Silent Birangonas: Sexual Violence, Women's Voices and Male Conflict Narratives

https://www.e-ir.info/2017/09/19/silent-birangonas-sexual-violence-womens-voices-and-male-conflict-narratives/

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Sexual violence is a constant threat to women's security in times of peace and war alike. Often, little is known about the actual numbers of victims as only a few speak out, even when peacetime institutions make this possible. Therefore, it is not only important to research why sexual violence occurs in conflict and peace (see for example Pankhurst, 2010; Kirby, 2013) but also to understand why women's experiences of sexual violence are not articulated by the victims, and, even more, why their experiences are often left out of the accepted narratives of conflict. This is particularly important as the victims and their experiences are often forgotten in humanitarian intervention and post-conflict reconstruction. Including them allows for a more comprehensive approach to reconstruction and reconciliation, and better responses to post-conflict trauma, not only for those affected by acts of sexual violence but for the community as a whole. This essay uses a case study approach, and a feminist critical perspective, in order to provide a framework for understanding why women's voices remain absent from conflict narratives. The 1971 Bangladesh War of Liberation, in which an estimated 200,000-400,000 women were raped (Brownmiller, 175, 80), is taken as the case study due to the lack of research about women in this conflict, in an attempt to help fill this gap. In terms of structure, this essay starts by discussing methodology and theory, before the historical context is outlined, followed by the analysis. Lastly, the essay concludes that many experiences of conflict are yet to be recorded and that doing so would improve post-conflict resolutions and reconstruction.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

As a research method, the case study is a useful method to analyse the silence of victims of sexual violence and to understand why they occur in different cases as it allows for an in depth look at a situation (Burnham et al., 2004, 53) which can generate a theory that can, in turn, also be applied to other instances (Bryman, 2004, 52). For this essay, the Bangladesh Liberation War is chosen because the silence surrounding the widespread rape of women during the conflict in 1971 has clearly been demonstrated in the research of Mookherjee (2006) and Saikia, (2004). Consequently, little in depth research has been undertaken and as D'Costa has pointed out 'a silence in research about what happened to the women not only silenced the women themselves but also marginalized the whole issue of violence and mass rape in the 1971 war of Bangladesh and in world politics' (2006, 136). Thus, the gap in the literature must be filled; firstly, because women's experiences are a vital aspect to consider in intervention, post-conflict resolution and reconstruction, and, secondly, because it is an issue with a long-term impact on a society as trauma of sexual violence often has life-long and even intergenerational consequences (Jones et al, 2014, 2).

Feminism, as a theoretical approach, provides a perspective absent from mainstream IR theories, and allows for the analysis of issues that rarely find consideration elsewhere. The main assumptions shared to certain degrees by all branches of feminism, that gender and gender roles are socially constructed and that security goes beyond the state will be outlined briefly here. Feminism assumes that gender and gender roles are socially constructed, and that gender is 'a set of socially constructed characteristics describing what men and women ought to be' (Tickner and Sjober, 2010, 196), resulting in ideal type masculinities and femininities, where the masculine is usually favoured. By understanding gender as constructed, feminism is thus able to illustrate that IR itself is gendered (Roberts, 2017, 232) and that 'knowledge that claims to be universal and objective […] is, in reality, knowledge based on men's lives' (Tickner, 2017, 97). Feminism also understands security more broadly and refers to it 'in multidimensional and

Silent Birangonas: Sexual Violence, Women's Voices and Male Conflict Narratives

Written by Annika Wolke

multilevel terms – as the diminution of all forms of violence, including physical, structural, and ecological' (Tickner and Sjober, 2010, 203-204). This approach to security is a bottom up approach starting 'with the individual or the community, rather than with the state or the international system' (Tickner and Sjober, 2010, 204). As a result, sexual violence and the consequences of the experience can be articulated as a threat to security that needs to be considered during conflict, intervention and post-conflict reconstruction. Based on these theoretical assumptions, feminist researchers have been able to ask different research questions, not least about sexual violence in conflict. This research has predominantly focused on the reasons why sexual violence occurs during war, especially after the events in Bosnia and Rwanda (see for example Allan, 1996; Mullins, 2009). Pankhurst (2010), for example, discusses five common explanations, including 'frustration-aggression and men trauma', 'the absence of social constraints', 'rewarding soldiers', 'rape as a weapon of war', and 'masculinity as a root cause.' (Other authors ascribe similar causes, see for example: Seifert, 1996; Kirby 2013, Henry, 2016). However, little work has been done to explain why women only rarely speak about and articulate their experiences of sexual violence. By applying a feminist approach to narratives of war, culture and religion and nationalism within this case study of the Bangladesh War of Liberation an explanation of some of the reasons for the continued silence becomes possible.

