With Women’s Bodies as a Battlefield

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Abstract
The world faces a new global battlefield, upon which terrorist deeds are met with a war against terrorism, unregulated violence with regulated violence. It is said that the world will never be the same after September 11, 2001. But what has changed - and for whom? How could 9/11 be interpreted in a feminist perspective? My paper will discuss connections between global conflicts and terrorism on the one hand and violence of individual men towards women on the other. I will use Fadime Sahindel, a young Swedish/Kurdish woman who was murdered by her father in January 2002, as an illustrative case. The core concept of the paper is threatened masculinity, which will be analyzed both in terms of armed conflict and at the level of individual men killing “their” women.

Male Violence

War is a story about men, virility and violence. War creates solidarity among men, for values that are defined by men. But war is also stories about gender relations, sexualized symbols, and access to women.

The most obvious is that the terrorists are men. It was men, prepared to die, who steered the planes against the twin towers in New York. Al-Qaida and similar terrorist networks are dominated by men. And the attacks were directed against men. Usama bin Laden has stated in an interview that women and children were not targeted. "The Holy Prophet was against killing women and children”, he said.

It is men, headed by president George W Bush, who have reacted with force and who have initiated the war against terrorism. It is men who have passed the crucial resolutions, who make authoritative statements, and who dominate the media debate. With few exceptions terrorism and the war against terrorism is a performance of men, for men, against other men.

1 This paper is a revised version of a plenary lecture given at "Alva Myrdal’s Questions to Our Time", An International Conference in Uppsala, Sweden, 6-8 March 2002. The lecture has also been published in NIKK magasin, no 3, 2002: "September 11 and Male Violence".
Men are also less critical than women to attacks of retaliation. Two weeks after the attack on World Trade Center in New York, an opinion poll in Sweden showed that 48 per cent of the men interviewed and 72 per cent of the women were against attacks, which imply a risk that innocent people would be killed (Dagens Nyheter 2001-09-27).

Women are unreliable allies for those who are in favour of war. If, as Bush points out, there is only one way between civilisation and (global) terrorism, for us or against us, it becomes evident that women’s hesitation to the use of violence marginalises them even more. To speak of alternative solutions and non-violence is dubious in the polarized global order that is outlined, both in the west and within Islamistic groups.

Men’s and women’s tasks and conditions are clearly separated in war and international crisis management: men as soldiers vs women as civilians and outsiders, and at the same time symbols of the specifically national, the bearers of culture, those who should be protected. It is not only that men are those fighting, both with and against terrorist methods. The message that is spread is, above all, that when the security of a country or other basic values are threatened, men are most suited to take on the political responsibility, in common. But that women are excluded, physically, is only part of a broader paradigm, that is built on gendered concepts such as nation, war, homeland security and defense.

**Whose security?**

In a cartoon circulated on the net, bin Laden has assaulted the American president. She, America, has lost her innocence, the peace researcher Johan Galtung writes (2002). He also wonders whether this could be interpreted as three buildings being raped by jets, rammed into their wombs.

The fatherland is a woman who must be protected from assault (from men). But America was molested, humiliated, on her own soil. It has been regarded as a shame in the US that the attacks of September 11 could not be stopped. The military and economic superpower showed for a moment a sign of weakness. The man had not been capable of protecting his woman. The metaphors are based in an idealised masculinity, where the security of the nation is built with strength, autonomy and demarcation against others. The citizen as soldier-patriot-man is glorified. Women symbolize weakness, even a threat against the national order.

"Nowhere in the public realm are (these) stereotypical gender images more apparent than in the realm of international politics, where the characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity are projected onto the behavior of states whose success as international actors is measured in terms of their power capabilities and capacity for self-help and autonomy", states Ann Tickner (1992, pp 6-7).

