Narratives of Violence and Gendered Experience: Notes on Methodology

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This paper draws on the methodology of my doctoral research that looked into the gendered aspects of the conflict in southeast Bangladesh and explored the gender specific implications of violence as well as examining the gendered embodiments of the *Jumma* nationalist project. In this paper, I endeavour to introduce my analytical approach that challenges the idea of objectivity, stresses the need for the researcher's engagement with the research topic and participants, and asserts that the researcher's subjective position has facilitated the research process, allowing me to access data on gendered violence in the conflict zone. I argue further that for an understanding of gendered aspects of armed conflict and indigenous women's subjectivity in gendered violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, we need to employ knowledge of both radical and deconstructive feminism. In doing so, I stress on the one hand the need for a continuous redrawing and redesigning of methodological approaches in the social sciences; and on the other I emphasise the need for a social science research 'with a heart and emotions as well as a mind' (Stanley, 2003:4).

Key words: gender relation - gendered violence - feminist epistemology - objectivity - analytical approach - reflexivity

Introduction

In all research, be it empirical or theoretical, methodology and method are deemed to be significant; and for empirical research they are probably more significant than anything else. My research is purely an empirical study of gender and armed conflict. It examines the gendered aspects of the armed conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and explores gender (power) relations between women and men within the nationalist project and the gender specific implications of militarised violence in the conflict prone CHT.[13] In this paper I will seek to discuss some methodological issues relevant to my research. Analysing gender relations in conflict zones has been a long and difficult undertaking, and the methodology and method of my research are somewhat complex. As will be discussed below, there is a considerable number of ethical issues involved in my research as it combines ethnographic research with qualitative interviews with women and men, survivors and actors, and mediators and perpetrators in the conflict prone CHT.

The discussion in this paper is influenced by feminist epistemology[14] and feminist ideas on methodological matters- within the discipline of sociology as well as feminist thinking more broadly- that have contributed greatly to the production of "good knowledge" (to use Stanley, 2003: 4) within social science. I begin by engaging with the recurrent debates on the issue of objectivity in feminist research. Then I move on to elaborate my own standpoint, positionality and analytical approach and draw on the suggestion that feminist research is based on the recognition that knowledge is situated (Harding, 1987; Haraway, 1998; Stanley 1990, 2003), and that knowledge emanating from one standpoint cannot be "finished" (Collins, 1991; Stanley, 1997). I argue that my subjective (social as well as political) position in the research and my (emotional and political) engagement with the topic and participants have, essentially, informed and facilitated the research process, allowing me to produce new and good knowledge on the subject.

Finally, I seek to provide a brief explanation as to why I have drawn on radical and deconstructive ideas in the same research, and whether feminist research should combine different approaches to feminism. I argue that while we should recognise the fundamental differences between deconstructive and radical feminism for the sake of philosophical clarity, we

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[13] My research looks at both women's and men's experience in conflict and violence, and thus it is not merely a narrative of "violence against women". As 'neither in talk, research, analysis, policy, nor programming can gender be equated solely with women, nor solely with women's activities, beliefs, goals, or needs' (Indra, 1999, :2), I seek to narrate the gendered experiences of indigenous women and men, and not only that of women.

[14] According to Sandra Harding, 'an *epistemology* is a theory of knowledge which answers questions about who can be a "knower" (for example can women be knowers?); what tests beliefs must pass in order to be legitimated as knowledge (that only tests against men's experience and observation); what kinds of things can knowledge characterize epistemologies as strategies for justifying beliefs such as appeals to the authority of God, of custom and tradition, of "common sense", of observation, of reason, and of masculine authority are examples of familiar justificatory strategies' (1987:3). There are important connections between epistemologies, methodologies and research methods, even though epistemology may not be directly related to research method. Epistemological issues have crucial implications for how general theoretical structures can and should be applied in particular disciplines,. and for the choice of methods of research. *Feminist epistemology* refers to alternative theories that legitimate women as "knowers" and/or "agents of knowledge". Over the last 35 years feminist epistemologists have invested much passion in understanding the ways that social science investigates social lives, and have "raised fundamental challenges" to the ways in which social sciences have analysed the lives of women and men in society. Issues about method, methodology, and epistemology have been interwoven with discussions of how best to correct 'the partial, imagined and distorted accounts'(Harding 1987:1).

need to consider different (feminist) sources of knowledge for understanding and analysing data in the same research. I conclude by arguing that this approach can substantially enhance the production of good and new knowledge.