Narratives of War

Using the feminist understanding that gender roles are constructed, it is possible to illustrate that masculinities and the military are built on a so-called protector myth. This myth derives from the 'widespread myth that men fight wars to protect 'vulnerable people' usually defined as women and children (Tickner and Sjoberg, 2010, 204), and ascribes certain behaviour and roles to men and women, both in peacetime and (especially) in conflict situations (see for example Boesten and Wilding, 2015, Boesten, 2017). Often, the myth and ascribed gender roles are challenged when victims of sexual violence become visible through the public articulation of their own experiences.. Secondly, and closely connected, the experiences of civilians and the loss of life are usually regarded as less important and traumatising, than the experience of the soldier (Seifert, 1996, 38). Thus, the accounts of civilians are not as important to narrate as soldiers' experience and 'women are dealt with in a completely different way than the fate of soldiers' (Seifert, 1996, 38). As a result, these concepts and narratives of war are one possibility that can help explain the silence of women, as they illustrate that women's roles in conflict and their experiences are deemed less valuable and not as important to articulate.

Culture and Religion

To analyse the absence of women's voices and their narratives of the experience of sexual violence, the role of culture needs to be taken into consideration. Culture is a broad term, but here it is understood mainly as a tool for building societies and, as a result, also a method for 'the emergence of new lines of inclusion and exclusion' (Pelkmans, 2007, 883). Thus, when linked with feminism, culture becomes an analytical tool that makes the patriarchy and the construction of gender roles visible. Also, religion is closely linked to this because 'culture is concerned with the meaning and significance of human activities and relations, and since this is also a central concern of religion the two tend to be closely connected' (Parekh, 2000, 146). In addition, by expressing 'collective realities' (Pelkmans, 2007, 895) religion is also influential on how sex and the family are perceived (Endsjor, 2011) and plays an important role in the construction of gender roles, and how and where sex is discussed within a society. Consequently, when 'collapsing sex and the family together into the private and domestic spheres' religion and culture also 'distance them from both the political sphere and what might be considered security priorities' (Mackenzie, 2010, 209). Male dominated culture and religion are thus powerful tools for preventing women articulating their experiences of conflict by removing them from security consideration and placing sex and the experience of sexual violence in the private sphere.

Nationalism

Similar to culture, nationalism also functions as a tool for excluding and including people and their narratives and experiences (Marx, 2002). In war and conflict, similar to gender roles, 'national identity gets more rigid and acutely defined' (Anand, 2010, 289). Furthermore, as part of the re-construction after large scale violence societies will need to incorporate the experience of the conflict into the narrative of their national identity to create a sense of unity and

Silent Birangonas: Sexual Violence, Women's Voices and Male Conflict Narratives
Written by Annika Wolke

order. These narratives can have a variety of forms, however examples of heroic men fighting for the nation are often invoked (D'Costa and Hossain, 2010, 341). As a result, not all experiences can be included, especially if they are contrary to the predominant narratives which have often 'sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope' (Enloe, 1989, 44). In particular, linking this to the above discussed state that soldiers' narratives are often more valuable than civilians, it becomes clear that the national discourse after a conflict has room only for a limited number of stories. How the national post-conflict narrative is consequently framed plays an important role in silencing or empowering women to speak out about their experiences.

