

Armed Conflict in Middle East; a Gendered Perspective

Abstract

Feminists' thinkers take gender as an analytical tool to understand different socio-political phenomenon like war. They believe that addressing the root causes of conflict from a gender perspective is needed to make unequal gender structures visible in order to move beyond them to achieve sustainable peace. This paper is an attempt to understand disproportionate impact of the armed conflict on women, whether it is direct crimes committed against women or indirect impact of international policies and sanctions imposed on a particular society. To place these ideas into context the researcher is taking conflict in Middle East (Palestine and Syria) as a case study and crimes committed against women in the region as an instrument of war, as a strategy to defeat the morale of a particular society.

Keywords: War, Gender Discrimination, Crimes Against Women, Middle East, Syria, Palestine

Introduction

Gender is a set of socially and culturally constructed characteristics assigned to individuals on the basis of their biological sex. It creates a structure that signifies unequal power relationships between women and men and between men women and others. It is a system of social hierarchy in which masculine characteristics are valued more than feminine ones. Characteristics such as power, autonomy, public and rationality are associated with masculinity opposite characteristics like emotionality, weakness, private and dependence are considered as attributes of women. Characteristics such as power, autonomy, and rationality are characteristics that are most valued in state. International politics is also representative of such values and operates on structures of unequal power relationships. Masculinity is manifested in the state in a way it creates a masculine state that indulges in power struggle since its inception.

The breakout of internal conflict in Syria for freedom and justice has become a proxy war of central front. Sunni and Shia alike have been drawn into the conflict as the Syrian tragedy has unfolded. Inspired by the revolts in Arab World, in March 2011 Syrians—a predominantly Sunni population—started a peaceful protest against the rule of the Shia-offshoot Alawite regime headed by Bashar al-Assad. Secure in his support from the extremist Iranian regime, Assad responded with great brutality. Sunni protester found support for their uprising from Gulf Arab states and later on an undeclared support from United States of America. As USA doesn't have a major provocation, an overt Western military intervention seems unlikely. Assad's foreign supporters, such as Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah are in the conflict for their own interest.

Objective of the Study

The main Objective of the Study is to understand the impact of armed conflict on women.

Review of Literature

Many well researched articles are available related to the violence against women in different states of Middle East. And for this study, data from many researched reports has been utilised. NRC's report, November 2015—Gaza: the Impact of the Conflict on Women looks into the occupation, conflict and Israeli imposed blockade and women's lives in Gaza. Palestinian women under prolonged Israeli occupation, a joint submission to the UPR working Group 29th Session, January 2018, is a very detailed report about the day to day life of women in Palestine. Roald Hovring, Gaza: The world's largest open-air prison published by NRC, 26. Apr 2018, illustrates how more than 50 years of occupation and 10 years of blockade have made the lives of millions of Palestinians living inside the Gaza Strip unbearable. Briefing Paper Based on an FIDH assessment

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mission in Jordan in December 2012 provides information regarding the crimes against women in Syria. Similarly many reports have also been submitted to United Nations like Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review of The Syrian Arab Republic 26th Session of the UPR Working Group of the Human Rights Council, 2016, exposing the brutality of existing regime in power. Apart from reports many articles such as Simona Sharoni, Rethinking Women's Struggles in Israel-Palestine and in the North of Ireland, in Caroline Moser and Fiona Clark, (eds). *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors: Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*, London: Zed, 2001, has been taken into account to develop analytical understanding of the impact of conflict on women in such societies. While using such information about the lives of women, a comparative study suggests that women experiences are more or less similar in different conflict situations and treated as instruments of war by warring parties.

Hypothesis

In an armed conflict society, violence against women is a war strategy.

Research Design and Methodology

This paper examines the impact of armed conflicts on women. For the said purpose descriptive and analytical method has been employed. Gender Studies are also being undertaken to understand the differential impact of armed conflicts on women in general by taking some states of Middle East as particular cases of studies.

