Examining the Gendered Dimensions of Genocide

By David Yakubu

The study of genocide has often centered on political, ethnic, and ideological drivers, overlooking how gender shapes and informs every dimension of mass violence. Scholarship emphasizes that genocidal violence is not a gender-neutral phenomenon; rather, it is deeply gendered, influencing victimization, perpetration, resistance, and post-genocidal recovery. Understanding these dynamics requires a nuanced exploration of how gendered norms, cultural expectations, and intersecting identities shape experiences within genocidal contexts. This literature review will engage with the gendered dimensions of genocide, drawing upon case studies and historical examples to illuminate the complex ways in which gender intersects with broader genocidal processes.

The Systematic Use and Purpose of Sexual Violence in Genocide

Sexual violence is one of the most destructive and pervasive forms of gendered violence in genocidal campaigns. It serves specific purposes, including terrorizing communities, destabilizing social structures, and furthering ethnic cleansing. The Rwandan Genocide of 1994 is a stark example, with an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 Tutsi women subjected to rape by militias, state actors, and civilians (Denov & Saad, 2024). This widespread sexual violence was not incidental but rather a calculated effort to break down Tutsi society through trauma and social fragmentation. By using women's bodies as instruments of violence, perpetrators sought to achieve psychological devastation, undermine the communal structure, and disrupt future generational continuity.

Historical parallels can be drawn with the Bosnian Genocide (1992-1995), during which Bosniak women were systematically raped in concentration camps by Serb forces as part of a campaign to enforce ethnic cleansing and forced assimilation. By forcibly impregnating Bosniak women, perpetrators sought to biologically alter and undermine Bosniak identity (Rittner & Roth, 2012). This use of sexual violence highlights the deeply strategic and political goals embedded in gendered violence. Von Joeden-Forgey (2012) emphasizes that these acts reflect patriarchal norms that treat women as bearers of cultural identity, making their bodies battlegrounds for enacting genocidal intent.

The historical trajectory of sexual violence in genocides extends to the Armenian Genocide, where Ottoman authorities employed systemic rape, forced marriage, and abduction of Armenian women as strategies to destroy the Armenian community's social fabric and force assimilation (Suny, 2015). The intent behind such acts was multifaceted, serving not only as a means of immediate terror but as a way to culturally and biologically erase Armenian identity through assimilation into Turkish society. This demonstrates the enduring legacy of using gender-based violence to achieve long-term genocidal objectives.

Although the focus on female-targeted violence is crucial, it is equally important to acknowledge male-targeted violence, such as forced conscription, sexual abuse, and torture, which remain underexplored in most literatures. Carpenter (2006) highlights this gap by arguing that societal norms framing men solely as **"aggressors or protectors"** obscure their experiences of vulnerability. In some cases, male victims are subjected to sexual violence as a means of emasculation and domination, challenging traditional notions of masculinity and revealing the deeply gendered nature of violence.

The use of sexual violence in genocidal contexts reveals the intersection of gender, power, and intent. Historical and modern examples illustrate its strategic use in dismantling social cohesion, asserting dominance, and enacting ethnic erasure. The literature provides critical insights into patriarchal structures and genocidal aims, but it must also account for the agency and resilience of survivors, including their acts of resistance, subversion, and recovery.

Gendered Perceptions of Victimhood and Agency

Gender norms and societal expectations profoundly shape perceptions of victimhood during genocides. Women are often depicted as passive victims, primarily through narratives of sexual violence, degradation, and marginalization. While this portrayal underscores the severe trauma faced by women, it risks essentializing their experiences and obscuring their acts of resistance and agency. Jewish women during the Holocaust, for example, engaged in various acts of defiance, from smuggling food and forging documents to participating in underground networks to protect vulnerable community members (Pine, 2004). These actions demonstrate the resilience and resourcefulness of women who navigated immense danger to save lives and challenge genocidal regimes. Similarly, Rwandan women resisted systemic violence by hiding and protecting children, organizing communal aid, and engaging in acts of sabotage. Their roles as resisters highlight the duality of their experiences as both targets and agents of defiance (Straus, 2006). Recognizing these acts complicates simplistic narratives that reduce women to passive victims during genocide.