Case Study: Bangladesh War of Liberation

The origins of the Bangladesh War of Liberation can be traced back to 1947 when Pakistan became independent from British colonial rule. The country had been divided into East and West Pakistan, with approximately 1500 kilometres separating them (Wheeler, 2000, 55). The two parts were significantly different in their language, culture, ethnicities, economic situation and political orientation towards neighbours (Choudhury, 1972, 242; Wheeler, 2000, 56), with Islam being the main shared characteristic (Choudhury, 1972, 244). The relationship between the two halves of the country was strained and marked in inequality, so much so that East Pakistan was 'systematically reduced to the status of a colony by a West Pakistan based ruling class' (Kaber, 1988, 97).

All these were contributing factors for the outbreak of violence lasting from March to December 1971 where 'a possible three million persons lost their lives, ten million fled across the border to India, and 200,000, 300,000 or possibly 400,000 women were raped' (Brownmiller, 1975, 80). The conflict ended only due to India's unauthorized military intervention between December 3-16, 1971 (D'Costa, 2006, 135). Throughout the nine months of conflict women experienced sexual violence perpetrated by men fighting on both sides. On the Pakistani side one motivation was the desire 'to alter an *impure* Bengali identity to a Muslim one that was imagined by the Pakistani political elite' (D'Costa, 2006, 136). Meanwhile, on the Bengali side, due to the state making 'their men freedom fighters and [giving] them power to carry out its will' as well as 'the rhetoric of war and perception of Pakistanis and Biharis as the 'enemy' […] Bengali men commit[ed] horrific acts and these often metamorphosed into sexual violence against women in order to terrorize and force whole communities into fear and submission' (Saikia, 2004, 284).

After the war, the victims of sexual violence were called *Birangonas*, meaning war heroine, with the aim to acknowledge the suffering and sacrifice of the women (D'Costa and Hossain, 2010, 340). However, despite good intentions by the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, 'rather than doing justice to the women or granting them special status, the term, a homonym of the word "prostitute", labelled them as fallen women (D'Costa, 2006, 133). At the same time, various programmes were initiated with the aim of helping these women which included measures ranging from abortion and medical care, to adoption, providing shelter, teaching working skills, as well as "marrying them off" campaigns, and initiatives to induce husbands to take back their wives (Brownmiller, 1975, 83-85). Unfortunately, these programmes were 'framed within the traditional perceptions of shame, honour and purity, instead of aiding, further marginalised women survivors' (D'Costa and Hossain, 2010, 340). As the women were not allowed to vocalise their own suffering, they were forced to accept the official narrative and a silence surrounding the experience emerged. This silence was aided further by the gendered narratives and conceptions of war, the Bangladeshi culture and nationalist discourse.

The post-conflict official narrative and consequent visibility of the victims of sexual violence made their suffering public and, within a predetermined gendered narrative imposed on them, clashed strongly with how men articulated their own role in the conflict. During the war, and in particular afterwards, in order to establish a strong national identity, a narrative of men as brave and ultimately successful freedom fighters was fostered. So much so, that 'every Bangladeshi man became a *mukti judha*, a war hero' (Saikia, 2004, 277). This constructed gender role of ultimate ideal masculinity was challenged by the *Birangonas*. Not only because their visibility, especially if pregnant was a living and, once the children were born, lasting proof of the failure to protect, but also because as 'war heroines' they were equal to men in their suffering and the role they played during the fighting. This however, does not fit into the overall gendered narrative of conflict and as a result, could not be sustained as part of the conflict narrative of the Liberation War and encouraged forgetting and silence about this chapter of the conflict. Thus, the label of 'war heroines' was not successful and forced a narrative of the experience on the victims as it made the articulation of

Silent Birangonas: Sexual Violence, Women's Voices and Male Conflict Narratives
Written by Annika Wolke

victims' experiences on their own terms near impossible. Furthermore, as a consequence of the official narrative, sexual violence was seen as a normal part of the conflict, and nothing that needed articulation beyond 'the language of loss or harm to the nation' (D'Costa and Hossain, 2010, 333) within the narrative of the conflict itself. Overall, the suffering of individual victims was downplayed, because it was not regarded as valuable or as important as that of the fighting men, and in the narrative of the conflict 'the human person became a blurry figure, too elusive for recognition' (Saikia, 2011, 489). As a result, women's experiences were understood as part of a larger story of suffering within particular gender roles.