"It is tempting, naturally, for Americans to stay out of a fight between two holy armies who oppose the United States and its allies. To put it very mildly, neither radical Shiite nor radical Sunni groups share our values or serve our interests. Still, as a practical matter, this does not mean that one of our enemies is not a more potent threat than the other. Of all the distasteful regimes in the region, only Iran's has defined itself from its foundation as our mortal enemy and acted accordingly ever since. Moreover, Iran's capacity to pursue hostile action toward America is currently growing. Thus, Iran presents the more serious threat to our well-being."¹

The conflict in Israel-Palestine is often defined as intractable struggles between two communities with competing claims over the same territory. The creation of the State of Israel in 1948, which served for the national aspirations of the Jews, came at the expense of Palestinians claim of an independent state in that region. Moreover, Palestinians are weak militarily and technologically whereas Israel's military is among the strongest and most advanced in the world, owing to US support that seems to be unconditional. Needless to say the escalation of violence and killings in Israel and the Occupied Territories since 1948 has brought enormous suffering to the Palestinian population especially women and at the same time it also has an impact on the lives of Israeli women.

Women's peace activist like Sharoni articulated different connections between different systems of domination and structured inequalities; between practices of violence against Palestinians

and the unprecedented rise in violence against women in Israel, It is suggested that since the soldier learns that violence against Palestinians is permissible, he is likely to bring that violence with him when he return to his community, which in turn creates a spill over effect on Israeli women. Particular aspects of the military occupation have impinged specifically upon women, for example by undermining women's health. Another main implication for women is the restricted and sometimes denied access to medical care when in labor, as Israeli soldiers denies them passage through checkpoints, or delay in such a way that women are forced to give birth by the check point without any medical assistance sometimes with fatal consequences. As noted by Amnesty this clearly violates Article 38(2) of the Forth Geneva Convention, which stipulates that Israel has an obligation to ensure that Palestinians in the West bank and Gaza "receive medical attention and hospital treatment to the same extent" as do Israeli citizens.² During one research, "the women described their experiences and recounted their terror of fleeing the bombing and running from place to place. Some talked about forgetting children and leaving them behind, passing dead bodies, chaos and confusion and little time to think about where to go and what to take when they fled. Some women were pulled out of the rubble, amazed about being alive, whilst others witnessed children and other family members being killed in front of their eyes. The scale of destruction has left complete neighbourhoods flattened, and damaged and destroyed infrastructure including roads, hospitals, schools, nurseries, the power station, water and wastewater networks and treatment facilities"³.

Same as in Palestine, In Syria also, Laws for the protection of women were always weak. Social and cultural practices were always in favour of men. Gender based discrimination was never challenged by a legal system. The Syrian Constitution (2012) also did not provide for any specific article prohibiting discrimination against women, thus further undermining women's human rights, especially in light of the present ongoing armed conflict.⁴ There were already a number of discriminatory laws, e.g. the six personal status laws of different sects, the nationality law, and the penal code, legalise and legitimate gender based violence in different articles and under different pretexts. A few of these are honour killing, forced underage marriage, rape and arbitrary divorce by men. These laws provide full control of men over women, who are head of families and is reflected in civil laws.

The high number of civil causality, perhaps more than 250,000 fatalities to date speaks about the heinous nature of ongoing civil war in Syria. In the 2104 Israel-Palestine war, 1,563 Palestinian civilians were killed including 551 children and 306 women and there were 142 Palestinian families that lost at least three family members⁵. A large number of these casualties are women and children. In Syria, Women and children constitute the majority of the refugee population. Women are forced into refugee camps. They are subject to rape and different forms of violence. Arbitrary arrests and detention, extra-

judicial execution, rape, other forms of sexual violence abduction, enforced disappearances and the use of torture by Syrian authorities and pro-governmental militias have been widely documented.⁶ Rape is systematic military strategy to intimidate the rebels and those who are on the other sides. The Syrian government was reportedly responsible for 62 percent of rapes between 2011 and 2015, the use of rape in Syria has become a widespread tactic used by multiple actors as a tool to punish women and discourage dissent. The United Nations treated 38,000 victims in 2013. In one camp, 69 percent of women were reported to live in dwellings without adequate locks and 46 percent felt unsafe living within the camp. Other women report being abducted, detained, and raped in front of male relatives as blackmail. As of 2015, 34 percent of reported rapes occurred while victims were in detention, while 23 percent took place during home raids and 15 percent during abductions.⁷

