



# Women, Gender and Ethnic Conflict

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## Abstract

*This study examines the multifaceted nature of gender and ethnic conflict, with a particular focus on the roles of women in conflict zone. Women often face various forms of gender based discrimination and violence due to the intersection of their gender and ethnic identities. The analysis delves into the systemic power imbalances, cultural narratives, and institutional practices that contribute to the marginalization of women in ethnically diverse societies. It explores how gender norms and ethnic hierarchies intersect to shape women's roles, rights, and opportunities, often leading to heightened vulnerability during conflicts. Additionally, the study examines the impact of gender and ethnic conflict on women's social, economic, and political status, as well as their access to resources and justice. The study also highlights the vital role of women as instrument of change, examining their role and participation in peace building, advocacy, and policy-making efforts aimed at addressing these issues.*

**Keywords:** Women, Gender, Ethnic Conflict, Ethnic Identities, violence, Gender Norms

## Introduction

It has been widely recognized that ethnic conflict is a gendered phenomenon that creates a differential and multifaceted impact on women. Ethnic conflict influence on women and men in different ways and acknowledge diverse survive methods. It often leads to gender specific violence and exploitation, discrimination, inequality, insecurity and vulnerability. The ethnic conflicts that emerged in Transcaucasia after the collapse of Soviet Union generated similar problems for women. It is a fact that women have been the primary victims in the ethnic conflicts in this region. Due to forced displacement, missing of their husbands or male relatives, women become the primary breadwinners in their families, and they are assuming new socio-economic and political roles and

responsibilities in family or within society. Among the civilian deaths, displaced, refugees, etc, women constitute the majority. Georgia-Abkhazia conflict is a unique case that explains the impact of ethnic conflict on women in Transcaucasia. To be aware of how gendered the consequences of an ethnic conflict, it will be essential to look at the link between gender and ethnic conflict. This study tries to analyze how gender is an important variable in relation to ethnic conflict. Ultimately, this study seeks to enhance understanding of the intricate relationship between gender and ethnic conflict and to inform more inclusive and effective strategies for conflict resolution and social justice. By centering the experiences and contributions of women, this research aims to shed light on the importance of gender-sensitive approaches in addressing ethnic conflicts and promoting equitable and peaceful societies. The study investigates into the systemic power imbalances, cultural narratives, and institutional practices that contribute to the marginalization of women in ethnically diverse societies. The study explores how gender norms and ethnic hierarchies of society intersect to shape women's roles, rights, and opportunities, often leading to heightened liability during conflicts and examines the impact of gender and ethnic conflict on women's social, economic, and political status, as well as their access to resources and justice.

### **Gender and Ethnic Conflict: Conceptual link**

The perpetuation of patriarchy and traditional stereotypes influences women's lives in conflict zone. During conflict, the female bodies become the target of attack and atrocities. Women may be attached due to their gender identity as well as ethnic identity. The impact of ethnic conflict on women can be analysed in three specific dimensions, i.e.

- Women as civilian population,
- Combatants
- And peace building and reconstruction activities.

As members of civilian population women are generally subjected to victimization such as gender specific massacre, rape, etc. Gender often described as socially constructed roles played by women and men and not to biological difference between them (Report of UN Secretary General: 1996). Gender is a primary distribution of societies where societies will determine that should be the characteristics, activities and behavior of male and female and also determines that should be the duty of the male and female. Gender is one of the few modes of differentiation that has social, cultural, political and economic implications everywhere in world (Gray Mark M, Kittilson, Miki Caul and Sandholtz: 2006). In society according to their gender division male and female are playing different roles and responsibilities in socioeconomic and political sphere.

Gender refers to a system of roles and relationships between women and men which are determined not by biology but by the social, political and economic concepts (INSTRAW: 1996). Gender specially focus on the

attitudes, behavior, roles, responsibilities and activities of individual which imposed by society on men and women according to their culture, tradition and also including how they related with each other. Gender varies different assets to different people. Gender as a set of roles and social, political and economic activities performed in society based on gender stereotypes of what how an individual may be male or female should perform, assume and experience stand on their genuine sexual characteristics. Society assumes that men perform the masculine role and women perform the feminine role. Men are the head of household and breadwinner of their family where a woman takes care of their children and other family members and other household responsibilities.

Gender interactions are logically illustrated with unequal right to admittance or unequal distribution of power between male and female in society. Gender discrimination is subsequently ubiquitous; it manipulates substantively the dynamics of ethnic conflict. Gender investigation in ethnic conflict highlights the dissimilarity among women and men in provisions of their gendered actions, their desires, their possession and power over resources and their right to decision-making procedure in during and after the conflict situations. Women, conversely, are the main victims and sufferer of violent conflict because of their low status in society and their sex. Women are particularly vulnerable to marginalization, poverty and the anguishing engendered through ethnic conflict. During conflict times the collapse of family units and community groups forced women to attainment of new roles, head of the household and became the sole provider to the family.