Objectivity, Feminist Epistemology and My Analytical Approach

Social scientists have invested much time in disputing the issue of objectivity in social science research. Scholars- from conventional methodologists to feminist epistemologists- have obscured the issue of objectivity in various ways for over three decades. Some have argued for "good enough" objectivity (Jenkins, 2002), while others have argued for 'situated objectivity' (Williams, 2005) or for "corroborative objectivity" (May and Perry, 2011). Feminist epistemologists themselves have argued much about the issue of objectivity by introducing ideas such as "strong objectivity" (Harding, 1993) and "feminist fractured foundations" (Stanley and Wise, 1993). However, one major development is the jettisoning of the positivist notion of objectivity in research, a development which has challenged the notions of a "God's eye view" (Stanley, 2003:1) and of "truth production".

Whilst conventional methodologies in social science suggest that our research should produce unbiased, indistinct and impartial knowledge, and that the knowledge-claims produced from our research should be based on fact, accuracy and truth, feminist methodologists have argued that there is no research which can be considered unbiased and/or complete in terms of accuracy and fact (see for example, Bhopal, 2012; Letherby, 2003, 2012; Stanley, 2003). Research is an embodied process and is an interrogation with the personal. It is, thus, essential to recognise that our research is fully a part of the social life it investigates and should produce knowledge on the subject which encourages its practitioners 'to act with as much care and probity in our research and writing as in the rest of our lives' (Stanley, 2003: 1).

My research is particularly based on this assumption and it aims to offer an analysis of the armed conflict in the CHT that would encourage its practitioners to act with care and probity in the field. I do not intend to produce any "ultimate truth" about the conflict. Instead, I situate myself in the (subjective) position of a feminist researcher whose aim is to interrogate the gender politics in the CHT in order to make an impact on the lives of indigenous women and men who endure militarised violence and state repression as "Others". I appreciate that feminist research project should combine analytical, ethical and political dimensions. Feminist thinking not only includes analytical, ethical and political dimensions, but 'it combines them: it refuses to separate and allocate them to separate spheres' (ibid:3). This is one of the sources of 'trouble' in the relationship of academic feminists with mainstream academia, which historically has promoted the view that science involves a strict objectivity.

Letherby (2012) argues that in order to produce 'good knowledge' we need to consider 'theorised subjectivity' rather than objectivity. The concept of 'theorised subjectivity' recognises that 'while there is a "reality" "out there", the political complexities of subjectivities, and their inevitable involvement in the research process make a final and definite "objective" statement impracticable' (ibid:1, also see 2003:14)). This suggestion is particularly important for my research. In the "reality" of occupied CHT and gender politics in Bangladesh, I situated myself in the position of a feminist researcher, whose work does not necessarily produce an "objective statement" or "impartial knowledge" on the subject, but it rather offers a "gendered analysis" of the conflict that reveals the underpinning [gender] power relations in nationalist discourse that seemingly generate and sustain unequal [power] relations between women and men within the nation building process of the *Jumma*, between [powerful] Bengali men and [ethnic] *Jumma* men,

and between the state and its "Others". I look at the conflict through a gendered lens and argue that the armed conflict in the CHT is a gendered construction and the transformations of this conflict, i.e. the militarised and communal violence generated from this conflict, have gender specific implications.

