



REVIEW ESSAY

**Gender, Conflict and Nationalism**

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**Women, States and Nationalism: At home in the nation?**

Sita Ranchood-Nilsson & Mary Ann Tetreault (eds.)

Routledge, 2000

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**Gender, Peace and Conflict**

Inger Skjelsbeak & Dan Smith (eds.)

Sage, 2001

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To say that there has been a recent renewal of interest in all aspects of nationalism and ethnicity is by now almost a cliché. The long-standing concern over the nature and origins of nations, states and ethnic groups and the definition of the differences and interrelationships between them has generated a series of classic studies. These have been supplemented over the last ten years by a proliferation of material reflecting the upsurge in violent conflicts where national or ethnic identity is seen as a major causal factor. Such recent literature has taken many forms and addressed a wide range of concerns including the problems of specific geographical regions and the perspectives of particular interest groups. Amongst these have been a growing number of examinations of the ways in which women's experiences can be related to both the theoretical analysis of nationalism and ethnicity and its practical manifestations and impact.

These two edited collections bring together a fairly representative cross section of such material. Under the title *Gender, Peace and Conflict*, Inger Skjelsbeak and Dan Smith have edited a set of papers, which were originally presented at an Expert Group Meeting jointly organised by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) and the International Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). This was held in 1996 in Santo Domingo and aimed primarily to examine gender difference in approaches to conflict resolution and political decision-making. The result is actually a rather wider-ranging analysis of underlying theoretical concerns, reviews of current international initiatives to increase women's participation in conflict resolution and a broad range of illustrative case studies. Sita Ranchood Nilsson and Mary Ann Tetreault's collection, entitled, *Women, States and Nationalism: At home in the nation?*, arose initially from papers presented during two specialist panels at the International Studies Association (ISA) conference in Chicago in 1995. The contributions again address a range of general and theoretical issues and also provide a broad range of specific case study material. The two collections are, therefore, similar in a number of ways, for example, they both seek to integrate examination of underlying issues of definition and analysis of theoretical concepts with studies of women's actual experiences in a range of cross-cultural contexts. Thus, rather than analysing each separately it seems more appropriate to focus on the major threads in the debate on women and nationalism, women and ethnicity and women's roles in conflict resolution which they seek to illuminate.

A pre-requisite for any examination of nationalism and/or ethnicity, from whatever perspective, seems to be a need to try to clarify the problems of definition which bedevil

the whole area. Both books include analyses of nationalism and ethnicity and of the extent to which existing literature in this field does, or more usually does not, take account of gender as a significant variable. Whilst much of the discussion covers relatively well trodden paths, the chapter by Linda Racioppi and Katherine O'Sullivan See (*Women, State and Nationalism*) is particularly helpful in providing an overview of the insights of a number of leading writers on nationalism and then examining the explicit and implicit gender implications of their models. The overall conclusion may be rather depressing, in that some of the core texts on nationalism and ethnicity give only very limited consideration to how gender contributes to and interacts with the key issue of identity formation within the ethnic group or the nation, but it does provide a valuable base line.

Having identified similar deficiencies in much existing literature a number of writers in both collections try to redress the balance by providing their own analyses of the role of gender within the construction of concepts such as state, nation and ethnic group. For example, Errol Miller (*Gender, Peace and Conflict*) provides an interesting historical analysis of the development of patriarchy and goes on to examine the interaction of social structures based on 'geneology, gender and generation' and those which claim to prioritise 'human rights, social justice and consent as the foundation of government'. As part of this process he highlights the extent to which the under-representation of women in government cannot be separated from 'the gross inequalities in the other criteria upon which the society or nation is organised'. This link is taken up in a number of related ways by other contributors in both collections. Thus Spike Peterson (*Women, State and Nationalism*) argues that valuing male heterosexism to the detriment of other identities is central to the construction of nationalism. A somewhat similar thread is developed by Dan Smith (*Gender, Peace and Conflict*). He cautions against any simple binary categorisations, such as the conventional male/female duality, which ignore the complexity of differences within and between sub groups and the shifting nature of identity. Overall the writers provide no single clear pathway through the minefield of nationalism and identity but their insights do make clear the range of issues which have to be addressed. Interestingly although much of the writing has a feminist focus it stresses that simply adding gender to the equation may progress our understanding but must be supplemented by a wider cultural, social and economic inclusiveness.