In international relations (theory) "security has been understood largely in terms of the protection of national communities from the violence – actual or potential – of excluded ‘others’", according to Jill Steans. War "has been constructed out of hostility towards the female ‘other’” (Steans 1998, p 99)

We stand in front of a series of simple and devastating dichotomies such as strength vs weakness, autonomy vs dependence, us (good) vs them (evil). Goals are set up against means. Peace is regarded as based on balance of power and deterrence, above all through the maximizing of military strength.

The question has to be raised: How can violence and terror be used in order to build a safe world without violence and terror? Feminist critique maintains that the separation of goals and
means is one of the most devastating ideas in humanity, that security rather must be seen as the absence of war and violence, and that the security of one state cannot be built on the insecurity of others. The question is: security for whom, for which values – and, not least, how is security kept up? Only those who have something to secure or defend – material resources, territory, power, women and children, honour etc – will express the need to take to violence. In Noam Chomsky’s interpretation “defense” usually means “offense” (Chomsky 2002, p. 157).

Access to women

Usama bin Laden is said to be frightened by gender relations in the West. In an interview in 1998 he maintained that “the rulers of that region /the Gulf States/ have been deprived of their manhood. And they think the people are women. By God, Muslim women refuse to be defended by these American and Jewish prostitutes”. The West, in bin Laden’s account, is determined “to deprive us of our manhood. We believe we are men”. This interview was published in an article on “Occidentalism” in New York Review of Books and the Swedish daily newspaper Dagens Nyheter. The authors’ comment is that “to all those who see military discipline, self-sacrifice, austerity, and worship of the Leader as the highest social ideal, the power of female sexuality will be seen as a dire threat” (Margalit & Buruma 2001).

Bin Laden’s words on manhood can be interpreted so that men who permit women to exploit their sexuality and pursue their emancipation as far as in the US are not real men. Hence, the western dominance in the world is a threat to the heroic masculinity, which holds death in contempt. Or with Anne Sisson Runyan: both the terrorist and the state terrorist “are preoccupied with transcendence and (sexual) purification through death” (2002)

The standpoint of president Bush, in an address to the American people, is that the Afghan people have been brutalized, i.a. since women were not allowed to attend school. The oppression of women is used as an argument against the enemy and its culture. The worry about Afghan women “is not really motivated by concern for these women. Rather it is a device for ranking the ‘other’ men as inferior or as ‘uncivilised’”, writes Nira Yuval-Davis (2002).

Real, civilized men do not treat women that way. The US government intend to say that the Taliban are not only terrorists, but also sexists. The severe conditions of women in Afghanistan have been used to legitimize the bombings.

It is worth noting, though, that neither the US, nor any other country, have earlier on been prepared to take to violence against the Taliban regime in Kaboul to liberate women (on the contrary, they sought to cooperate with the Taliban). "In the masculinist legalese of 'national sovereignty' men in power can do what they like to their women, safe in the knowledge that no other men will intervene. Only when men attack each other is their reaction”, according to Annabelle Sreberny (2002).

In similar terms, Wendy Brown maintains that ”the state guarantees each man exclusive rights to his woman” and ”agrees not to interfere in a man’s family (de facto woman’s life) as long as he is presiding over it (de facto, her) (1995, p. 189). Politics between men are “the politics of exchanging, violating, protecting, and regulating women” (ibid, p. 188).

Women must be controlled. The Taliban are not afraid of death, as the French journalist Catherine David formulates the problem (David 2001). They are afraid of women. David characterises the extreme fanatism as a masculine neurosis, a phallocentric tragedy. The contempt for women is apparent. Mohammed Atta, probably the most well-known of the hijackers, wrote in his last message that he did not want pregnant women to say good-bye to him, nor any woman to go to his funeral or later to his grave.
Do we face a new expression of masculinity? With September 11, it becomes clear that men’s frustrations and need of control are not restricted to so-called honour killings or violence against women in the home. The aerial attacks were, among other things, directed against a gender order that is not tolerated. As Michael Kimmel writes: “Terrorism is fueled by a fatal brew of antiglobalization politics, convoluted Islamic theology, and virulent misogyny” (2002).

