in question. Conflict situations often lead to mother's playing a role in society, which under normal circumstances would have been natural to them but in a conflict becomes a symbol of protest. Such a role was that of the Argentinian mothers who mourned their 'missing' children. Mourning of the dead in most societies is usually a private and social act where women play an important part. But in situations where 'death' itself in not recognized, then the very act of mourning is held to be a symbol of protest. Not only does such actions contain a cathartic and therapeutic element for emotions suppressed, but it also foregrounds the private into the public arena, hence making grieving or mourning an intensely political act, which transforms victims into survivors.

As widowed wife or grieving mother it is often women who are seen to seek justice. The impunity of soldiers and other law enforcing agencies have often been the target of criticism of many civil society and human rights organisations. But at the ground level the demand for justice had always been fuelled by the demands of war widows or mothers of martyred children or the children of martyrs (e,g, Projonmo '71) who through their immediate involvement could carry through these demands even at great odds. The role of the widows of the intellectuals killed during the 1971 War of Liberation was significant since they were the only group which protested the repatriation of Pakistani Prisoners of War (POWs) from the soil of Bangladesh without any promise of a trial for the massacres they committed. Again it was the mother of

a martyred freedom fighter Jahanara Imam who demanded the trial and punishment of wartime collaborators at a time when the whole society was turning its back on the issue. The movement for the trial of war criminals and the consequent setting up of the Gono Adalat or public tribunal was seen as challenge to a legitimate state, and the charges of sedition were filed against Jahanara Imam and forty other leaders of the movement.

Women's common experience across ethnic, class and community boundaries have often helped women in conflictual situations to network with each other in a way found inconceivable for other groups engaged in conflict. This could be seen among Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian women during the Bosnian crisis. Also Israeli women's groups were among the first to cross the lines and declare solidarity with Palestinian women in the West Bank. It may be noted that Pakistani women's groups were also among the first in Pakistan to apologize for the atrocities, the Pakistani Army inflicted on the Bengali population in general and women in particular. Even within the context of Bangladesh the Hill Women's Federation worked closely with certain Bengali women's groups to make public its demands for the trial and punishment of those repsonsible for the abduction and subsequent disappearance of Kalpana Chakma, their organising secretary. Alliances and networks such as these help to reduce the perception of 'otherness' by ethnic communities, which in turn fuels hostilities. (Guhathakurta,1997)

Although women have had constructive role in peace-building during and after conflicts, there is a

general tendency to ignore their contribution in formal peace processes i.e. one that entail the drawing up of the peace accord or peace negotiations. Amena Mohsin in her article Gendered Nation, Gendered Peace has critiqued the way in which the peace process in the Chittagong Hill Tracts has excluded women. She has also discussed how the marginalisation of women have in fact been institutionalised by the peace accord in the allocation of reserved seats for women (Mohsin, 2002). But although women have been neglected in the formal peace process, they have had a large role to play informally. One of the shining examples of this has been the Naga Mothers Association. In the face of warring factions and ethnic strife, the Naga Mothers Association has initiated dialogues with the 'undergrounds'(militant factions) and the state government to arrest violence and bloodshed. They organised public rallies with religious leaders to appeal for peace and spoke against killings not only by army but also by militants. (Banerjee, 2001).

Women's agenda

It is not only necessary to focus on women as actors in order to evaluate their role in peace-building but also to focus on what should be women's agenda for peace. Feminist scholars have analysed violence against women in conflict situations with a view to portray them as crimes against humanity. It has been part of a strategy to project women's rights as human rights and hence to be taken up by international humanitarian law. Violence against women covered rape, abduction, honor killings, sexual exploitation and slavery.

Welfare has always been associated with concerns related to women for example women as nurses, homemakers, nurturers. But added dimensions to welfare concerns related to women have been the result of systematic analyses of women's health in the face of traumatic situations. This has implications for physical, mental, and situational aspects of health. Feminist scholars have emphasized the longer lasting effects of the psychological dimensions of rape in order to draw attention to the seriousness of the woman's plight as well as indicate the different orientation required to meet her welfare needs. In most post-conflict situations we see the absence of such an approach. For example, in the treatment of the raped victims of the 1971 War of Liberation, social stigma often became an obstacle to their rehabilitation into their own homes and societies. During this time we see that the state policies towards these victims, which the state ostentatiously called Birangonas or war heroines came to be virtually known as a "marry them off" campaign. (Brownmiller, 1975.)