The analysis that I present in my research is not merely a narration of what my participants told me. Instead it is a critical analysis of nationalist discourse and gender politics in Bangladesh, and is informed by: feminist theory[15] and previous feminist research on the subject; work on gender relations in nationalist movements, militarization and wars in the sub-continent and elsewhere; my personal experience of gender-specific violence in the *plains* of Bangladesh as well as in the conflict zone during my fieldwork. My position in this research is not only as a listener or a narrator, who listens to the stories of participants and understands meanings in their given form, but as one who analyses them and gives meanings to the narratives in the context of feminist approaches to war and violence. I consider Ruthelen Josselson's idea (2004: 3-5) of "decoding process" appropriate for my research. Josselson, in her discussion of the practice of narrative research, stresses that the meanings produced by the narrators/analysts of testimonies and interviews are subject to the type of analysis used. According to Josselson, there are two different types of analysis in narrative research: "hermeneutics of restoration" and "hermeneutics of demystification". The former suggests a careful listening to the stories, whereas the latter emphasises the "decoding [of] meaning". My interest lies with the latter because 'it aims to constructively achieve a complete understanding of the stories' (Squire, 2008: 41). I do not simply tell the stories of my research participants. It is my intention to define or give meaning to the stories and experiences of my research participants, who spoke in colloquial language and might have not said what they meant to say. Squire notes that adopting a "hermeneutics of demystification" or "decoding meaning" approach in analysing the stories of people's lives 'is part of experience-centred narrative research'(2008: 41) and it may enhance the mode of praxis-based research.

The theoretical tool for my analysis of the stories of my participants is intersectionality, and I consider Anthias and Yuval Davis's (1989) suggestion that gender, class, "race", ethnicity, culture and nationality are interwoven and they construct each other (also see Yuval-Davis, 2006). I have seen gender as a mode of discourse, as Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) have proposed. That is, it relates to groups of subjects whose social roles are defined by their sexual or biological difference as opposed to their economic positions or their membership of ethnic and "racial" collectivities. As already discussed in an earlier writing (in the Year Book III, 2009)[16], an intersectional approach allows us to trace the multiple oppression and powerlessness of people who are members of [other] groups and collectivities, who are different from the dominant group/nation of the state. The theory of intersectionality reflects the minority/marginalised culture rather than the culture of the majority (Knudsen, 2005: 62). It points towards the critical view of becoming "the other" in a normative setting within a general [mainstream/dominant] culture. Intersectionality has been a tool for viewing how cultural and social categories intertwine. It enables us to grasp the relationships between socio-cultural categories and identities. As Knudsen notes, it refers to an approach that is 'more than gender research, more

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[15] Primarily deconstructive and post-modernist, but also drawing on radical feminist approach to gender and sexuality. The applications of these theories vary on the context and I have tried to relate and connect different approaches to analysing the gendered aspects of violence.

[16] An article on my theoretical take, entitled 'Framing Nation-State and Gender', was published in the *Year Book III: PhD Research in Progress* (2009), ed. Derek Robbins, 66-82. London: School of Social Sciences, Media and Cultural Studies, University of East London.

than studying differences between women and men, and more than diversities within women's groups and men's groups' (2005: 61)[17].

I, hence, seek to analyse the discourse of gender power in connection with the politics of identity, i.e. simultaneously exploring the links between ethnicity, sexuality, class and nationality. I show that whilst indigenous men are subjects of "otherness" in relation to ethnicity and class, indigenous women are subjects of "multiple oppression" because of their cultural, ethnic and class identities - as interwoven with their gender identities. They are the "marginalized of the marginalized", "oppressed of the oppressed" and dominated by all - the state, the military, the powerful men and women [of the Bengali community] and by the male members of their own community. Within the matrix of power and domination in Bangladesh, indigenous women have been historically marginalized and silenced. I seek to reveal their less-heard stories in my research.

Nevertheless, the analysis which my research offers may be relative and incomplete because knowledge is relative and should be contextualised based on this notion. The epistemological framework by which my work is informed recognises that knowledge is influenced by the standpoint, positionality and the situated self of the researchers – including their subjectivities and their correlations – as much as those of the research subjects (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002: 2). The idea of an absolute, pure and complete knowledge is, indeed, indistinct. Letherby correctly points out that any research that had been undertaken by a different researcher, or by the same researcher at a different point in time, would produce different findings and the results would vary depending on the time, space and method of the research. She notes, in her methodology on auto/biographical research on infertility, that some of her respondents' experiences suggested that a repetition of her research on pregnancy and involuntary childlessness would 'uncover flavours of difference rather than result in distinctively different claims' (2002: 94).

