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Gender Agency and Violence

Elina Penttinen

The question of gender and agency in the context of violence is a topic of much debate in feminist scholarship. The controversy lies in developing understanding how violence is gendered without reinforcing gender stereotypes about women as passive victims and men as aggressive perpetrators and to develop new understanding of how especially women use and enact agency in conflict and post-conflict setting. In this chapter I combine feminist security studies with feminist research on violence in order to deepen understandings of how gender and agency can be understood in the context of violence. The objective of the chapter is to focus on how violence is gendered, how gender norms and normative notions of gender inform manifestations and practices of violence in public and private spheres as well as look for possibilities of agency in the midst of violence.

My objective is to broaden the analysis of gender-based violence in feminist security studies which focuses on large scale gender based violence in conflict areas (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2014; Could and Agnich 2016) on the politics of gender-mainstreaming (Basu 2016, Pratt and Richter-Devroe 2011) by combining research on intimate partner violence (IPV) (Dobash & Dobash 1998; McKey 2005) in order to develop understanding how the large-scale and small-scale manifestations are linked and reflect hierarchic gender orders. I emphasize that in the context of feminist security studies it is

important to recognize the connectedness of violence in the practices ‘out there’ and ‘over here’ especially if the research to conflict areas is done by scholars situated in the global North.

The fact remains also that women and girls are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence and globally (Meger 2015; True 2015) and that this violence is deeply reflective of male-domination, patriarchy and traditional gender relations (York 2011). The question that arises is about the possibilities to transform these oppressive structures which naturalize women’s subordination and manifest as various levels and degrees of violence. Is agency something which emerges after the conflict or experience of violence? Are women always passive victims? Or is violent resistance and participation in violent conflicts sign of emancipation, empowerment and transformation of gender norms?

In this chapter I hope to bring emphasis to the complexity of violence as an integral element to society and culture and in so doing broaden our understanding of what gendered agency is in the context of violence. The chapter is divided into three sections. First, I discuss the challenges in defining violence in feminist terms. Second, I focus on what violence is seen to say about gender and agency. Last, I argue for the recognition of agency of targets of violence and thus broaden our understanding what agency in the context of violence and how it can be supported. Thus, my approach is informed by feminist ethics of non-violence (Butler 2009) and I seek to challenge feminist scholarship which equates violence enacted by women as transformative of the normative violence of hierarchic gender order.

Challenges in defining gender-based violence in feminist terms

How we define what is violence matters in terms of what kinds of acts and practices are understood as a violation and what kinds of practices are accepted as part of normal society. Feminist research on violence begins with the premise that the hierarchic gender order, which is based on normative heterosexuality and gender binary is in itself a practice of violence (McKey 2005; York 2011). Therefore, the heterosexual social contract which assigns women a specific gender role as mothers, nurtures and caretakers naturalized by their biology is a practice of normalized discrimination (Karhu 2016). The binary gender order is named as system of normative violence by Judith Butler (Karhu 2016, Butler 2009), a system that informs the manifestation of discrimination and diverse violent practices against women, gender and sexual minorities in a social order informed by compulsory heterosexuality. These include, for example, the pathologization of gender non-conformative persons and sexual minorities (Honkasalo 2016), medical procedures on intersex babies, and everyday practices of exclusion and discrimination against women and girls based on their role in the heteronormative social order. Violence against women in the context of normative violence of binary gender order is a practice of maintaining that order through control and intimidation. It is important to understand that women and girls are not vulnerable because of their biology, but because the hierarchic gender order assigns women and girls in a subordinate position.

What is important here to note is that the poststructuralist feminist approach (Butler 2004, 2009, Karhu 2016) maintains that the range of manifestations of violence such as war on terror, hate crimes, gender-based violence, intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual abuse are not separate or distinct forms of violence. The basis of the diverse manifestations and practices of violence is the normative violence of hierarchic gender order. Therefore violence against women in wars, for example, is not a spillover of war to the private sphere, but based on the normative violence which informs the public-private distinctions. Feminist research on violence against women in the global north emphasizes this connectedness (McKey 2005). Moreover, the practices of non-physical abuse such coercive control,

psychological abuse or threat of violence are seen as manifestations of the hierarchic gender order in feminist research (Lammers & al 2008; Meger 2015).

In this regard, the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention ISTA 2011) offers the most comprehensive definition of gender-based violence to date. First of all, it frames gender-based violence as “a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men, which have led to domination over, and discrimination against, women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women” (p.5). This refers to the challenges of women face in terms of equal rights in civil society as well direct and indirect violence towards women on the basis of their gender. What is notable here in this definition for feminist security studies is that whereas the convention recognizes the increase in gender-based violence during and after armed conflict, it does not differentiate between violence against women in conflict areas and in areas of western liberal democracies.

