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Women in Conflict

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Abstract

The relation between conflict and women is one of the ancient and challenging relations. The presence of women can be seen at all the stages of conflict. This paper seeks to analyze the impact of conflict on women and look at their role in the entire conflict process.

Women are frequently considered to be the victims of conflict. The most horrific acts during a conflict are perpetuated upon women and children. They are used as a means to humiliate a particular ethnic group through rape, forced marriages and genocide. However, there have also been instances of women as combatants. They have abused their positions of power to aggravate the conflict.

Considering everything, women have a much bigger stake in the conflict resolution process. This is so because conflict snatches their security and violates their rights in the worst manner. Women can play their role as peacekeepers.

Thus, a strong case can be made out for women as peace negotiators and peacekeepers. The UN Security Resolution 1325 (on women, peace and security) is a landmark step in this regard.

Key Words: Combatant, Conflict, Genocide, Negotiator, Peacekeeper.

Introduction: The study of International Politics is primarily a study of war and peace. Conflict has been an inevitable phenomenon since the times of the state of nature. It has been rightly said that it is human nature to be at war with one another. Conflict resolution has become one of the challenges since the very beginning. Tackling incompatible interests to manage and resolve conflicts therefore becomes a significant activity.

Conflict encompasses both men and women. The actual process of carrying out the conflict affects men and women differently. The relation between conflict and women is one of the ancient and challenging relations. Feminist International Relations scholars argue that war and peace, conflict and cooperation are gendered activities (Mcglan and Sarkess, 1993).

Conflict is an incompatibility of interests. It is inevitable and constructive outcomes from conflict are rarely possible. Tackling incompatibilities is one of the greatest challenges to the conflict resolution process. The term conflict can be defined as the analysis of the underlying sources of conflict situations (Burton John, 1987).

Conflict resolution refers to the analysis of incompatibilities. These incompatibilities lie at the core of a conflict. Conflict resolution therefore has to tackle these incompatibilities and devise a solution to the conflict.

Conflict is carried out at three levels and therefore a strategy for conflict resolution involves three distinct levels:-the elite, the militia and the mass (Galtung J, 1985). We find the presence of women at all the three levels. This paper seeks to analyze the impact of conflict on women and look at their role in the entire conflict prevention, conflict management and conflict resolution process.

The changing nature of warfare has broadened the area of the persons affected in a war. The targets now are not just soldiers or military personnel but women and children. The role of women can be found in every stage of the conflict both armed and unarmed and to understand the true nature of conflict, it is essential to understand women's participation in it. (Sjoberg, 2014). Women in a conflict have assumed three roles. Women are looked upon as the victims, the combatants and the peacekeepers.

Women as Victims: There are diverse approaches with regard to the role of women in conflict. In most cases, women are regarded as the victims of conflict. This approach has its roots in the perception of a woman as a homemaker where she is in need of protection. Her role is primarily confined to her home and her family. She is therefore seen as a major player in carrying cultures forward through the process of socialization. Culture places women in subordinate roles. The main responsibility of women is to take care of the family, maintain the purity of caste, religion. She is responsible for keeping intact the honor of the family and in turn the community. The most horrific acts during a conflict are perpetuated upon women and children.

With the increase in ethnic conflicts in the post cold war era, violence against women also increased. Women were targeted as the means of humiliating a particular ethnic group through rape, forced marriages and genocide. Women were protectors of culture. Cultural traditions are maintained and strengthened via the agency of women. Thus, what is most insulting to a community is targeting their womenfolk.

Women are considered to be the weaker section in conflict. The most in need of protection during a conflict are the women and children. They are viewed as the victims in conflict. Sexual violence has been used by many warring groups as a weapon of war. In fact in most ethnic conflicts, sexual violence and rape are used as weapons to vitiate a woman who is considered as a carrier of culture. An easy way to demean and corrupt cultures and values systems is by demeaning and assaulting the women of the group. They are the bearers of the next generation and so by violating the modesty of a woman, an indirect

attack on the racial purity of the group is launched. To dishonor a woman symbolizes dishonor to the community

Most conflicts in the modern times are cultural conflicts. Therefore, if cultures have to be targeted then the easiest available means is through their womenfolk. Rape and forced marriages are techniques of carrying out a conflict. Women in refugee camps too have to stick to culturally designed rituals. Women suffer many violations in camps as well.