The silencing was increased through a culture of strict gender roles and patriarchy which characterised Bangladeshi society. Men were in power and led a public life due to a culture that practiced 'rigid gender segregation, specific forms of family and kinship and a powerful ideology linking family honour to female virtue' (Kabeer, 1988, 95) and 'which denie[d] women access both to social power and autonomy over their own lives' (Kabeer, 1988, 100). This was furthered by 'the economic deprivation of women and the patrilineal nature of property relations' (Zaman, 1999, 38). One important cultural and religious tradition that upheld this strict segregation, was that Muslim women often lived in *purdah*, referring to 'strict, veiled isolation that includes separate, secluded shelter arrangements apart from men, even in their own homes' (Brownmiller, 1975, 80) which aimed to maintain their purity. As a result of these very strict gender roles and the importance of purity, as well as the belief that honour is based in female virtue, it was very difficult for victims of sexual violence to speak out about their experience. Remaining silent was so ingrained that for the young men interviewed by Mookherjee 'a raped woman who refuses to acknowledge and speak about her account of sexual violence indicates her shame and this makes her authentically raped' (2006, 440). Thus, this bizarre contradiction means voicing an experience of sexual violence took away the legitimacy of the experience in the eyes of society resulting in an enforced silence. Speaking out, as a consequence, was made nearly impossible. This is further illustrated by the fact that remaining or getting married was still the best outcome for victims (Browmiller, 175, 58) in a society where women were severely limited from participating in public life, so much so that they could not even sell products they had produced themselves (Kabeer, 1988, 102). However, the perception of *Birangonas* as 'fallen women' (D'Costa, 2006, 133) often resulted in the refusal of men to take back their wives or very high demands for dowry from potential grooms (Brownmiller, 1975, 83) due to the loss of honour and the shame of being associated with a woman who was touched by another man (Brownmiller, 1975, 79). Therefore, victims were encouraged to remain silent about the abuse they had suffered which encouraged a general acceptance of the official narrative as an abstract gendered construct removed from women's actual experience.

D'Costa (2006) shows that the silence is necessary beyond individuals trying to avoid shame. Controlling woman and their voices was very important for 'the construction of a coherent national identity, the one created through privileged voices, mainly of the national elite' (2006, 142) which in the case of Bangladesh were members of the Awami League, BNP, Jatiyo Party, the Army as well as the religious political elite (D'Costa, 2006, 142). These elites, which were characterised by an absence of women, created a national discourse that constructed victims of sexual violence as 'sacrificial victims for the nation' (D'Costa, 2006, 131). Including them in the national discourse in this way, as well as treating 'all women as similarly willing or docile enough to go through abortions or adoptions of their babies' (D'Costa, 2006, 146) in the rehabilitation centres, meant that they could not narrate their experience on their own terms. It also removed the option of 'demanding justice and from having the perpetrators punished for the war crimes they had committed' (D'Costa, 2006, 132). This was partly a result of the need to create a uniform narrative for nation-building after the conflict when 'the traumatic memories of people were buried and the chorus of liberation emerged in Bangladesh' (Saikia, 2011, 489). In this climate, the voices of women telling their stories would have disrupted the envisioned national discourse of the elites, and thus, their narratives were of less importance to remember. So much so, that Saikia struggled with finding anything that had records 'about women in the traditional sites for historical research – in archives and libraries' (2004, 277).

Conclusion

The impact of gendered narratives of war, culture, and nationalism on the silencing of women and their experiences of sexual violence has been clearly illustrated by the case of the Bangladesh War of Liberation. However, it is important to note that the factors discussed here are not exclusively responsible for inhibiting women telling their stories, but rather they are the most universally applicable. In more general terms, this case demonstrates that there

Silent Birangonas: Sexual Violence, Women's Voices and Male Conflict Narratives
Written by Annika Wolke

are experiences of conflict yet to be recorded, not only for academic value but most importantly so that female suffering and experience of conflict can be heard and that responses to trauma in post-conflict reconstruction can be improved.

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Silent Birangonas: Sexual Violence, Women's Voices and Male Conflict Narratives
Written by Annika Wolke

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Date written: January 2015