The convention defines violence against women as “a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.” (ISTA 2011, 8)

What is relevant here is that the Istanbul convention identifies for the first time psychological violence and threats of violence as violence against women. This challenges the conventional distinctions between what is regarded as actual violence and what is regarded as a warning sign of violence to come. In this definition the threat of violence in itself is already defined as violence. In addition non-physical practices of coercive control of women in the private sphere are to be taken seriously as large

scale physical violence against women in the public sphere such as during conflicts. The mundane and often disregarded intimate partner violence is seen here as a manifestation of gender-based violence which is often normalized as part of heterosexual relationships. Men's rights organizations have already reacted strongly against this as it is seen to threaten the power relations in heteronormative relations. Therefore, the objective is not only to react and respond to violence after the fact, but to prevent violence and transform discriminatory gender order.

The boundary between normalized and extreme forms of gender based violence may also be reiterated in feminist research which prioritizes gender based violence of scale in conflict settings as indicative of the problem (Gold and Agnich 2016) and simultaneously distances the practices gender-based violence in the context of private sphere. McKey (2005) emphasizes that this emphasis on gender based violence in the conflict areas reflects the conventional understanding according to which violence in the public sphere is regarded as unacceptable, whereas violence in the families and in the privacy of homes is left untouched or less relevant. McKey (2005: 17) argues that even though every one in four women in Britain experiences violence during their life time by men known to them, this does not raise as much public discussion as the violence perpetrated by strangers in public places does. This reflects the implicit assumptions about what is considered as unacceptable violence at societal level and what kinds of violence is seen as up to partners in adult relationships to figure out on their own. This refers to the level of responsibility for individuals who are targeted by violence. The partner who is abused in an adult relationship can be seen as responsible for ending the abuse and the relationship, whereas in the context of large scale violence the targets are not seen to have such possibilities. Or intimate partner violence can be seen as problem of personal psychopathologies such as narcissism or continuation of violence from family of origin (Elmqvist & al 2016) and thus fundamentally different from systematic violence such as rape as a strategy of war. Moreover, violence in the privacy of the home and family may be seen as violence as a normal part of

relationships (Velonis 2016). But if violence in public and private spheres are seen as manifestations of hierarchic gender order, also intimate partner violence can be seen as a large-scale manifestation of violence, albeit it takes place in the private sphere.

Feminist phenomenological research on violence (Crann and Barata 2016) challenges the prioritization of large scale physical violence over mundane practices gender based violence by building the definition of violence on the basis of how it is experienced. Thus this approach challenges the role of the academic experts as the one who gets to decide what violence is and what it means. Moreover, the feminist phenomenological approach to violence highlights how violence cannot be reduced to the violent event and does not have a clear beginning or ending for the target. A person who has been abused and violated carry the sense of being dirty or different from others long way into adulthood (Ronkainen 2008). Experience of violence is deeply transformative. It challenges core beliefs of a person in their own sense of self, goodness in others, capacity trust other people and society (Penttinen 2016). Experience based research shows that targets of violence name psychological abuse and living under fear as more harmful than the direct physical violence.

What violence says about gender?

As explained above, feminist research on violence is informed by the premise that gender based violence reflects structural gender hierarchy. However, the controversy lies in understanding what violence says about gender. How to account for the fact that women are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence during conflicts and not reiterate essentialist notions of women as passive victims?

Recently, in the discussion on gender-based violence the inclusion of how men and boys are affected by these practices enables to broaden the scope of who is affected (Kirby and Shepherd 2016). This means recognizing the how men and boys are targeted in gender specific ways during conflicts and in the context of militarism. In addition, the analysis of hazing practices and sexualized torture enables one to see how gender norms and normative notions of gender concretize in the context of male victims of gender-based violence. Thus the objective is to broaden the understanding of gender based violence as something which affects mainly women. Agency appears as something which emerges after the conflict in the form of activism (Hill & al 2003; McLeod 2015) or diverse social roles which women take in conflict resolution (Cockburn 2007).

Another approach that challenges the binary opposition between women as targets of violence and men as perpetrators, which informs much research on gender and violence, is a focus on women as active perpetrators of violence (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). Henshaw (2016) argues that critical study of men and masculinities also reinforces gender stereotypes as it focuses on the critical study of men in the context of terrorism and militarism. For example, hypermasculinist male culture and hegemonic masculinity are seen to inform men's choices to participate in violent conflicts. This is problematic as women's role in the same violent conflicts is ignored as well as underestimated. Moreover, women may have their own reasons and motivations to join which are not reflective of stereotypical gender roles. Indeed, women who participate in conflicts as perpetrators of intimate and extreme violence are seen as challenging gender norms (Hassani 2016) and having agency (Brown 2014). Yet, such arguments do not mention whether targets of violence transform gender norms.