Like in all other spheres of life, the experiences of women and what they have to say are undervalued in conflict. Issues of war and peace are considered to be an area of hard politics and this is considered to be an area that men are mostly involved in. Therefore women have no say in a man's world. They have nothing to contribute that can be considered of significance.

Post conflict societies also depend on women. Since women are at home looking after the family, the fall out of the conflict implies that the women have to pick up the threads after the death of the men in the family during a conflict. The burden of rebuilding conflict prone societies rests with the women.

Women as Combatants: There is also a completely different way of looking at the role of women in conflict. Women mostly are the victims of conflict but they are also in certain cases the combatants or active participants in conflict situations. Women have a mind of their own, they have their opinions. In case of cultural conflicts, women believe that they have a stake in the conflict since they are socialized to think as the savior of cultures. Due to this belief women may tend to be actively involved in conflict as ideologues, messengers, and so on. Women as combatants is a reality that cannot be ignored. (Alison, 2009).

Women are no longer only the victims of a conflict but in certain cases are the perpetrators of the conflict and in some others they are the combatants in a conflict. Women now seem to play a central role in the conflict. They are active participants in a conflict. They make their voices heard and give direction to a conflict. They work at the level of the militia as well as strategists in a conflict. They become active members of conflict because they too are committed to a political social or religious objective (Janni and Miller, 2012).

There is an alternative approach that suggests that it is unfair to assume that women think differently than men and so their involvement in the conflict resolution process is also going to be different. If war is a man's game then women to end it need to think like men. Their attitudes and behavior should reflect the attitudes and behavior of men. The very premise of women as peacemakers and men as peace breakers is false.

Women are as prone to war as men and therefore they can also be the initiators of conflict just like men. Biological differences cannot be considered as a factor negating socio politico and economic contexts in which women have to function. Women can be just as motivated by issues as men. They may be motivated by the same set of interest as men. The understanding of the role of women in conflict also therefore has to undergo a change.

Though it is true that women in a majority of cases are victims of a war, there are also instances of women as combatants in a conflict. The traditional stereotype of a woman is that she has the potential to prevent conflict and build peace but there have been instances where the women have been the perpetrators of conflict. They have abused their positions of power to aggravate the conflict. There have also been examples of women who have been involved in the hate rhetoric- probably to prove their 'masculinity'.

The surge in ethnic conflicts has broadened the scope of women as active participants. Women have now moved out of their allotted social roles and are demanding their share in the power sharing arrangements even in conflict situations. However, the dominant idea still remains of men as "warriors" and women as "beautiful souls" who need to be protected (Elshtain, 1987).

Women are there in the global process if we look for them. However, they are primarily there as wives, as prostitutes serving the men in conflict, and also as refugees (Encloe, 1990).

Women as Peacekeepers: The general perception in International Relations is that women are peacekeepers. The involvement of women should be increased to ensure peace in the world. Women are the peacekeepers and the peace builders. Their involvement as peacemakers will ensure that conflicts are resolved amicably. Since the worst impact of war is felt by women and children, and women being given the responsibility of catering to the children, the involvement of more women in the peace process will give sustainable results.

Sustainable peace is possible with the maximum involvement of women in the peace process. Bringing women to the peace table increases the chances of peace and improves the quality of negotiations and agreements reached because of the unique set of skills that women possess. The effect of war on women is very different and since their experiences in conflict are different they bring something different to the negotiating table than men (Klien, 2012).

The process of reconstruction of societies by caring for the wounded is more effective when women are involved in the peace building process. (Kray and Babcock, 2006). Special efforts have to be made by the international and local actors to ensure the growing participation of women in the peacebuilding and decision making process. (Hedstrom and Senarathna, 2015).

Having said this, it cannot be denied that women have a higher stake in the conflict resolution process. This is so because conflict snatches their security and violates their rights in the worst possible manner. Women have traditionally been looked upon as victims but there is a new thought which suggests that women can play a role as peacekeepers in the rebuilding of society. Women are being regarded as active peace builders in the society. There is a broad generalization that is being made that men start conflicts and the women are left to pick up the pieces and in this sense, women have been at the forefront of the peace process.