The contemporary society primarily based on patriarchy, in this society men are the dominant character and women are subordinate character. The families are ruled by husband or father. However, in developing countries, with a small number of women enjoy less legal, social, economic and political rights. In many countries women can only travel in the company of a male relative, or with his authorization; they are economically dependent on the male head of the family (if their husband is dead, or they are single, they become dependent on another male relative); they may be restricted to certain sectors of rewarded work, and compulsory to carry out most of the household work of the family for very small rewards. They are subject to widespread and routine domestic violence. In some societies women who suffer sexual violence or who break social taboos can be legally murdered by their male relatives in order to preserve the family honour.

An ethnic conflict or ethnic war is a war between ethnic groups often as a result of ethnic nationalism. According to Rodolfo Stavenhagen,<sup>1</sup> “ethnic conflict appears to be a permanent form of social and political struggle in the modern world. It generally involves a clash of interests or a struggle over rights: rights of land, education, the use of language, political representation, freedom of religion, the preservation of ethnic identity, and autonomy of self-determination.” In society diverse ethnic communities claim power over different issues such as autonomy, education, language, policy etc., each of these issues become the central focus of power games and manipulation by the competing ethnic groups.

Women have been the primary victims in ethnic conflicts, constituting the bulk of civilian deaths and displaced refugees. Moreover, Women have played increasingly noticeable roles in policy-making, international civil society and militaries. Ethnic conflict generally emerges because of the rise of disputes regarding significant socio-economic, political and cultural or territorial issues stuck between two or more racial groups. The countries they are having conflict over gender and ethnicity in worldwide are: Bosnia, Bangladesh, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Kosovo, Palestine, Serbia, Former Yugoslavia, Cambodia, The Balkans, Colombia, East Timor, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, and the countries of Transcaucasia and Central Asia. All of these countries are severely affected by ethnic conflict, civil war, and inter-state conflict. Due to conflict, day after day their economic condition going down and people are facing difficulties of poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> Stavenhagen, Rodolfo, (1990), *The Ethnic Question? Conflict, Development and Human Rights*, Tokyo, United Nations University Press, pp.77.



To rebuilding a stable society gender roles refer to traditional prescriptions of how women and men have to act in society. The concept ethnic conflict is completely gendered. The relationship between gender and conflict suggests that men make conflict and women build peace, men representing as a combat in conflict, where women takes the household responsibilities. Conflict is an unavoidable aspect of social life and frequently an optimistic force for change. Societies deal with conflict by denying its very existence, negotiating a mutually desirable solution, compromising, threatening verbally, attacking physically, appealing to a third party, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin argue that each war affects women in profoundly in different ways than men. Women play many roles during wartime: they are “gendered” as mothers, as soldiers, as munitions makers, as caretakers, as sex workers.<sup>3</sup> During conflict times women takes heavy boarden to survive their family and cooperate with their male relatives in the battle field. Also women play leading role in conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction.

The Conference on Gender and Violent Conflict, characterize gender through social relations of power, which means placing gender at the heart of relations of dominance and marginalization, hierarchy, oppression and subjugation.<sup>4</sup> In the environment of violent conflict, gender differences are constructed through societal practice. In fact that conflict and violence generate a particular social sorts and social factions. In conflict zone conflict is a procedure in which exact societal spaces and identities of men and women are characterized, and importances are recognized to their works and behaviors. Prevailing ideas of maleness and femaleness are erected or armored, which are genuinely entrenched and which cope the approach of realizing warfare and conflict.

Societal diversity affects gender roles and activities in conflict zones because by nature women are subordinate, submissive, and discreet. Men are dominant, tough, strong and warlike. Ethnic conflict affects men and women differently. During conflict times both men and women perform different roles, like the duties of men is to join in war and at that time women take care of their family, property, agricultural production and also became the head decision maker of their family. “If conflicts are about different needs, interests and perceptions of needs and interests, than gender identity becomes an important determinant in creating, maintaining and ending violent conflicts and wars”<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Hizkias, Assefa, (1999), *The Making of Reconciliation in : People Building Peace*, European Centre for Peace Studies, Utrecht, pp. 37-48.

<sup>3</sup> Lorentzen, Lois Ann, and Turpin, Jennifer, edit., (1998), *The Women and War Reader*, New York University Press, New York and London, pp. xi.

<sup>4</sup> GOOD Conference on *Gender and Violent Conflict*, (12-14 September 2001), Hosted by Church of Sweden, p.3.