My own research may be similar in that, despite my sincere attempts to appreciate gender relation within the *Jumma* society, some of my respondents in the conflict zone in the CHT (such as the *Jumma* male political leaders) suggested that the results of my research could have been different had I talked to or corresponded with the same individuals (survivors of gendered violence) at a different time. They might have talked about or focused on different aspects of their experiences. The knowledge-claims produced by my work are not representative of all groups/communities and of all people in the CHT. Nor can I "prove" the accuracy of my analysis in an absolute sense. I consider this research to be a comparison of respondents' experiences.

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[17] The idea of intersectionality was first introduced by Chrenshaw in late 1989 as an interplay between Black feminism, feminist theory and postcolonial theory. Since then, feminists have written much on the intersectionality of gender, class, "race", ethnicity, nationality and state, and have moved away from the additive approach of the concept. Additive intersectionality means that both the subject formations based on gender, "race", ethnicity, sexuality, etc., and the orders of power that create them, are analysed as separated structures and limited units which do interact, but do not intra-act. (Lykke, 2005: 9, cited in Knudsen, 2005:63). These latter works (for example, Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Knudsen, 2005; Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 2006) argue that gender, class, ethnicity, "race" and nationality do not only add to each other, but they intersect and construct each other. I consider this suggestion to be appropriate for my research.

In this section I will discuss how my activism and engagement with human rights, indigenous rights and the women's movement have enabled me to reach out to groups that are extremely hard-to-reach. I will argue that my research would have been left undone had I failed to engage with the topic. My political and emotional involvement with the topic has been immensely helpful in creating networks and forming groups that work against oppression, subordination and the victimization of indigenous women, men and powerless people in the militarised CHT. Before beginning this research I had worked with local, regional and national indigenous organisations, which was very useful in reaching out to and gaining the trust of survivors. My previous activism appeared to be the bridge between myself as the researcher and the participants, and my identity as a human rights activist became the basis of the "building bridges methodology".

I first contacted two indigenous organisations based in Dhaka, the Hill Literature Forum (HLF) and the Hill Women's Federation (HWF), which work closely with the communities in the CHT. For some communities it may seem oppressive when their first contact occurs through the national bodies which do not necessarily represent their needs and views. For this reason, approval was sought from the community assemblies in the first instance. I started to build trust with the *Chakma* people even before I started this project. I had the opportunity to work closely with them through my previous work and I helped them publish a periodical, called *Mowrum*, that documented injustices and the violation of the human rights of indigenous people by "masculine militaries" (to use Enloe, 1993) for two years, February 2005 to April 2007.

As a result of this approach the assembly of the Hill Literature Forum agreed to help me undertake the study, and the Hill Women's Federation agreed to guide me in the field. My main informant in the field was one of the coordinators of HLF, whom I had met in Dhaka during my first meeting with the HLF. He opened doors for me and became very involved in the research; he also offered to let me stay with his family in his village during my fieldwork. Although I did not take up this offer – being aware of the possible ethical issues of the research, I stayed in a government rest house in Khagrachari proper, and travelled to remote villages from the town centre as and when required – my informant and his family became an invaluable source of information for my research. They recommended me to *Jumma* communities and to indigenous leaders in Khagrachari, some of whom believed that my research was being conducted to facilitate their struggle for the autonomy and human rights of indigenous people[18].

In my contacts with research participants, I followed "dialogical epistemology" (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002). Dialogical epistemology suggests that a dialogue between people from different positionings is the just way to approximate the truth' (ibid: 7). Although the purpose of this research is not to entrench an "ultimate truth", dialogical epistemology allowed me to reach out to research participants, especially survivors of militarised violence, which further helped me to understand the gendered experiences of women and men, and the gender-specific implications of violence in the CHT. I situated myself in the position of a researcher and "learner" whose primary role was to learn about "participants' culture" as much as "participants' experience/situation", whereas my participants were the "knowers". In addition, since work on indigenous people and other cultures involves important ethical considerations of which I was

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[18] This presupposition is not incorrect in that that my research is empirical in nature and it is aimed at producing knowledge that would encourage the practitioners and policy makers to act with probity and care. The purpose of the research is to obtain an understanding of the causes of their oppression and their situation in the globalised world, and to outline the actions that need to be taken to bring an end to this situation.

aware, I often expressed an interest in learning about "their culture" (to use Clifford, 1998) and their language which enabled me to gain the "trust" of my participants.

