

Notes on Women and Ethnic Conflict, Part 1

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I've headed my remarks "Women and Ethnic Conflict, Part 1" because there is much more to be said about the issue than I can cover today. Today, we are discussing race relations in Guyana in a context of increased violence, some of it reportedly aimed at forcing the government to a political solution. Some non-violent protest is said to have the same aim. Various players have said that the costs we are paying are necessary costs to achieve this solution. (There's an echo here of George Bush's collateral damage). At the risk of being called (again) hopelessly naive and "typical of a woman" I want to ask again: on whose bodies will this solution be constructed? In all the calculations made by different sides, the bodies counted are those of the police or civilians killed by usually unknown and uncaught assailants and the bodies of those killed by the police on the grounds that they are wanted.

But a woman's perhaps naive body count would include bodies hurt in another kind of assault. Let me back up a bit to make the point. Women and children are always, everywhere, the main victims of war - for example, we are 80% of refugees worldwide. But women are also the main victims in other ways. In Guyana, African-Guyanese mothers have been the main victims of incidents where police have shot into unarmed crowds of protestors, because they have been at the forefront of street protests, and it would strike those who are willing to hear them how often they say that they are fighting because they want the means to feed and school their children: to say that they are shot because they are protesting is to agree that there is no right to even peaceful protest.

Part 2 of Women and Ethnic Conflict needs to be about these women. But there are other women in Guyana who are victims, this time of the sexual humiliation and abuse that is typical of all race/ethnic/religious conflict, and these victims are overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, Indo-Guyanese women. This is the body count I choose to talk about today. I choose it firstly, because our inability to say factually what the acts of humiliation and abuse are, without either exaggerating numbers or dismissing their importance, and our inability to collectively condemn them as unequivocally wrong, is the clearest example of how, in Guyana, race and ethnicity have come to supersede class, sex, and all other markers, including humanness.

I choose it secondly, to remind other Guyanese women that in times of peace, we have agreed, across race, that the sexual subjugation of women - no matter who the subjugator(s) - is the worst expression of the subjugation of women, and one against which we would fight. I want to begin by referring briefly to three examples outside Guyana of the sexual abuse of women as a military objective in racial/ethnic/religious conflict, in the hope that reminding ourselves of how global the phenomenon is can help us out of our normal attack/defense mode:

One: During the Rwanda war, hundreds of thousands of women were individually raped, gang-raped with objects such as sharp sticks or gun barrels, held in sexual slavery or sexually mutilated. During the trial of a former mayor for war crimes, Rwandan women testified that they had been subjected to repeated collective rape by militia in and around the commune office, including in view of the mayor.

Two: During the partition war in India, as many as 100,000 women from different communities were abducted and raped, and recently, during the surges in communal violence in Gujarat, rape and sexual violence against women were prevalent, with women telling of being gored in the

stomach, having a fetus ripped out or having sticks inserted in their vaginas.

Three: During the breakup of Yugoslavia, untold numbers of women were victims of sexual violence, and it was the horrors of Yugoslavia which gave us the description of these violations as rape not out of control, but rape under control. And in Guyana: * In the 1960s, while we know that the reporting was not comprehensive, the overwhelming evidence is of the sexual humiliation and abuse of Indo-Guyanese women and girls (there is the Wismar report, as well as recent information via Eusi Kwayana). There is also evidence of some incidents of sexual humiliation and abuse of Afro-Guyanese women .

In the 1990s, according to a Guyanese Indian Foundation Trust (GIFT) report whose numbers I have no reason to reject, 34% of the 228 victims were women, and of these, 52% were physically and sexually abused. The sexual abuse was often stripping. The fear in the testimonies, as in similar testimonies from women elsewhere, is palpable, but a few of them give us hope that we can move out of this zero sum position. * In the present upsurge of conflict, I know of at least one incident of a man putting his penis in a woman's mouth; there are uncontested reports of incidents of the stripping of women during attacks on mini-buses and robberies; and there is the chopping off of Anita Singh's hair, accompanied by a verbal racist assault.

All the incidents, except one recently reported during a robbery, were against Indo-Guyanese women. I want to intervene here to suggest that the media contribute heavily to the growing fragmentation of the society by what they choose to focus on. On March 8, 2002, 140 women were organized by Red Thread to march in Linden as part of a global strike of women held every year since 2000 in more than 60 countries. Most of the 140 Indo-Guyanese, Afro-Guyanese, Amerindian, and mixed race women in the march were not alive in the early 1960s. But as a new generation they were willing to subscribe to the following words in the handbill we distributed: [Ours] is a struggle of women of all races for women of all races. Because Wismar was a symbol of the terrible racial violence of the 1960s, we, the women, send out this call - Let us make Linden a symbol of how women can cross race divides and fight for a world which values all women's work and all women's lives!. Red Thread informed all the media about our action, but none of them found this attempt at reconciliation important enough to cover.