Economic rehabilitation is perhaps the most common kind of policies, which is addressed towards women as victims of war. It is of course a much-needed intervention since many women who were traditionally homemakers and had little or no exposure to public life, are left alone to fend for their families. For many women their struggle had begun during the conflict when their husbands or fathers had gone off to battle. But in the post-conflict situation economic rehabilitation strategies have often proved the turning point for many women to enter the public sphere. Here too strategies have been gender prejudiced. The skills in which women are trained are

often dictated by traditional perceptions of gender roles embedded in that society, for example sewing, handicrafts, weaving etc. But more often than not these skills are not enough to generate an adequate income to maintain a family, and women feel disadvantaged from the very beginning of her entry into public life. Long term skill training in a specific career and opportunities for education to help her face the competitive job market are not given priority by such state policies. Therefore it is necessary to construct a women's agenda of economic rehabilitation.

Women's perception

It is also important to incorporate women's perception into processes of peace-building. The women's agenda that has been discussed above has to be informed by how women see the world of conflict and how they view themselves in it. For example, feminist legal scholars have especially worked hard to depict rape as a war crime and get it recognized in international humanitarian law. Previously the Geneva Convention had accepted rape as a war crime only as a crime against humanity, which did not ordain the most severest of punishment. Torture was a crime, which was more severely punishable than rape. Feminist legal scholars therefore focused on redefining rape as torture. Torture itself was redefined from its original meaning as a way to interrogate the enemy to a means through which to break the backbone of opposition. Thus rape was not only a way of harming individual women of a particular race or group but because of its associated social stigma, it was a way in

which a whole society could be demoralised and ultimately defeated.

It was also seen above how women actors tended to be involved in the demand for justice for war crimes. This has to do with how a woman who had been affected by the war/conflict perceive the issue of justice. For them it attains the topmost priority since the restitution of justice is often perceived to contribute towards the healing of wounds. However from a politician's perspective diplomatic cautiousness may be the order of the day.

In the Bosnian crisis feminist scholars and activists alike has been especially concerned about the mental health of women raped, tortured or affected by the militia. This has highlighted the phenomena of post trauma stress disorder or PTSD in short. This has given medical and social workers a whole new approach to work with women war victims.

In a war where whole populations are affected, the issue of women's rights often gets subsumed in other dominant issues like independence or autonomy or self-determination. But this is important to recognise that women themselves may have a different outlook on issues related to male notions of authority, especially since they are particularly affected by it. It is essential therefore that women's perceptions be incorporated into the charter of demands from the very beginning. Time and again however we have seen this to be absent in many indigenous or local movements. In the demand for autonomy made by the hill people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, women's voices have been subdued by promises to look at women's rights only as an appendage to the

demand for autonomy. This is something that concerns members of the Hill Women's Federation even after a Peace Accord has been signed.

Although during conflict situations women may be forced to take up activities normally taken up by men, for example, factory work and soldiering, this apparent liberation may not be long lasting. For as soon as the conflict is over, women may again be relegated to the domestic sphere as has been seen again and again in cases like Nicaragua, Bangladesh, or even Russia after the Second World War. If women's liberation is to be made part and parcel of the new society under construction then steps must be taken to legitimise and institutionalise gender equality in some form or another.

Conclusion

To conclude one may look at some necessary steps which may be taken in both understanding and ensuring women's positive contribution towards peace-building. These are:

- addressing women's needs

- prioritising women's agenda

- encouraging multiple identities

- networking and organising

- balanced representation

- legalising and institutionalising gender equality

- incorporating women's perceptions

Both during and after the conflict it is necessary to address women's particular needs. This may relate to her security, physical, financial or psychological, or welfare needs like health and education.

Second the women's agenda for peace needs to be prioritised both by women themselves as well as by their male colleagues in the struggle. Since the demand for independence, or autonomy tend to gain predominance in times of conflict the issue of women's rights may get submerged under these demands. It is essential therefore that the prioritisation of the women's agenda be consciously pursued.

Third, where the conflict is about conflicting identities, religious, ethnic or national, identities of gender can only be incorporated into the struggle or in peace-building activities if the notion of multiple identities is pursued at some stage.

Fourth, women's groups in conflict zones needs to network and organise themselves both across ethnic and community divides as well as to build solidarity within themselves. This is the only way in which they can ensure that their voices will be heard both during peace negotiations and after.

Fifth, in any formal negotiations or institutional set up which is part of the peace process, a gender-balanced representation should be ensured.

Sixth, as mentioned before peace bulding processes should include the institutionalision and legitimising of gender relations.

Finally women's perception about the role of authoritative structures, welfare services and governance in general should be highlighted and incorporated at every stage of the peace-building process.

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