Women can play their role as peacekeepers. Though there is no evidence to prove that women are better peacekeepers than men, they are definitely more effective. There are several reasons for this perception to develop. It is believed that women are better listeners and are more open to the other point of view. They are good at transmitting messages of peace. Women are good at convincing others about peace. They also use more traditional means of negotiations. They are not as authoritarian as men and are also not egoistic. They are willing to keep aside their egos and go to negotiate for the second time.

Women are good at groups and are involved in the civil society. However, they are left out of the peace process especially where decision making is concerned. Women can take active part as transformative peacekeepers but the greatest hurdle they face is from the gendered power structures and the overall socio cultural environment (Manchanda, 2017). They are not permitted to be a part of decision making. However, due to the active involvement of the UN women have been encouraged to stay in the process.

The changing socio political and economic condition compels us to also re-understand our positions about the role of women in conflict as well. Compromise leading to collaboration is a much better approach than competition leading to conflict. Constructive rather than disruptive approaches are necessary. Aggression may at some point appear to be a winning strategy but it is seldom a long lasting one. Aggression produces counter aggression. Even if the conflict is managed at a particular point of time it is not resolved.

For resolution of a conflict, it is essential that all feelings of ill will are dealt with. The conflict is more about issues than the actors. Aggression focuses more on the actor rather than issues and thus in the long run it harms the resolution process. Involvement of women in peace processes will help in achieving sustainable peace and establish friendly relations in conflict. (Shepherd, 2015).

Political participation of women in the reconciliation process must be considered. Conflict resolution processes work at the formal and informal levels. Women have been involved in the informal processes through social groups and gatherings often but the need of the hour is to involve them in the formal process as well on the negotiating table. The involvement of women in the political arena would lead to an emphasis on peace and other cooperative aspects (Ticknor, 2001).

Women and the UN: On 31st October 2000, the UN Security Council adopted the Resolution 1325. This resolution addressed the issue of the contribution of women in issues of war, peace and security. The UN Security Council called for the “adoption of a gender perspective in the negotiation and implementation of peace agreements, active participation of women in the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the support of local women’s peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution” (UN Press Release SC/6942, 2000).

For the first time in 55years, the Security Council discussed the matter about women. They did emphasize upon women as victims but the main thrust of the program was on

involving women in the peacemaking process. It is essential to get women on the constitutional negotiating table.

The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted on 31st October 2000 is a landmark step in this regard. It is the first document of its kind passed by the UN Security Council that requires parties in a conflict to respect women's rights and to support their participation in the peace process and peace negotiations. It stresses upon the full and active participation of women as agents in the peace process.

Bringing women on the negotiating table, helps to fill the vacuum tremendously. It introduces and emphasizes the missing dimension of a woman's experience of war and conflict situations. Participation of the victims of war gives immediacy to the issues that tend to remain academic. It is thus, necessary for women to assume a new role that of real contributors to the global peace process and conflict resolution dialogue.

Women are now working at the grass root level to attain conflict resolution. They are building peace between localities and communities. This resolution views the inclusion of women in the conflict resolution process as a security issue rather than a rights issue.

Another landmark resolution of the UN is the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by the UN in 1995. This declaration is significant since it makes women in armed conflicts a serious area of concern (Beijing Declaration, 1995). The declaration speaks against the growing expenditure on military that creates a war like atmosphere that hampers the security of women. If women are to be given a secure environment arms control and disarmament should be the way forward.

It recognizes the importance of women to be included in the peace process especially the conflict resolution process. It emphasizes the strength of women as peace builders.

Conclusion: After a careful understanding of the role of women in conflict we find that there are divergent approaches to the same issue. The approach we use entirely depends upon our ideological position and our experience at that point of time. For the feminists, the challenge lies in involving more and more women in International Relations whereas for the traditionalist women are still the victims of war. Women are changing with the changing times. They are viewing themselves differently in the era of globalization.

Women are now very much a part of reshaping destinies. They have to get their proper share in power structures. They will definitely bring a different dimension to the conflict on the negotiating table.

If a reshaping and understanding of women in conflict is to be brought about then the core concepts of International Relations will have to be redefined. The inclusion of women in the whole process will broaden the scope of these concepts. Security will no longer be just territorial or military but it will bring within its ambit human security. There is measured progress in including women in peace building but there is still a long way to go.

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