The gender of active perpetrators and passive victims is also a source of much debate in the literature of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). The challenge has to do with acknowledging the fact that majority of IPV is still perpetrated by men towards women known to them (McKey 2005; Dobash & Dobash

2004) and recognize how women use violence against men in heterosexual relationships. In the context of research on IPV, a critical perspective to feminist research on violence is called 'gender symmetry' or family violence approach (Johnson 2006). This approach contends that violence in the context of intimate relationships is perpetrated by both genders approximately equally. Feminist research on violence has traditionally gathered data from women's shelters, court cases, reports to the police, first person accounts of survivors and from anti-violence organizations both at national and international level (Dobash & Dobash 2004; McKey 2005). The evidence shows clearly that domestic and gender-based violence is for the most part perpetrated by men and target women known to them. On the other hand, the family violence uses statistical analysis based on survey data from large generalizable samples (Velonis 2016). Both approaches accuse each other for methodological biases.

What is relevant here is how research design and methodology, in addition to the definition of violence, influence research outcomes. Johnson (2006) emphasizes that the general surveys are not apt to measure the kind of systematic coercive control, which is telling of intimate partner violence in heterosexual relationships (Anderson 2009). Instead, the surveys mainly ask questions about situational violence, such as throwing objects at a partner, or using physical force or verbal abuse during heated arguments, and show that there is a gender symmetry in the respondents who use such practices (Velonis 2016). However, such situational violence is different from the practice of what Johnson names as 'intimate terrorism', which are systematic acts of coercive control in heterosexual relationships. Intimate terrorism, refers to a practice where the target is terrorized into subjecting to the perpetrators will by systematic acts coercive control, isolation of the target, financial control, intimidation, manipulation and blame-shifting. Moreover, these practices are reflective of the normative heterosexual gender order, the targets are controlled in terms of dress and appearance, the cleanliness of the house and parenting (Alaggia 2006; York 2011). Women do retaliate against such practices of coercive control with violence, either as a means to break free, to defend themselves or

defend their children. On the other hand, women who reported using violence because they were angry reported doing so without much guilt or remorse about their actions (Velonis 2016). This does not imply, however, that there is a gender symmetry to violence in families and heterosexual relationships.

I am concerned with the feminist theorizing on violence in which there is a tendency to equate violence with having agency (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; Hassani 2016) as a means to transform gender orders. I find these arguments problematic because they do not challenge the normative violence of binary gender order. Rather these challenge the boundary between binary opposites by also including women in the category of those who can dominate and discriminate against others. It is a matter of shifting power relations within the context of normative violence, but not about transforming the implicitly violent power structure. Women who use violence challenge gender stereotypes and perhaps gender roles in relationships and institutions, but this is different from transforming the gender norms. Emphasis on violence as agency reinforces the category of the victim as passive, feminized other.

The challenge here is to rethink what agency is, what the real consequences of violence are and recognize how agency is not the binary opposite of being a victim, nor something which victims may gain after the violent conflict or relationship has ended. In practice this means destabilizing the category of the victim as ontologically passive and thus without agency. Moreover, it means redefining vulnerability as integral to being human (Butler 2004; Salamon 2010) instead of weakness. Emphasizing the use of violence enforces the prioritization of masculine subjectivity by the argument that 'also women' can enact harsh violence and thus be recognized as subjects. For the targets of systematic and patterned abuse these arguments would hardly make any sense, whether they were male or female. Therefore, the level of abstraction in theorizing gender, agency and violence can lead

to dystopian world-view in which the use of violence is seen as a positive force and a sign gendered agency without much compassion towards the feminized others who are victimized, violated and hurt in return.

In the next section I discuss further how recognizing agency in the midst of violence can enable moving beyond the binary opposition between active perpetrators and passive victims in order to pave the way for feminist ethics of nonviolence (Karhu 2016; Butler 2009). Therefore, in order to recognize gendered agency in the context of violence, it is crucial to look for also how agency is enacted into being in non-violent ways.