Conversely, men's victimization during genocides is shaped by their perceived roles as protectors, combatants, and potential threats to genocidal regimes. In many cases, men are disproportionately targeted for execution, forced labor, or torture to weaken community resistance. During the Armenian Genocide, Ottoman authorities systematically targeted and executed able-bodied Armenian men to dismantle their communities' capacity for resistance (Suny, 2015). This pattern of targeting men underscores the strategic logic of genocidal violence, where gendered perceptions of strength and resistance determine who becomes a target.

Carpenter (2006) critiques the neglect of male-targeted violence in existing scholarship, arguing that societal assumptions often frame men solely as aggressors or protectors, ignoring their vulnerabilities and experiences of victimization. This critique highlights a critical gap in our understanding of gendered violence during genocides and calls for a more inclusive approach that accounts for diverse experiences. Intersectional analyses provide valuable insights by highlighting

how intersecting identities—such as ethnicity, age, and social status—compound vulnerabilities. For example, Tutsi women during the Rwandan Genocide faced compounded victimization due to their ethnicity, gender, and roles as community leaders, resulting in targeted sexual violence, forced displacement, and social ostracization (von Joeden-Forgey, 2012).

Intersectional Influences and Vulnerabilities

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, offers a framework for analyzing how intersecting identities—such as gender, ethnicity, religion, age, and social status—shape individual experiences of violence during genocides. The interaction of these identities often amplifies vulnerability and creates unique risks for specific groups within targeted populations. During the Rwandan Genocide, for example, Tutsi women experienced compounded layers of victimization due to their ethnic identity, gender, and roles within their communities. They were subjected not only to sexual violence but also to forced displacement, social isolation, and targeted killings (von Joeden-Forgey, 2012). This demonstrates how the intersection of multiple identities intensifies the impact of genocidal violence and shapes individual experiences of trauma and survival.

The Bosnian Genocide similarly illustrates the influence of intersectional vulnerabilities, as rural Bosniak women faced particular risks due to geographic isolation, limited access to protection, and societal marginalization. These women were targeted for systematic rape, forced detention, and other forms of violence that exploited their vulnerability within both gendered and ethnic hierarchies (Rittner & Roth, 2012). Intersectional analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which violence operates and how power structures are reinforced during genocides.

The Armenian Genocide also highlights the intersectional nature of violence, with Armenian women targeted based on their religious, ethnic, and gendered identities. Ottoman authorities used strategies such as forced assimilation, sexual violence, and abduction to undermine the Armenian community's cohesion and cultural continuity (Suny, 2015). Intersectional approaches reveal how different layers of identity influence the forms of violence experienced by individuals, demonstrating that gender cannot be fully understood in isolation from other markers of identity.

Despite the valuable insights offered by intersectional analysis, significant gaps remain in the literature. The experiences of non-binary and LGBTQ+ individuals during genocides are often excluded from scholarly discourse, reflecting broader biases within the field. Non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals may face distinct forms of violence, including targeted humiliation, sexual abuse, and cultural erasure, yet their experiences remain understudied. Addressing these gaps requires adopting a more inclusive and nuanced approach to understanding genocidal violence. Intersectionality can deepen our comprehension of how power dynamics and societal norms intersect with gendered violence, offering a more complete picture of victimization and agency.

Women as Perpetrators: Motivations and Implications

The role of women as perpetrators of genocide disrupts traditional narratives that depict them solely as passive victims or nurturing figures. Women's participation in genocidal violence has been documented across various historical and cultural contexts, revealing a complex interplay of motivations and social pressures. In Rwanda, women within the Interahamwe militia played active roles in planning attacks, inciting violence, and participating in killings. Their motivations were diverse and often included ideological commitment, coercion, survival strategies, and social pressures to conform to the genocidal regime's goals (Adler, Loyle, & Globerman, 2007). The involvement of women in such roles challenges essentialist notions of gender and highlights the need to examine their participation through a nuanced and context-specific lens.

Similarly, the Armenian Genocide offers examples of women collaborating with Ottoman officials to facilitate forced conversions, participate in acts of violence, and enforce social norms that furthered the genocidal campaign (Suny, 2015). Women's roles as perpetrators reveal the extent to which gendered expectations and societal norms shape participation in violence. Female perpetrators often occupy roles that align with traditional gender identities, such as informants, enforcers of social order, and community organizers. This reflects both the limitations imposed by gendered structures and the agency exercised within them.