I want to close with a number of general points about the sexual abuse of women during violent ethnic, religious and racial conflict:

1. Across the globe, all the kinds of conflict I've mentioned - ethnic, religious, racial - result in the same atrocities, whether on a small scale or a large scale (look at the recurrences in testimonies - stripping naked, sexual taunting, objects being inserted in the vagina, women being forced to take penises in their mouths). In different degrees, all the conflicts are also about politics and about power.

2. The point about sexually abusing or humiliating a woman of the "other side" is to humiliate the men of the "other side." As Devaki Jain said, it is the idea that women are the nation and dishonouring them is dishonouring the nation. She adds that in these cases men rape or brutalise women meaning it as an insult to the honour of the men of the nation. Himani Bannerji says: we are talking about the conversion of women into metaphors for a race or country, not as real persons.

3. Women who are sexually humiliated and abused in race/ethnic/religious conflict are silenced in four ways:

- (a) through fear of reprisal;

- (b) through shame and fear: a Kosovo Albanian woman, Drita, raped by a Serb policeman and another man who waited till the policeman finished before taking his turn reported that when she asked her husband what would happen to their marriage if she was raped, he answered, "I would never keep you";

(c) through the response of men of their own "side" who, in defence of "their" women, think of the assault in the same way the rapists did - as dishonouring them or their group, the women only the objects of the dishonouring;

(d) through the response of women of the same race/ethnicity/religion as the abusers who participate in the abuse or incite it, or just as bad, fail to condemn it. In Guyana, the reasons for this silence include fear of playing into the racism of others, particularly about black men; and resentment that the ways in which Afro-Guyanese are oppressed/assaulted/humiliated are not taken into account. I feel and have felt both of these.

4. As we all know, sexual humiliation and abuse are not only carried out during race/ethnic/religious conflict by men of the other race, but daily, within the family, often by men of the same race. The point is not to downplay the first kind of abuse but to show its connections to the other kind. The woman of "the other side" who is sexually humiliated and abused is being humiliated and abused both because of her race/ethnicity/religion, and because of her sex. We do not find, in any country, examples of men stripped naked or having objects pushed into their bodies. Being female is a precondition to this kind of assault. The clearest expression of how race hate and woman hate can converge is from a self-styled revolutionary of the 1960s or 1970s who explained that he was raping black women to improve his skills to rape white women for the liberation of black people. He was raping me to practise how to rape you to liberate me. Sexual violence is targeted, but any of us may become an incidental victim of men who think in this way.

Finally: we do not have to agree on whether a cause is legitimate to agree that not all means are legitimate. I choose to single out the sexual violation of women as manifestly illegitimate and immoral except to men who are sick.

It doesn't matter if it is still on a small scale. It doesn't matter whether it is planned or unplanned. Leaders are guilty not only when they plan these assaults or incite them, but when, knowing that they will occur because they always do, they do nothing to prevent them, and when they happen, excuse them or dismiss or call them regrettable but acceptable side effects of a necessary struggle. Collateral damage. In Guyana, our refusal or inability to see the fears and oppressions of the "other side" is crippling us and will cripple us even if a "political solution" is created on top of it. And our preoccupation with the conflict between Afro- and Indo-Guyanese continues to deafen us to the demands of the Indigenous people. So far, the way we have been talking about power sharing has been dangerously limited to how the two main race groups, as represented by the two main political parties, will share power there - at the top.

Even though the efforts that women have made so far to come together across race and party in defence of women who have been abused have yielded little, we have to keep working. Most women are incapable of being as cavalier as most men about "collateral damage" - perhaps because we give birth to and raise and care for the persons who constitute this "collateral damage". This is the point that Mothers in Black has been making for two years now - that they gave birth to and raised children only to see a society accept that their lives were worth nothing. It is clear that for most Guyanese women, the strongest identity they feel is their race/ethnic identity. But maybe, if we see ourselves as women, capable of thinking freely, without party blinders, we can return to the position that we reached so easily when we were organising for Beijing - that the sexual subjugation of women can never, ever, be acceptable to us, whoever the subjugator(s), whatever the cause.