Prior to the conflict, while Syria's healthcare access indicators were appreciable, health services were still in need of expansion and improvement. The conflict has devastated Syria's fragile healthcare infrastructure while, at the same time, producing greater number of badly injured people. Attack on healthcare infrastructure and blockades of supplies by Syrian government forces, foreign government forces and by non state armed actors and restrictions on refugee movement all serve to exacerbate the health crisis in Syria. Women and girls lack necessary reproductive health access, as well as treatment specific to those victimised by gender based violence.⁸

These stories about the women in Palestine and in Syrian conflict expose the reality of protection myth. Protection myth takes men as the protector and women and children as those who require protection. These myths may provide legitimacy to war but effects of war on women provide us a better understanding about the condition of women in such conflicts. UNSC resolution 1325 calls on parties in conflict to uphold women's rights and respond to violations, impunity for conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) continues to be undermined. UN Women Deputy Executive Director Lakshmi Puri added, "The women, peace and security agenda is clear. There has to be zero tolerance for violation of women and girls' rights. We are all here today because we are part of the movement demanding justice for sexual and gender-based violence being committed in Syria and Iraq, including the rape of women and men in government detention centres in Syria, and sexual enslavement of women and girls and the targeting of sexual minorities by the Islamic State."⁹

Conclusion and Suggestions

As it is evident that only those states who have their national interest in the ongoing conflicts in Middle East will take any action and other may prefer to stay out. It is pertinent to take cognizance of the principle of responsibility to protect (R2P) that was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly at the 2005 World Summit. It was agreed by the member

states that responsibility to protect intervention required express United Nations Security Council authorisation. Firstly, it is the responsibility of the state to protect its population from war crimes, ethnic cleansing, genocide and crimes against humanity, and from their incitement. Secondly, the international community's responsibility to assist the state to fulfil its responsibility to protect, particularly by helping them to tackle with the different situations of conflict. Finally, in situations where has manifestly failed to protect its population from such crimes, it is the responsibility of international community to take timely and decisive action through peaceful diplomatic and humanitarian means and, if that fails, other more forceful means in a manner consistent with chapter VI, VII and VIII of the UN charter.¹⁰ It is very important for the parties to the conflict, state government and International community to make efforts to stop hostilities and negotiate a sustainable political solution. More important is to apply United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted on 31 October 2000. The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace building and peace keeping.¹¹ There is also a need that state government should pass laws to protect women from domestic violence and crimes committed by army. Apart from providing safety to detained women, fair trial there is also an urgent need to establish safe shelter for abused women. Those who are living in refugee camps also needed to be provided with clean livelihoods and sanitations. The reproductive health of the women should be given adequate attention. It is the most important duty of international community to provide humanitarian and medical aid to all affected regions and refugee camps, under the supervision of an independent commission with international commission. It seems quite obvious that state may not be able and willing to negotiate and work for peaceful resolution without decisive intervention of international community. State will continue to use gender based violence as a war strategy to terrorise the opposite party to the dispute. Transnational action may help to facilitate the spread of international human rights norms in Syria and Palestine.

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P: ISSN NO.: 2321-290X

RNI : UPBIL/2013/55327

VOL-6* ISSUE-1* September- 2018

E: ISSN NO.: 2349-980X

Shrinkhla Ek Shodhparak Vaicharik Patrika

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