Although power plays an important role in research, the power relation between me and my participants was better balanced. Following critical, indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches, I was able to create a common ground for the researched and for the researcher. As Bhopal (2012) stresses, power can be two-way and there may be situations in which participants withhold information that they do not want to share with the researcher, or which they do not think important. Although most of my participants (i.e., survivors) were open in sharing their experiences and confiding their stories, others, (such as, government officials, security personnel and soldiers) provided information which was either intentionally false or partial and distorted. In those cases I needed to cross-check information provided by one party with a third group (and occasionally with the opposition).

In addition, I used different strategies and methods to gain access to information. To access the survivors and gain trust I followed a "bottom-up approach". In contrast, to gain access to power-holders such as military commanders, security personnel and government officials, I used a "top-down" method[19]. These methods were first introduced by Sabin (1998), who has undertaken research with indigenous people in Peru, and were followed by Dominguez (2008) in her research on oil conflicts in Ecuador.

Generally this approach is used for participatory research. I have, however, applied these methods in narrative research as they suit my investigation. The "bottom-up" approach is one which allows research participants to contribute actively to the research process and to express their views openly. As Sabin argues, it is important to consider the knowledge of indigenous communities rather than romanticising them or presenting them as wild and primitive. I first listened to indigenous women and men about their culture, their politics and their vision for nationalist struggles. I learned about the survivors' backgrounds from my guides and interpreters before our meetings. At the start of each meeting with a participant I made sure that they knew enough about my background and the purpose and objectives of my research. This has helped in gaining trust of the participants. During the interviews with survivors of violence, I sought the consent of the participants and made sure they felt safe and were comfortable enough to talk to me. I asked them to remind me to "stop" when they felt any discomfort in answering a question.

In contrast, the "top-down" method was employed to access the powerful groups and actors in the conflict in order to make sure that they did not influence my research. The "top-down" approach allowed me to dominate the conversation with members of powerful groups through asking a series of set questions. The first phase of fieldwork might have affected the situation on the ground, as data collection in the guerrilla-dominated villages caused antagonism among the military personnel. I, therefore, always made a point to negotiate with army officials and border security personnel (Bangladesh Rifles) using the "top-down" method before starting data collection and before leaving the area.

In any case, carrying out feminist research on state-induced violence and the gendered experiences of women and men involves ethical issues concerning the safety of both the subjects of the research and the researcher (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000). Ethical considerations regarding gendered relations in conflict zones implies that the anonymity and confidentiality of

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[19] The idea of bottom up and top-down method was found in the research methodology of Maria Teresa Martinez (2008) who carried out research on the indigenous society of Peru. For details of this method see Dominguez, M. T. M., 'Building Bridges: Participatory and emancipatory methodologies with indigenous communities affected by the oil industry, *ENQUIRE*, 1, (2008). No.1: 1-17.

the participants will be safeguarded by using pseudonyms and by avoiding the publication of any data before the dissertation is completed. In addition, I have not discussed my experience of the fieldwork in public in order to avoid any possible military crimes occurring on the ground after I had left the field. On a few occasions, when I considered the safety both of the participants and of the researcher, I left the field with incomplete data. In the first phase of fieldwork, I was repeatedly exposed to actual and potential forms of violence, simply by being a "female researcher" working on gendered violence in a military dominated conflict zone.[20] This, on the one hand, shaped the research findings and my analysis, and on the other made me take extra care over my research participants' safety, dignity and confidentiality. While my incomplete fieldwork on the first phase might have affected the completeness of the research, for example in producing "unfinished knowledge" on the subject, the limitations and restrictions arising from my being a female researcher in a conflict-prone society, determining "where the researcher could go", "who I was able to talk to" and "what it is possible to know" (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000), articulated the gendered nature of the conflict.

