

Gendercide: A Critical Examination of Gender and Sex-Selective Mass Killing

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Introduction

As Van Arsdale et al. note in the lead article, atrocities committed by Saddam Hussein and his regime against the Kurds during the so-called Anfal campaign can best be termed genocide. In examining this 1988 tragedy, where indeed most of the violence was directed towards military-aged men and boys, it also is clear that gender can play a significant role in targeted violence and mass killing. For some scholars, targeted violence and mass killing on the basis of gender (as a cultural term) and/or sex (as a biological term) warrants specialized classification; hence the concept gendercide has been developed, conceptualized, and theorized in describing such events. However, for some theorists, use of the term gendercide has problematic aspects and implications that do not allow for thorough analysis of the interplay of gender and sex in directed violence and mass killing. This commentary examines the development of gendercide, as a concept with strong theoretical implications, while also providing an overview of the major scholars working on the topic. A discussion of the key points of controversy regarding gendercide also is central to this commentary.

Defining Gendercide

Central to the development of the concept of gendercide is the work of Mary Anne Warren titled *Gendercide: The Implications of Sex Selection* (1985). Although Warren's work focuses on sex selection, which adversely and disproportionately affects women in society, the definitions she provides are instrumental to understanding gendercide whether males or females are targeted. She begins, "many of the moral issues raised by the prospect of sex selection may usefully be posed through an analogy between the concept of *genocide* and what I call *gendercide*, 'by analogy, gendercide would be the deliberate extermination of persons of a particular sex (or gender)' (Warren 1985:22). Essential to Warren's definition is that gendercide "is a sex-neutral

term, in that victims may be either male or female." For Warren, there is a need for sex-neutral terminology, and "the term also calls to attention the fact that gender roles have often had lethal consequences." Here, Warren highlights an important aspect of gendercide, which is that gender roles and norms can fuel directed violent, and often deadly, attacks.

Warren furthers her argument that genocide and gendercide are closely related, "if 'genocide' means the wrongfully killing or otherwise reducing the relative number of persons of a particular race, then 'gendercide' means the same thing, except that 'sex' is substituted for 'race'" (Warren 1985:24). Importantly, "like genocide, gendercide need not involve outright murder, although the paradigm examples of it do," and, "like genocide, gendercide involves actions which are morally objectionable for reasons apart from the mere fact that they may cause an alteration in the numerical ratios between certain groups." Again, Warren significantly links genocide and gendercide, with sex as the distinctive difference.

Another important scholar who has contributed to the development of gendercide as a concept is Adam Jones. Jones, and his website Gendercide Watch, has made gendercide, and issues around gender and sex-targeted violence and mass killing, more widely known. Jones theorizes that "gendercide—inclusively defined as *gender-selective mass killing*—is a frequent and often defining feature of human conflict, and perhaps human social organization, extending back to antiquity" (Jones 2002:2). Moreover, in addition to pointing out the historical/cultural nature of gendercide, Jones notes that "gender can be defined primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of biology." For him, "sex" can be substituted for "gender" in many such arguments.

As in the illustrative case of targeted mass executions of military-aged men and boys in the Anfal campaign, Jones similarly focuses his study on the targeted violence and killing of non-combatant men, whom he argues have been absent from conventional discourses around

gender-selective atrocities. According to Jones, “to ignore or dismiss mass atrocities against men because the perpetrators are generally ‘other men’ is [as] an argument—actually, a bigoted and dangerous assumption” (Jones 2002:28). Thus for Jones, although gendercide can be historically located, non-combatant males have typically not been included in examinations of gender-selective mass killing, and in order to accurately assess the role of gender in targeted violence and mass killing, male and female victims must both be recognized.

R. Charli Carpenter furthers the discourse surrounding gendercide as a concept by emphasizing the problematic aspects of the work of both Warren and Jones. For Carpenter, the conceptions and definitions of gendercide provided by Warren and Jones are limited because “the criteria for the definition is the biological sex of the dead, rather than the beliefs about gender that generate those outcomes,” and, “besides producing some conceptual inconsistency in the literature, this definition excludes sex-inclusive targeting for reasons that are gender related” (2002:231). Despite what to some are obvious differences between the two root terms—sex as biological, and gender as socially constructed—as Carpenter writes, there is a need to differentiate between gender and sex within the definition of gendercide in order to account for a more thorough analysis of their complexities -- which (when played out) may lead to targeted mass killing.