Von Joeden-Forgey (2012) argues that reducing female perpetration to a binary of empowered agents versus coerced victims fails to capture the complexity of their motivations. Women's involvement in genocidal violence must be understood as part of broader dynamics of power, coercion, and agency. The recognition of female perpetrators challenges patriarchal narratives that cast women solely as passive victims and highlights their potential to act as agents within oppressive regimes. This complicates the moral and ethical dimensions of agency and complicity, raising important questions about accountability and structural constraints.

Gendered Resistance during Genocide

Resistance to genocidal violence is deeply shaped by gender norms and societal expectations. Women have historically employed covert and indirect strategies to resist violence, using their perceived vulnerability and social roles to subvert genocidal policies. During the Holocaust, Jewish women acted as couriers, smugglers, and members of underground resistance networks, leveraging their mobility and perceived non-threat status to facilitate escapes, distribute information, and protect vulnerable community members (Pine, 2004). These acts of resistance underscore the resilience and agency of women who, despite immense risks, found ways to undermine genocidal regimes and protect their communities.

In the Rwandan Genocide, women similarly engaged in resistance by sheltering children, hiding targeted individuals, and sabotaging infrastructure used by perpetrators. These acts of defiance highlight the complex interplay between gendered norms and individual agency (Straus, 2006). Women's roles in resistance often contrast with societal expectations that frame them as

passive victims, revealing the diverse expressions of defiance and survival strategies that emerge during periods of extreme violence.

Men, by contrast, often faced societal expectations of combativeness and leadership, shaping their forms of resistance. Armed resistance by men during the Armenian Genocide and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising exemplifies the risks and challenges faced by male resisters, who were often subjected to immediate retaliation and execution (Browning, 1992). The gendered dynamics of resistance reveal both the limitations and possibilities afforded by societal norms, illustrating the diverse ways in which men and women navigate the constraints of genocidal violence.

Scholarship on resistance must expand beyond narratives of armed defiance to recognize the diverse and often overlooked strategies employed by both men and women. Gendered norms influence the forms and effectiveness of resistance, revealing the varied expressions of agency during genocidal violence. Recognizing the full spectrum of resistance strategies challenges traditional binary conceptions of gender and highlights the need for more inclusive analyses.

The Role of Gender in Post-Genocidal Recovery and Justice

The aftermath of genocidal violence is marked by complex processes of recovery, reintegration, and justice, all of which are deeply influenced by gendered norms and societal expectations. Survivors of gendered violence face unique challenges, including social stigma, psychological trauma, and limited access to resources. Women who survived sexual violence often experience ostracization, shame, and economic marginalization, while men may grapple with the loss of social status, power, and their perceived roles as protectors (Ekmekcioglu, 2013). These gendered dynamics shape the long-term impact of genocidal violence and influence the effectiveness of recovery and justice mechanisms.

Efforts to address post-genocidal recovery must adopt inclusive approaches that recognize the diverse experiences of survivors. Legal frameworks and reparative measures often prioritize certain forms of violence, such as sexual violence against women, while overlooking the experiences of male and non-binary survivors (Carpenter, 2006). Addressing these gaps requires a more gender-sensitive approach that considers the structural inequalities and individual needs of all survivors. For example, transitional justice mechanisms that incorporate gender-sensitive strategies can better address the psychological and social needs of survivors, fostering healing and reconciliation.

The literature on post-genocidal recovery demonstrates that gender is a central factor in shaping survivors' experiences and access to justice. However, significant gaps remain, particularly concerning the experiences of non-binary and LGBTQ+ survivors, who often face additional layers of discrimination and marginalization. A more inclusive and intersectional approach to recovery and justice is essential for addressing these diverse needs and fostering meaningful healing and reconciliation. Integrating gender-sensitive frameworks into legal, social,

and policy mechanisms can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term impacts of genocidal violence and the possibilities for healing and rebuilding.

In conclusion, the gendered dimensions of genocide, encompassing victimization, perpetration, resistance, and post-genocidal recovery, reveal the complex ways in which societal norms, power dynamics, and individual agency shape experiences of violence. By adopting an intersectional and inclusive approach, scholars can better capture the diverse realities of genocidal violence. Future research must address underexamined areas, including the experiences of non-binary and LGBTQ+ individuals, and strive to integrate gender-sensitive frameworks into policy and justice mechanisms to build a more comprehensive understanding of genocide and its multifaceted impacts.

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