During my fieldwork, I was careful about the way I worked with the groups and individuals whom I visited and interviewed. I tried to transmit useful information from one group to another for the purpose of ensuring the validity of collated information. For example, information provided by army officers and government officials was often in direct conflict with information provided by underground activists, and I needed to cross-check this with ordinary people including Bengali women and men. Sometimes information from civil administration officials also clashed with information provided by military officers. In such cases I sought help from indigenous political leaders and policy makers to clarify the validity of the information. Similarly information provided by the leading indigenous political party often conflicted with information from the activists and militant groups. It was, therefore, important to cross check information either with a third group or, occasionally, between these two groups. All of these were made possible by my engagement with the topic and involvement with my participants. However, I was careful about the "politicisation" of the research process, because "political" and "politicised" projects are different and the knowledge produced from them would be substantially different.

[20] During the first phase of my fieldwork, I was forced to leave the field with incomplete data in the face of militarised violence and disturbance of the Bangladeshi border security agents (BDR personnel). At first they forcefully broke into my guest house at 1a.m. in the morning and ordered me to visit the nearest military camp, referring to my subordinate position as a civilian and as a woman researcher in a conflict zone controlled and occupied by the state military. When I refused to go to the Army camp, they kept me in house arrest by imposing restrictions on my movements, and prevented me from carrying out interviews with civilian women and men in the village. After four days I was released from the area under armed guard on condition that I left the field immediately. Around the same time two foreign journalists, from Spain and the Netherlands, were detained by the Bangladesh government, and an outspoken young feminist activist who had worked in the CHT for longer than a decade, Pricilla Raj, were detained for four months. Accusations against all three of these people were similar since all of them were interested in looking into the forms of violence in post-accord situations. These incidents made me concerned for my own safety and I therefore reduced my working time in the conflict zone and left the field with incomplete data.

Throughout this paper I have argued that my work is a feminist research project which combines political, analytical and ethical dimensions and that I am concerned with the interplay of all three. In order to substantiate the validity of my work I have drawn on feminist epistemology and feminist thinking derived from different feminist approaches to research methodologies. The ideas discussed herein about feminist research, its intellectual underpinnings, and the "knowledge-claims" produced from my research are influenced by a longstanding tradition of critical, post-modernist, deconstructive as well as radical feminist ideas about such matters produced within the discipline of sociology, by narrative research and by feminist thinking more broadly. My work, that is, the theoretical take of the research and the analysis of empirical data, is influenced by the ideas and approaches of different feminist strands.

But drawing on different feminist approaches in the same research is not a common trend. Especially, employing radical and deconstructive feminist theories in the same research is rare because there are considerable differences between the two. For radical feminism, gender inequality and the question of women's subordination should essentially be understood in relation to male domination and men's power. It is deemed by radical feminism that women - regardless of their class, ethnicity and "race" - in all societies at all times are oppressed by men and patriarchy, and it is male power that needs to be resisted to ensure gender equality. Conversely, deconstructive feminism argues that gender inequality and oppression cannot be understood by looking only at male domination because not all women experience inequality and oppression in the same way, nor do all men necessarily benefit equally from patriarchal projects (Bracewell, 2000: 566). According to deconstructive feminism, inequality and subordination can be found between women and women, and between men and men as much as it happens between women and men. They argue that subjectivity and agency are interrelated (Papadelos, 2006) because there are women who provide legitimacy to patriarchal projects and act as agents of the victimisation of "Other" women, that is, women of other classes, other "races", of other cultures and ethnicities) . Deconstructive feminism insists that in order to appreciate women's subjectivity in oppression and subordination we need to recognize the complex and multi-layered power relations and practices in the particular society being studied.

There is no doubt that there are considerable divisions of opinion between different feminist approaches, and the arguments for "sameness-difference'" and "universalism-relativism" demand serious attention. I am certainly concerned with these recognizable differences. Yet, I suggest that we consider the usefulness of both these approaches in the particular context of my research. We need to employ these theories to analyse different types of gender relations and gendered transformations as relevant because, despite the differences in their politics and approaches to overcoming oppression, these theories are connected in ways that aid our understanding of women's subordination, oppression and gender equality in a society like Bangladesh. I show in my research that oppression and gendered transformations in the conflict-prone Chittagong Hill Tracts can be described by both radical and deconstructive feminism, and that the historical, political and cultural context of the CHT conflict involves both material and structural power relations.