But these statements about the disdain for women within fundamentalist groups does not exonerate the US from responsibility in terms of gender. Global terrorism and war against terrorism remain conflicts between men - conflicts pertaining to construction of masculinity and women’s freedom of action, to what degree and how women should exist for men. It is to a large extent a hidden agenda. Under the social contract there is a sexual contract which, in the words of Carole Pateman (1988), is based on the law of male sex-right, men’s right of access to women’s bodies.

Gender is a vital but rarely discussed dimension of global and national security. One could talk about a hegemonic masculinity, which, first of all, consists of an overwhelming presence of men in armed conflicts. Women are reduced to a second-rang position in society, defined as people who need to be defended. Secondly, there is a combination of strong belief in one’s own masculine values and little respect for the Other, a dichotomous thinking that tends to restrict the political space for conflict solution to violence, war and terrorism. Thirdly, the notion hosts a substantial dispute about women’s agency, what women should do and not do. To defend someone is to deprive that person of its citizen rights, to “use” her for other purposes than her own. Those who protect define the conditions of the protected. To be defended is to be objectified - and sexualized. Defense can turn into offense. In sum, these three aspects of masculinity might be regarded as universal, or hegemonic.

Global - local

My next step, or question, in the discussion of gender and violence concerns the connection between public, global violence and so-called private violence. “The personal is international” should be read the other way around, Cynthia Enloe states. “The international is personal implies that governments depend upon certain kinds of allegedly private relationships in order to conduct their foreign affairs”. Governments “also depend on ideas about masculinized dignity and feminized sacrifice to sustain the sense of autonomous nationhood” (Enloe 1989, p. 196-197). My point of departure adhere to Enloe’s in the sense that violent relationships must be seen as running across different levels of analysis. But how, more specifically? Where would a more structural approach lead us?

There are strange parallels between public and private terror, according to Kathleen Jones (2002). She states that the mantra of the domestic violence community is to “break the cycle”. Why can’t there be a prayer for peace, not revenge, also at times of public violence, she asks. I certainly agree with her, but I would like to go a step further, not only see parallels but relationships.

As Jill Steans states: “The links between domestic violence and war go deeper than soldiers, brutalized by their experiences, beating their wives. Rather, there is an intricate relationship between the construction of masculinity and patriotism and violence. War and domestic violence are, in a symbolic but still meaningful sense, linked” (1998, p. 101).

It is easy to regard women’s conditions in Afghanistan as a question of culture, collectivity and gender – as a power structure. The US government is creating the Other (culture) as patriarchal, “evil” and “uncivilised”. But when an American man put bombs in skyscrapers in Oklahoma City in 1995 there was no talk of culture or collective responsibility. And no retaliation. Oklahoma was not bombed. The event was explained in individual terms, a mad person who ran out of social control.
In the same way, when a Swedish woman and her child(ren) are killed by a Swedish man it is not regarded as a sign of patriarchal culture or collective responsibility. It is seen as a single – and sad – action executed by a frustrated individual, (who happens to be a man). But how are the events relating to September 11 linked to a Swedish man’s killing of “his” woman?

**Fadime**

I will use the story of Fadime as an illustrative case. Fadime Sahindel was a 26-year old Kurdish woman who was murdered in Uppsala by her father on the 21st of January 2002. She had been threatened for years by her brother and father and had finally accepted to live in ”exile”. When returning to Uppsala to see her mother and sisters she was shot to death. Reactions to the so called ”honour killing” have been very strong in Sweden. People have mobilised against this crime. 5.000 visitors came to Fadime’s funeral in Uppsala.

Why the case of Fadime? I want to show how certain single events of murder could be constructed as patriarchal culture and group responsibility, contrary to Swedish legal traditions. When a Kurdish man kills his daughter it tends to be viewed, from a Swedish perspective, as a common, Kurdish, male cultural problem. But how can it be the responsibility of a whole culture, when a Kurd kills his daughter because she wants to live an emancipated life, but not when a Swedish man kills his woman and child? Why will woman killing in Sweden turn into Kurdish patriarchal culture when a Kurd kills his daughter, but not turn into Swedish patriarchal culture when a native-born Swede is the perpetrator?

