

Racism, Ethnicity, and Some Initial Thoughts

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L'auteure étudie les différentes formes de discrimination faite aux femmes et assure que c'est seulement en travaillant

created by the WCAR process to put on the main agenda a discussion about discrimination against members of

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sur les différences et les diversités plutôt que de les nier que l'on peut se sortir d'une situation de conflit basée sur les divisions raciales.

The World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR), held in Durban, South Africa in August/September 2001, provided an opportunity for new social movements grappling with a range of issues involving identity, identity-based politics, diversity, and difference to propose radical and critical redefinitions of racism and related intolerance within the global context of the twenty-first century.

Among the most critical of the discussions that took place around the process of preparing for the WCAR was a review and analysis of the definition of race-based discrimination as set out in the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)—“any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, national or ethnic origin.” Tribal and indigenous people, Roma and Sinti people, and *Dalits*¹ were among the communities that used the space and environment

these groups as a part of intolerance related to racism and racial discrimination.

The women's human rights lobby for the WCAR process focused on the need to address the specific impact of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance on women. As a prelude to this, their lobby supported the ICERD Committee to expound a General Recommendation (No. 25) on Gender-Related Dimensions of Racial Discrimination which clearly states: “Racial discrimination does not always affect women and men equally or in the same way.” This opened up a space for a wide-ranging discussion on the interlocking forms of discrimination experienced by women and by other marginalized communities and led to the articulation of the concept of inter-sectionality of oppression and discrimination (see Crenshaw; Abeysekera).

In feminist circles, the discussion about intersectionality has its roots in the struggles against racism and xenophobia, against classism and Euro-centrism within women's movements across the world. In the 1960s and 1970s, pioneering black feminists and feminists of colour in

the U.S. and Canada, such as Angela Davis and bell hooks, raised the cross-cutting nature of class, sex and race in their feminist and political work and writings. In the United Kingdom and Europe socialist feminists theorized on the links between racism, sexism and class privilege in their work on women and domestic labour (see Benston; “The Political Economy of Housework”). In more recent years, as feminists have reshaped the discussions on difference and diversity to include broader issues of democracy, representation and citizenship, issues of identity and identity-based politics have taken on new meanings.

In times of social, political or economic crisis, identity and belonging, or not belonging to a particular community or group, becomes a critical factor in determining one's access to power and resources. Competition over access to scarce resources and exclusion from power structures, and/or discrimination and suppression on the basis of perceived or real difference is what often leads to the emergence of tensions between different communities and social groups. It is in such situations, as identity assumes a divisive role, that women and their role in the community become critical in terms of the collective identity of the community.

My own line of inquiry is into the issue of identity as it provides the basis for social and political conflict and the construction of the female within that discourse on identity. In this article, I will focus on ethnicity since it has been the factor that has led to barbaric and horrible manifestations of conflict in several parts of the world over the past decades, in

Peace, on Intersectionality

Rwanda, in the former Yugoslavia, in Indonesia and in Sri Lanka, to name a few of the more obvious cases.

In recent years, as competition for resources and power has grown, we have seen the emergence of social formations and political organizations that primarily define themselves on the basis of an ethnic identity. They recreate the community, they re-write its history, they re-invent traditions and customs in order to draw the community together, to reaffirm that their community is different from others and to provide symbolic and imaginary meaning to the unity that is called for to establish some degree of control over resources and power in the name of the community.

Ethnic difference is not so much based on physical appearance, since there may be several different ethnic groups within one racial category, but rather on dissimilarities of cultural and social practice. This is why people of diverse ethnic origins living within one nation state or region often adopt and highlight specific ethnic markers such as a particular form of dress or adornment, language use or food habits in order to project their identity to an outsider and observer and to affirm their membership of a certain community to others within that community.

As any social group begins to base its sense of belonging, community, and identity on factors of ethnicity and ethnic origin, a special role is ascribed to women in the construction and maintenance of this identity. Within the community, women are perceived as the biological and social reproducers of the community. Especially in situations in which a particular ethnic group is in the

minority, the focus on biological reproduction as critical to the survival of the group places great pressure on women and men to marry and bear children, as many as possible. In their role as social reproducer, women bear the responsibility of preserving and passing on the traditions and culture of the community to the next generation. Because of their reproductive capacity, women become symbolic of the community, and of its honour. This in turn enables the community, especially male elders, to prescribe appropriate behaviour and practices for women. We have seen that this often means returning to traditional forms of dress and behaviour, even in communities that had abandoned these forms in previous years. The adoption of the *hijab* (head cover) among young Muslim women can be presented as an example. A process of

women are told that since the pursuit of the community's rights and dignity is the most critical issue at that moment, they should refrain from raising issues that would divide the community from within. Thus, issues such as domestic violence, incest, and denial of equal rights to women in traditional law are perceived as divisive. Women who raise these issues are labeled as traitors or agents of alien interests. The fact that women are perceived as the bearers of the community's honour restricts their mobility and choice of partner. It also makes them vulnerable to all forms of violence and abuse at the hands of the other community. This is why the rape and sexual violation of women has been a strategy of war through the ages.

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affirmation of ethnic identity can also mean a resurrection of stereotypes of women from traditional folklore and myths; most often these women are identified by virtues of self-sacrifice and dignity in the face of adversity. Sita from the Ramayana story² is one such figure. These figures begin to re-appear in both traditional and modern guise in songs, stories, and television serials and become role models for women.