One of the main practical effects of the marginalisation of gender in examinations of the actual manifestations of nationalism and their impact has been the fact that women's involvement and contribution either as supporters, opponents, participants or victims in national and ethnic projects have been ignored or, at best, downplayed. Even when women are included in the discussion, interpretations are frequently based on generalisations and women's real experiences or actual perspectives are ignored, regarded as the exception to a 'male norm' or treated as a footnote or an addendum. Idealised female models may be used to symbolise the nation or ethnic group but these usually have little connection with what happens to real women. This is brought out clearly by Zillah Eisenstein (*Women, State and Nationalism*), for example, when examining the nature and effects of rapes carried out as part of violent conflicts. The significance of rape in conflicts such as those in the former Yugoslavia has received considerable attention and there has been recognition that the great majority of victims are women but there has been limited practical support for women who have been traumatised or maimed. Indeed Eisenstein make the significant point that 'the sensationalized reporting of war rape has been used to create nationalist fervour on all sides more than it has been used to help the traumatized women'.

As suggested above, women frequently act as symbols and signifiers rather than actors in national and ethnic projects. This area has been examined in considerable detail by



writers such as Nira Yuval-Davis (Yuval-Davis, 1997) but these two collections reinforce the importance of gendered symbolism by providing a range of case studies across cultural and chronological boundaries. These illustrate clearly the wide variety of ways in which women are portrayed in the mythology, imagery and propaganda of national and ethnic movements, for example as mother of the nation, grieving widow, helpless maiden or mythical warrior. Almost without exception such representations idealise women but have limited connection with the reality of the lives of those actually living in the society in question. The process of setting women up as models to be defended, protected, attacked or avenged can be seen as part of the process of justifying aggression against those outside the kin-group, clan tribe or nation. This has a number of implications, for example it reinforces the view that women are objects motivating the actions of men rather than people operating as actors in their own right. It also links to the contentious stereotypes which portray men as innately aggressive, competitive and violent whilst women are passive, co-operative and nurturing. Whilst there are echoes of models which present women as inherently more peaceful than men in a few of the contributions, the simplistic nature of such gendered dichotomies is more fully explored in studies which emphasise the range and complexity of responses within and between genders such as those by Michael Salla and Errol Miller (*Gender, Peace and Conflict*) and by Spike Peterson (*Women, States and Nationalism*).

Whilst the chapters which pursue theoretical considerations and general models are interesting and frequently insightful, the material relating to specific contexts and policy developments is perhaps more original. The case studies chronicle women's experiences in a number of conflict situations ranging from Zimbabwe through Northern Ireland to central America, the Balkans and the Middle East. The diversity of the actual circumstances in each of these areas lends support to a post-modernist reading in which the specificity of context renders generalisation virtually meaningless. On the other hand the complex interplay of commonality and contrast, which accumulates across the case studies, suggests that whilst simple generalisations are inadequate a number of themes do recur in different guises in many cultural and geographical contexts. Thus, underlying the horrendous experiences of women, whether as rape victims in Bosnia or refugees in Bangladesh, seems to be a question about whether nationalism includes somewhere in its complex sub-structures an actual hostility to women. Is oppression of women implicit in the ideology or practice of nationalism, ethnicity and the development of communal identity? The examination of the roles women have played in national movements as different as Gandhi's campaigns in pre-independence India (Suresht Bald's chapter in *Women, States and Nationalism*) and the recent conflict in Northern Ireland (Mary K Meyer in *Women, States and Nationalism*) do seem to suggest that nationalism and patriarchy are frequently closely interconnected and result in marginalisation or even manipulation of women.