The Essentialist gender theorist's argue that the behavior, attitudes and values of women and men are different by nature. This statement proposes that men and women accept their roles and responsibility, what they are naturally good at. Essentialist conceptualized gender characteristics and gender disparity as a static unit. All men are masculine and all women are feminine.<sup>6</sup>

According to this idea, the subject of gender and conflict creates diverse logic among men and women. During conflict times men became aggressions and perpetrators and women became sufferers, submissive eyewitness and possessor of the social dilemma of societies ragged by conflict. As a result, women's prospective in conflict preclusion is predominantly seen in stipulations of their care for enlightening and raising kids through passive outlook and creates environment on behalf of their safeguard. As Kaplan argues "women are morally superior to men because they are inherently more peaceful and globalistic than men"<sup>7</sup>. Generally by nature men are aggressive and dominant and interested to create violent environment. But women by nature subordinate, emotional and victims of violence or dominance, for which always they are more interested to peace building, cooperation. For Andrea Dworkin, men and violence are inextricably tied together: 'male aggression is rapacious. It spills over, not accidentally, but purposefully. Men develop a strong loyalty to violence. Men are distinguished from women by their commitment to do violence rather than to be victimized by it (Dworkin 1981:51).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Tatjana Siksoka and Juliet Solomon, (1999), INSTRAW, *Introducing Gender in Conflict and conflict prevention: Conceptual and Policy Implications*, pp: 2

<sup>6</sup> Skjelsbaek, Inger. (1997), *Gendered Batterfields: A Gender Analysis of peace and conflict*, International Peace Research Institute (PRLO): Oslo.

<sup>7</sup> Gisela Kaplan. (1997), 'Comparative Europe: Feminism and Nationalism: The European Case', in Lois, A. West, ed., *Feminist Nationalism*. Routledge: London.

<sup>8</sup> Dworkin, A. (1981), *Pornography. Men Possessing Women*, London: The Women's Press, p: 51



During conflict, there are a number of changes occurs, demographic and socio-economic changes, violation of human rights and bad governance (absence of rule of law and corruption), migration, displacement, unemployment, poverty, shortages and disrupted social services. At that time importance of women and gender in conflict and peace become increases. During and after conflict a woman's social, political and marginalizations are increased. Women lose their positions in society. Conflict situation creates new scope for women also she gained new skills and responsibilities. She practice in politics, takes responsibilities of decision making and leadership. Due to conflict men suffers psychological traumas, and became handicapped and lose physical strength, job, and position. Both women and men, as gender actors in specific historic, social and political locations will be respond to conflict in different ways.<sup>9</sup> Because of their gendered division in society men and women play diverse roles and activities during and after conflicts and conflict impact on them differently.

The minority status of ethnic groups varies from their culture. Due to their ethnic difference time to time discriminatory and defiling acts are committed, and rarely murders are committed. Women are the main causalities of these attacks. Minority status of an ethnic group causes the rise of ethnic conflict. Ethnic hatred created because ethnic communities hated each other and could no longer live together. These ethnic groups have different, different identity, language, traditions and culture for which they want freedom to enjoy it. Need of freedom causes the conflict between these groups. Territorial trouble that is attached to a autonomy claim. Want of separate political status also reason for the produce of conflict between ethnic groups. Clash of geopolitical interests in that region also generate conflict.

It is very much necessary to study the impact of ethnic conflict on women separately. Women are the important part of the society, a good family, a good nation and a good society only possible through women. "There are countless instances, however, in which the women, as the guardians of traditions and as emotional centers of families and communities. Women have mustered enormous strength and courage's to uphold and support their ethnic group<sup>10</sup>. Women are the preserver of the family, traditions, and culture and become the sole care-providers for the children and old members of the family. Each and every event or matter of a family depends upon women. In conflict women are the main victims. When men go to join the war, at that time women serves the head of the family. Due to conflict women lose their physical, moral and economic strength. And that time she became hopeless. All these difficulties faced by women severely hit to the existence of the family in society. It is necessary to identify the gendered impact of ethnic conflict on women and also very much necessary to find out the way to solve this problems, difficulties faced by women

<sup>9</sup> M. Korac, (2006), "Gender, Conflict and Peace-building: Lessons from the Conflict in the former Yugoslavia", *Women's Studies International Forum* (29), pp :511

<sup>10</sup> Obbo, Christine. (1980), *African Women: their struggle for economic independence*, London. Zed

The study of women, gender, and ethnic conflict reveals the profound and multifaceted impact that intersecting identities have on individuals and societies. Women, in particular, face compounded challenges due to the convergence of gender and ethnic discrimination, which exacerbates their vulnerability and marginalization in conflict scenarios. This research highlights the critical need to address these intersecting oppressions through nuanced and context-specific approaches.