In addition, in such situations,

As the strengthening of ethnic identities perceived and proclaimed to be different from one another proceeds within a society, one soon sees a polarization of the society take place. As different sides emerge and the conflicts become more complex, some conflicts become violent. From civil strife to separatist war, conflict then results in the destruction of life and the devastation of all communities involved

in the conflict. The conflict leads to militarization of the entire society and the conflict is battled out in a number of arenas, military, social, educational, ideological and cultural, to name a few.

One of the most chilling manifestations of ethnic conflict that we have seen emerge in recent times is that of ethnic cleansing in which the brutal and physical annihilation of an entire community is carried out by armed men as well as civilian groups working in collaboration and in consonance with each other. While it is women who are always the most brutalized and victimized in such circumstances, one cannot forget that women are also cast in the role of perpetrators of violence against women of othered communities.

Women civilians and women members of armed forces on all sides of ethnic divide have been known to engage in acts of violence and abuse against members of the enemy community. The example of the women cadres of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, and especially of their suicide-squad membership has led to inquiry as to the ideological and political basis for their extremism. More recently, similar work has been done on the women cadre of the Maoist militants in Nepal. The interaction between traditional notions of womanhood and femininity and the transformations of these notions in the context of conflict have evoked great academic interest. While some inquiries have been directed at the changing roles of women in the context of conflict-related displacement, widowhood, assumption of head of household status and imposed independence, others have looked at the impact of the process of transformation of women's role from mother and wife to armed militant.³

Women who belong to communities for whom ethnicity is the defining factor in self-identification find themselves torn between different loyalties—to their community and to the community of women. They

cannot raise issues that are significant for women or that seem to call for equality within the community since this is often perceived as being contrary to the interests of the community. They cannot also easily maintain links with women outside the community because these women may more often than not belong to the other community and are, therefore, perceived as hostile. This places restraints on their ability to take collective action as women and places them at times in opposition to other women. In such a moment, unless there is critical understanding of the complexities of the situation, the divisions that are created can destroy a collectivity that has been nurtured over years of activism.

There are several extremely significant women's groups across the world that have maintained links across ethnic divides at moments of conflict and crisis and that have emerged as strong voices for peace and for an end to conflict not only in their own communities but in the world. Among these are the Women in Black initiatives in Israel/Palestine and in the former Yugoslavia. In South Asia, the North-East Network that brings together women from different ethnic and tribal communities in conflict with one another in the north-eastern region of India and networks such as Mothers and Daughters of Lanka, the Sri Lanka Women's NGO Forum and the Women's Alliance for Peace that work for peace and against the war with Sinhala. Tamil and Muslim women have demonstrated that strategic thinking and action among women can challenge existing divides and bear positive and constructive results.

Some critical issues that have emerged for us as feminist activists from examining these experiences have been:

- the need to respect women's needs to affirm their identity as a member of a community;
- the acceptance that criticism of a community that feels under

siege best comes from within that community itself, with support from the outside when requested;

- the need to continue engaging in a dialogue about denial of equality to women in tradition, custom and religious practices with women from communities in which such denial takes place most blatantly, but framed within the understanding that *all* societies contain elements that deny equality to women;
- the need to develop a feminist understanding of violence against women as a continuum of patriarchal domination, and to see the links between militarization at the state level and spousal abuse at the level of the family;
- the need to engage in a dialogue not only about discrimination but about privilege, on the understanding that women from majority/hegemonic communities need to address their own complicity in the conflict;
- the need to promote non-violent forms of conflict resolution at every level of society.

The challenge of working with and across ethnic diversity for peace, and for reconciliation, is a long and hard task. At times it seems as if there are more factors that divide us and promote hostility among us than there are factors that unite us and which provide the basis for collective action. Yet, it is clear that we can move forward in situations of conflict based on ethnic divisions only by working with differences and diversities, not denying them. The old slogan of "Unity in Diversity" now seems to smack of assimilation. We should rather affirm "Diversity for Unity" in the understanding that our differences enrich rather than diminish our activism and collective spirit. When communities are at war with one another, this is sometimes a difficult goal to pin our hopes on. Yet, in the end, I think feminism has taught

us to understand the concept of identity as a constantly shifting and multi-faceted phenomenon. Therefore we can, in the abstract, imagine ways and means of coming through such conflicts, hanging on to our integrity as women while at the same time not denying ourselves the joy of belonging to our community. It should not be an either/or scenario. How to transform this abstract idea into reality, how to maintain friendships and express affection for one another while our communities are at war with one another, how to link our understanding of what it means to be women on either side of the ethnic divide: these are the key issues on which we must focus as we move towards developing strategies and actions for sustainable and just peace in all our societies.

This article was originally written in preparation for a discussion on feminist leadership and diversity at the World Conference Against Racism held in Durban in August/September 2001.

Sunila Abeyssekera has been actively involved in human rights work and women's issues in Sri Lanka since the mid 1970s. She participated in the 1990s Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights and was an active member of the Women's Caucus at the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993. In 1998 she was the recipient of the UN Human Rights Prize for the Asia Pacific region at the special celebrations of the UN for the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Currently, she is the Executive Director of INFORM, a human rights documentation centre based in Colombo.

¹Dalits is the term used by members of so-called low and scheduled caste communities in India to identify themselves.

²Sita is the epitome of wifely devotion and chastity and is presented to all women as the "ideal" Indian woman.

³See the work of Neloufer de Mel, Kumudini Samuel, Malathy de Alwis, Radhika Coomaraswamy on Sri

Lanka, Shobha Gautam and Rita Manchanda on Nepal.

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