Such evidence also contributes to the analysis of another key question which recurs in discussions of gender and national or ethnic conflict, the issue of whether periods of upheaval provide positive opportunities for change. It has been suggested that the combination of a ferment of ideas and the practical necessities of mobilising the entire population during a period of violent struggle opens up new possibilities for political, economic and social participation by women. Initially much of the supporting evidence for such assertions came from data on women's increased involvement in the labour force and in areas of employment previously reserved for men in industrialised western societies during the two World Wars. Other analyses have argued that events in these contexts have limited transferability to women's experiences in most of the localised conflicts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. However, the contributions of a number of writers in these two collections do suggest that there can be greater flexibility and openness to change during such periods and this can mean that

women become active in areas which were previously seen as inappropriate or beyond their capability. For example, Sita Ranchood-Nilsson illustrates some of the effects of increased involvement by women in her examination of the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe (*Women, States and Nationalism*).

The other side of the argument, however, has been that any positives are more than countered by the negative impact of conflict on women. At a physical level, women are differentially the victims of many local and ethnic conflicts as the data on death rates, refugee numbers and statistics on rape victims, quoted by Inger Skjelsbeak and Dan Smith in their introductory chapter (*Gender, Peace and Conflict*), clearly illustrate. Perhaps even more significant in the long term are concerns which focus on the elements of gender conservatism within nationalism. A significant element in many conflicts is the desire of the participants to establish, re-assert or defend their distinct identity. This often involves appeals to tradition, myth, religious teaching and practice or cultural norms. The underlying message being that there was a 'golden age' in the past to which the group should try to return. Whilst attempts to re-establish what is felt to have been lost or corrupted can take many forms, significant elements frequently focus on the roles and activities of women. The claim is frequently made that part of the process of regeneration will be achieved if women concentrate on home making, bearing and bringing up children and preserving and transmitting traditional culture. As a result a whole range of cultural, economic, social and legal restrictions may be imposed. For example legal and political rights, especially in such areas as reproductive rights and family law may be curtailed. Participation in the labour market, or parts of it, may be discouraged or prohibited and social activities such as independent travel or choice of style of dress may be subject to regulation. Many of the case studies bring out the range of ways in which women's lives may be affected by such beliefs and the pressures they have been put under to conform. This is clear from contexts as varied as Kuwait (Mary Ann Tetreault and Haya Al-Mughni, in *Women, States and Nationalism*), the United States (Cheryl Logan Sparks, in *Women, States and Nationalism*) and former Yugoslavia, (Svetlana Slapsak in *Gender, Peace and Conflict*). Much of this material is particularly valuable because it emphasizes the complex ways in which ethnic conflicts may affect women, the subtle interaction of repression and liberation and the dangers of any generalization. This point is particularly well illustrated by Svetlana Slapsak's sensitive analysis of the wide range of ways in which women responded to and/or were affected by the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, a study which provides a welcome antidote to the simple black and white models found in many accounts.

If there is a wealth of discussion, not just in these collections, about the ways in which gender is neglected in theoretical analyses about women's experiences as victims of national and ethnic conflicts, there is often much less attention focused on how to address the problems. It is, therefore, refreshing to find serious attempts being made in a number of the chapters, particularly in '*Gender, Peace and Conflict*', to look at positive ways forward. The questions being examined here relate to why women should be involved in the politics and practicalities of peace and conflict and the ways in which they may be able to make valuable and original contributions to the analysis of nationalism and ethnicity and to conflict resolution. In terms of the theoretical debate two central lines of argument have been pursued. One is the fundamental claim in terms of human rights, in other words the view that women must be given an equal role in all aspects of decision making by the nation, state or ethnic group simply because they constitute approximately half of that group. This is a right regardless of how it is used and whether it has a positive or negative effect on the outcome of specific conflicts. The other, more pragmatic, argument appeals to the view that increasing women's involvement may have a beneficial impact. In other words the claim is made that women can provide insights from a different perspective and that this will inevitably be valuable for all those



seeking to understand the roots of nationalism, the range of manifestations it displays and their impact in different contexts. Similarly women's actual participation in conflict situations, whether as supporters or opponents of particular parties, as peace campaigners or as mediators, is also seen as positive in that it provides further avenues for widening debate and increasing options.