Possibilities for agency in the midst of gendered violence

The experience of violence is deeply humiliating and transforms the sense of self of the target and their sense of belonging to a community (Penttinen 2016). Moreover, cultures and societies that value individualism, strength, heteronormative heterosexual relationships and pursuit of happiness, reinforce also the sense of shame which is the result of experience of violence. In my own research with women who had lived in abusive relationships,¹ the reasons that made them stay longer in the relationships included having to admit to oneself and others that the abuse happened to them. As one of the respondents mentioned ‘I did not want to be one of ‘those’ women’ referring to being an ‘abused woman’ a sure sign of false judgement, being stupid enough to fall for the wrong guy, or too subjugated to leave. It is also difficult to admit that one’s partner is abusive and the shame associated with being involved with a man who uses violence. This may have resulted in rationalizing and

¹ This research project involves moderating online support groups and interviews with targets of intimate partner violence in collaboration with Women’s Line, a non-governmental organization which offers counselling and support to women who have been targets of IPV. The research is funded by University of Helsinki, Three year grants.

minimizing diverse forms of abuse as part of the normal relationship or not 'bad enough' to take action to leave and reflect the valorization of strength and responsibility at the expense of one's own safety. In this section I focus on recognition of agency during the process of seeking help, support and seeking justice for the violence. My goal is to destabilize the category of the victim as a passive, feminized other and broaden the understanding of agency in the context of gender-based violence.

Agency is understood here as both process and actions that lead to change and transformation. Therefore, agency is different from taking action which may or may not lead to change. We know agency from the outcome of the action and not on the type of action that is taken. I have argued elsewhere (Penttinen 2016) that individual the process of transforming trauma should be regarded as a sign of agency as it leads to change and transformation at a personal level. Here, I focus on the actions and processes which targets of violence have taken that lead to change of their situation.

Recognition of agency in the midst of gendered violence means first of all paying attention to how the targets of violence are able to transform their situations and seek help, support, and justice. These can be, for example, disclosing the experience of violence, making formal or informal reports, taking necessary steps to leave the relationship, and making a safety plan. Or, these can be the actions of individual peace-keeper, security agent or a police who helps a target of violence even beyond their own job description (Penttinen 2013). Therefore the difficulty of recognizing agency in the midst of violence and oppressive conditions may only be a problem of level of analysis. When the focus is on large scale violence, such as war, it is difficult to discern how individuals are able to transform their situation, heal and recover as well as support each other. Including also research data that focuses on the level of lived experience can broaden the perspective to recognize the ways in which there is already agency within contexts of violence. What does it take to really make changes once a person has been systematically violated?

Turning attention to healing and recovery as a relevant object of research in the context of feminist security studies is therefore not a practice of denying violent practices and structures, but opening towards the individual experience of violence with a strong sense of validation. This includes the validation that during violence the person who is the target is victimized and rendered helpless. At that moment they were not able to defend themselves. It is crucial to understand that such an experience results in debilitating shame and self-blame (Crann and Barata 2016) and it takes courage and strength to break from the internalization of the message which normative violence induces in the victim. Therefore, reporting violence should not be taken for granted.

As there is a universal tendency to blame the victim for sexual assault or challenge their credibility, there is a social risk for the victims of sexualized violence to make an official report the crimes done to them. According to Carretta & al (2016), women who made a formal report of rape to the police received negative social reactions. For example, in the US, approximately only 50% of rape cases were formally reported to the police in 2008 and only 24% of the reported cases lead to consequences for the perpetrator of violence. This means that making a formal report does not necessarily lead to justice, but more likely results in hostility toward the victim, adding another layer of suffering to her experience. Ronkainen (2008) calls this the culture of postmodern harshness, referring to the responsibility placed on the victim for her own victimization. McKie emphasizes (2005) that discriminatory gender order is enabled and maintained in the global north by distancing gender-based violence as something which is a symptom of non-democratic and Islamic societies. This adds a level of responsibility for the individuals in liberal democracies to be able to individually assess the risks in public and private spheres in order to ensure their own safety. If being victimized is the result of misjudgment on the part of the target, of her incapacity to assess the risks, then being violated is

indeed deeply shameful. This adds shame to the target of violence for the fact that they were not able to prevent, defend or protect themselves during the event, or they may be regarded as naïve or weak.

Carretta & al (2016) explain that the key factor that contributed to healing and social adjustment of the rape victims in their study was being believed and listened to. In opposition to formal reporting, informal disclosure of the experience of violence enabled the victims to heal. In practice, this means that their victimization was also validated and that they were seen and heard. This was helpful even if the abuse occurred in childhood and was disclosed much later in adulthood. The validation of violence means turning towards the experience of violence with compassion and without the need to fix it or change it for the person (Germer and Neff 2015). This is a practice of stripping the cultural negative connotations of victimhood and reducing the sense of shame which is a consequence of violence. Paradoxically, validation of the fact that the person was victimized in gender specific ways was key to supporting their agency and recovery. It enabled the target of violence to recognize that the harm done to them was violence, and something which was not in their control or their own fault. Letting go self-blame and shame opens also the possibility to take necessary steps to improve one's situation and make lasting changes, which are indeed signs of agency.