I will indicate three answers or objections. First, the Fadime case could be seen as ”worse” since it was a father killing his daughter (in Swedish public rhetoric men could be regarded as bad, but fathers are always good, as Maria Eriksson’s research (2001) on the good-enough father shows). Second, there was a strong group pressure on Fadime’s father to restore the honour of the family, that is to kill his daughter, the ”whore”. In this perspective, the event is a problem of culture, of explicit male bonding. And, finally, there are more women killed in the Kurdish than in the Swedish society – it is, thus, a question of numbers. The idea is that is more patriarchal if more women are killed.

Reactions in Sweden are mainly based on the presumption that there is a difference in kind between Kurdish so called ”honour killings” and killings of Swedish women. The broadly sanctioned ideal is kept up: Sweden is a land of equality, and thus, Swedish men are better men (with some exceptions). On the other hand, when Kurdish women activists in Sweden define their claims on the Swedish state, the common denominator is universal rights, no tolerance for different treatment according to different cultural backgrounds. Simply put, there are two positions in the debate: universalism and we vs them. This dichotomy could also be stated in terms of difference in degree vs difference in kind. If Swedes in general accepted the idea of difference in degree, the ethnicity issues would come too close. It would be difficult to uphold the construction of the Other as patriarchal. Swedish culture should have to be discussed and deconstructed as masculine, too. As the Norwegian antropologist Unni Wikan observes regarding the case of Fadime: one might as well have said ”Swedish woman killed in honour killing”. But that is uncomfortable, she continues, since it would have made honour killings a part of Sweden (Wikan 2003, p 273).

It is interesting to note how members of Fadime’s family construct the event. They uphold the view that the killing of Fadime was done by a lonely, odd and lost individual, without reference to the collective. Just the way men’s violence are officially defined in a Swedish context.
Threatened masculinity

Men’s honour is based on women’s sexual behaviour. So when a woman in the Kurdish family, like Fadime, behave “unproperly”, honour killing might be the final answer. The act of the father is regarded as self-defense (Wikan 2003). Honour and other male right are values of such great importance that they have to be defended in violent ways: threat, assault and murder. Defined as self-defense, the law prescribes a light penalty for honour killings in Turkey.

Self-defense is also a notion used by George W Bush and Usama bin Laden. Both regard their “nations” and social values as being attacked by the Other. When men, at personal, collective and national levels, feel threatened a common reaction is to hit back. It is, in my view, a structural question of power and control, not of male psychology. Men have taken on the task to defend important “objects” and principles. And it seems as if the more precious the values, the greater the “right” to take to violence. Self-defense is the key word for this offensive masculine behaviour.

In these disputes between men at the individual and collective levels, here illustrated by Fadime and September 11, women are reduced to pawns in an evil game. The demand for chastity which lies behind honour killings is a severe threat to women’s integrity and agency, legitimated by explicit patriarchal ideology and religious beliefs. In the case of 9/11 women on both sides are protected, regulated, and, hence, violated of basic citizen rights, also with reference to highly estimated principles.

However, women who are killed all over the world, by their partners, without explicit reference to cultural and religious values, are still victims of men’s believed demands and rights, their threatened masculinity. It is worse with codified and regulated male violence than disguised violence, but it is still violence. Men’s right to have access to women, the questioning and denial of women’s freedom of action, is in my interpretation the link between global armed conflicts and an individual man’s killing of “his” woman.

What seems to be universal is the “culture” of male violence: that men’s frustrations, need of control and threatened masculinity is "permitted” to express itself in violence on all levels in society. This threatened masculinity is an underestimated global problem, with repercussions for women’s conditions, democracy and peace in the world.

References


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