Furthermore, Carpenter asserts that “recalling the sex/gender distinction enables us to establish cases where gender is a cause and sex-specific outcomes an effect. But it also helps us distinguish between *different* gendered causes of sex-specific outcomes” (Carpenter 2002:236). Carpenter’s point reveals that problems can arise in conceptualizing gendercide when individuals do not fit conventional gender norms, such as those who may be homosexual, hermaphroditic, or transgendered. In addition to accenting the need to distinguish between the two terms in conceptualizing gendercide, Carpenter also questions the linkage of the latter term to genocide. Specifically, Carpenter illustrates that not all forms of directed gender or sex-selective violence and killing may qualify as mass killing in the same manner as

race is targeted in genocide (2002:239). Carpenter’s criticisms highlight the need for clear and accurate definitions of the elements that comprise gendercide that account for both gender and sex-selective violence and mass killing. Therefore, Carpenter’s work poses necessary questions that are essential to conceptualizing and applying the term gendercide in specific instances.

Other Forms of Gender- and Sex-Based Atrocities

In a recent study by the United Nations Secretary General, instances of femicide are reported to be one of the most pressing areas of concern as humanitarians work toward ending violence against women (United Nations 2006:48, 79). According to feminist scholars, “femicide is the misogynous killing of women by men,” and is a form of sexual violence (Radford 1992:3). Femicide is also thought of as “the killing of females because they are females,” and more specifically, “femicide [being] the murder of women by men motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women” (Russell 2001:13, 14). It is important to note what might appear obvious, i.e., that research on femicide is restricted to the directed violence and mass killing solely of women. Another significant term is gynocide, which can be defined as “intentional measures of effecting the destruction of women is a specific population” (Russell 1992:21). Although useful for discussions of violence against women, the limitations of the terms femicide and gynocide – as the targeting of males also is considered – suggests the need for still other expansions in definition-oriented research, as suggested by Jones.

Society and Power in Considerations of Gendercide

An important corollary of gendercide, as many instances of gender- and sex-based mass killing are considered, is targeted sexual violence (such as rape and forced impregnation). A comprehensive examination of social relations and conceptions of power that have an egregious and lasting effect on society, and more specifically shape the forms of violence experienced by both females and males, is crucial. Importantly, in her work on sexual violence during genocide,

Catherine MacKinnon suggests that “sexual subordination, outside of war and genocide, also contributes to creating women as a subordinated group under conditions of sex inequality” (MacKinnon 2006:226). Subordination and inequality also have important implications for gendercide, thus “a theory of gendercide cannot [address] gender in isolation, but must highlight the gender relations that also exist[.] A main point is the way in which gender conflict contributes to other forms of conflicts, and is present within them” (Holter 2002:63).

In order to better comprehend gender- and sex-selective mass killings, it is essential to examine the cultural and social underpinnings within societies that speak to the larger and more extensive power dynamics that lead to gender- and sex-specific violence. Carpenter clarifies this point in her discussion of the need to distinguish between gender and sex in gendercide, stressing that “gender can operate indirectly, as a cultural schema that channels men and women into separate spaces where they are at risk for different types of harm; or directly, as a conscious ideology of actors who may use sex as a proxy variable for socially constructed attributes” (2002:236). Without a thorough analysis of cultural norms and social relations regarding sex and gender, theoretical understanding will continue to be hampered. ○

Conclusion

This commentary has provided an overview of the term gendercide, both developmentally and conceptually. The work of several of the most prominent scholars and theorists working on the topic has been highlighted. Two other forms of gender- and sex-based atrocities, femicide and gynocide, also have been noted. The need for careful social analysis of these terms – as concepts and ultimately theories are further developed – is of particular importance. The ominous 1988 Anfal campaign against military-aged Kurdish men and boys illustrates how sensitivity to circumstances involving both males and females must be maintained. As the authors of the lead article suggest, and as this commentary affirms, the critical consideration of genocide must be complemented by a critical consideration of gendercide.

Notes

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