Crann and Barata (2016) argue that we need new ways of understanding resilience by researching how women who have been the target of violence define what resilience means to them and what actions they expressed as forms of resilience. Such forms of self-proclaimed agency were, for example, telling someone, reporting the abuse to the police who actually were able to help, making a safety plan with the help of support organization, leaving the relationship even though this meant financial difficulties and further on, participating in support groups, offering help to other victims of violence. These examples show that resilience and agency is the capacity to action which leads to changing circumstances. Moreover, it shows how agency of a person emerges in relationship with

supportive people. Agency is not something that someone either has or does not have. It can be evoked with support from others and enacted into being even at against all odds. Recognizing agency in this way enables to move beyond the conceptualization of violence as agency and transformation of gender norms.

Moreover, agency is something which can be supported in the validation of violence by formal organizations. This means also willingness of persons working in institutions such as police, judicial system, social work, development aid, health care and other agencies who come into contact with people who have been targets of violence to really recognize and validate their experience. This is a challenge because the people working in these services may be also hold onto cultural constructs which normalize certain levels of violence such as coercive control in heterosexual relationships or fear and intimidation as simply warning signs of violence and not actual violence.

In this regard, I also want to emphasize that the academic scholarship in feminist security studies can be a practice of validation of violence as well. Recognizing the agency that is already present in the midst of violence enables to open up to the complexity of lived experience and move beyond the normative violence of binary gender order. Therefore, there is a direct link between the capacity to validate how violence hurts and understanding what agency is. How we define what kinds of actions and events are regarded as unacceptable and violent is, on the other hand, linked with how targets of violence can recognize what has been done to them as unacceptable and wrong instead of being a normal part of patriarchal power relations. In this process the academic scholarship on research on violence in the context of security studies can play a crucial role. It is about being accountable to the millions of people who are affected by gender based violence on daily basis, who are close and those who are in distant locations. It is a matter of recognizing how the women, men and sexual and gender minorities already enact agency in their everyday life, how they are able to influence change

regardless of the outside conditions and often bleak circumstances. Therefore, the recognition of agency in the midst of violence can be a practice which enables to strengthen these processes for the victims of violence, instead of being a practice which enforces and reiterates the normative notions of shame and weakness associated with the experience of violence.

Concluding words

In this chapter I have shown how gender-based violence is not something which happens only ‘somewhere else’ or to ‘someone else’ but that it is part of everyday life in societies both in peaceful democracies as well as conflict areas. I have explained how conceptualizing agency in the context of violence is difficult because the debate on how violence is gendered often masks or renders invisible the agency of the persons who have been the targets of violence as well as the people in national and international organizations who in practice offer help and services to people who have been violated. Instead the focus turns to discussing what violence says about gender and can lead to problematic conclusions that see violent resistance or participation in conflicts as the salient forms of agency and thus leave the category of the passive victims intact.

My goal has been to show that even a small step taken to transform a violent situation should be recognized as agency, because it takes enormous courage to challenge the practices of violence which emerge out of hierarchic gender order. Moreover, the validation of this violence as real, harmful and something which hurts for a long time is in itself a practice which can support the process of healing and recovery and enhance personal and social transformation.

I want to emphasize that gender-based violence emerges out the normative violence of a binary gender order that informs cultures and societies globally. To create new understandings of gender and agency

in the context of feminist security studies we need to develop a meta-analysis of violence, which recognizes how gendered violence here and elsewhere are reflective of the same system of power. This approach opens the conceptualization of agency towards practices which transform normative gender orders and not only change power relations between genders. In addition we need to develop further experienced-based research, which builds the understanding of agency from the perspective of targets of violence themselves and what enacting and embodying agency is to them.

Such a multifaceted approach enables us to recognize agency in non-normative ways and in unexpected places, which can be easily overlooked if the focus remains solely on gender discrimination and gendered disempowerment, or violence as agency. Violence is a complex phenomenon which cannot be distanced to faraway places, to other families, or to other men and women who perpetrate violence, but is entangled in our everyday practices. We need to be ready to look directly at how violence is configured in our everyday lives, in the lives of people close to us, in our own neighborhoods and workplaces, and build an active practice of validation and resistance in alignment with feminist ethics of non-violence in order to transform the ontologically violent normative gender order.

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