Whilst such general arguments are not difficult to sustain, the question of what difference would actually be made by increasing women's involvement, for example, in conflict resolution processes, is more difficult to predict. Many of the authors included in both collections acknowledge that we currently have only limited evidence of how women would operate as negotiators, decision makers or national leaders and what overall impact their equal participation at these levels would have. Several writers make the point that although there have been a small number of women who have occupied positions of political leadership they have usually been operating alone or as part of a very small minority in an overwhelmingly male group. Indeed Drude Dahlerup (*Gender, Peace and Conflict*) convincingly argues the position that a 'critical mass' is needed to provide the conditions in which women can be effective. She suggests that it will only be possible to evaluate the real impact of women on political decision making when they constitute a sizeable proportion of those involved of those in positions where they can affect processes, policies and decisions - a figure of about a third is postulated as necessary. The evidence from Scandinavia, which she examines, underlines the complexity both of ensuring that women are able to gain access to political leadership and also of predicting how they will operate and what sorts of changes may occur as a result. To add further to the difficulties of extrapolation, it is also evident that the social, political and economic situation in countries such as Sweden or Norway is so different from that pertaining in most areas currently experiencing violent ethnic or national conflict that comparison or prediction from existing evidence may be of little value.

Whilst several writers express the hope that greater participation by women would help to promote 'peace, security and conflict resolution', almost all are also refreshingly realistic. The theoretical models, which portray women as more peaceful, co-operative and willing to compromise, are seen as just that, theories, for which there is currently little evidence. What emerges from analysis of actual events and situations, such as those provided by Anuradha Mitra Chenoy and Achin Vanaik, Eva Irene Tuft and Svetlana Slapsak (*Gender, Peace and Conflict*) is a much more fragmentary and convoluted picture in which women may behave in very different ways depending on the actual situation. From such evidence some women in some conflicts are just as committed to national or ethnic ideals and to their prosecution through any means, however violent, as some men. At the same time others may be campaigning, sometimes alongside men, for an end to conflict. Indeed there seems to be an argument in much of this material to support the view which sees the impact of women's involvement as making qualitative rather than quantitative differences. Thus, for example, women are more likely to play a significant role in conflict resolution by widening the range of approaches to campaigning or modifying the styles of negotiation than by radically changing the ground rules.

For some feminists such conclusions may sound depressing, even defeatist. But from another perspective these two collections present a very positive message about the study of women's involvement in conflict resolution. They represent sophisticated attempts to move away from ungrounded idealism and over-simplified dichotomies to addressing the complex interaction of events, places, attitudes and gender differences. Much of the writing is from an essentially feminist position but most of the writers, whilst viewing traditional male perspectives on peace and conflict as inadequate, do not then fall into the trap of just prioritising women's views instead. For many of these scholars

and activists the marginalisation of women in much debate about nationalism, ethnicity and conflict resolution, is linked to the neglect of the concerns of a whole range of other groups from the disabled to minority religious groups and to the downplaying of specific localised, economic, cultural, religious and social variables. As a number of contributors, for example Dan Smith (*Gender, Peace and Conflict*), make clear the danger is that simple binary divisions obscure the complexity of the whole picture and also imply that identity is a relatively simple and unchanging phenomenon. There is polemic in places and unevenness in the quality of some of the argument but both books provide a real sense of 'where the issues are'. The range of styles, the uncertainty about outcomes in many areas and the fragmentary nature of evidence on some issues reflects the depth and variety of ways in which gender issues are now being examined. Paradoxically these very features make it much easier to take the questions surrounding women's under-representation seriously than would be the case with an approach based on inflated claims about how much better everything would be if women played a larger role in determining the direction of conflicts across the world.

### **Reference**

Yuval-Davis, N., 1997, *Gender and Nation*, London, Sage