While taking a feminist stance, I have resisted the temptation to follow one particular approach because relying on knowledge produced by one particular group, I believe, may be precarious and we should avoid the temptation to follow one particular feminist approach for a gendered analysis of armed conflict. 'Feminism', I maintain, drawing on Letherby and Stanley (Stanley, 2003: 3), is a 'formal body of thought' and a 'praxis' that involves an analysis, an ethics and a politics (Letherby, 2011: 6) which is useful for recognising, appreciating and defining gender power relations and women's (and men's) oppression. As Stanley notes,

feminism provides an analysis of the complex inter-related hierarchies of inequalities referred to through the term "oppression", it sees these as unjust, it insists they are capable of being changed, and its adherents are actively involved in producing such changes (2003: 3).

A feminist researcher would, thus, be concerned with the politics of inequalities, primarily in terms of radical feminism, but also – to be more critical – deconstructive feminism, and would invest in her work a passion for producing knowledge that would contribute to possible and positive changes in the complex hierarchies of inequalities. I, however, acknowledge the usefulness of both approaches when/as they are relevant , and I aim to incorporate different approaches in analysing women's and men's positions and positioning in the *Jumma* nationalist project and their experiences in the armed conflict in relation to their gender identities. This way I explore the contextual differences of the armed conflict, on the one hand; and on the other, demonstrate the material aspect of gendered violence in the CHT.

The politics by which my work is influenced recognises the idea of "differences over connections" (to use Brah, 1992). That is, it appreciates the notion that we need to make connections between our different positionings, ideas and actions - albeit retaining our differences. It is a politics that recognises the validity and significance of the different approaches and ideas of people from different groups and strands responding to similar issues. Yuval-Davis calls it a "transversal politics" (1999, also see 1997: 125-132). In "transversal politics", perceived unity and homogeneity are replaced by dialogues which give recognition to the specific positioning of those who participate in them as well as to the "unfinished knowledge" that each such situated positioning can offer (ibid: 131). Yuval-Davis notes that it is

> an alternative to the universalism/relativism dichotomy which is at the heart of modernist/post-modernist feminist debate. It aims at providing answers to the crucial theoretical/political questions of how and with whom we should work if/when we accept that we are all different as deconstructionist theories argue. (ibid)

Transversal politics problematises simplistic assumptions about the "feminist agenda" on the one hand, and invites coalition and connection on the other. It encourages and invites us to adopt a "connection" to form a "coalition'" – not an "uncritical solidarity" such as "sisterhood" that universalists suggest and which ignores the differential positioning of those to whom the universalist rules are supposed to apply – in which the differences among women (and men) are recognised and 'given a voice, in and outside the political units and the boundaries of this coalition set not in terms of "who" we are but in terms of "what" we want to achieve' (ibid: 126). In other words, transversal politics differentiates between social identities and social values and assumes that "epistemological communities'" (Assiter, 1996, cited in Yuval-Davis 1997: 131) which share common value systems, can exist across differential positioning and identities. In this sense, it allows the combining and sharing of ideas, information and knowledge produced or held by different groups/epistemological strands, so long as they enhance the production of "good knowledge". My approach, however, is to draw on different theories and to share the ideas of different strands of feminism and different sources of knowledge, in order to understand and analyse the narratives of violence and gendered experience in armed conflict.

Conclusion

My research, as noted above, is reflexive, dialogical, situated and political, and it is aimed at producing (unfinished) knowledge for gender studies and feminist thinking in general. Throughout this paper, I have stressed that feminist research in social science allows the researcher's engagement and emotional involvement with the topic and the participants. I have asserted that research is an embodied process. I have emphasised that my research is a gendered analysis of the armed conflict in the CHT, and that it may produce contextualised, relative, and "unfinished knowledge" on the subject. Even if I cannot "prove" the accuracy of my analysis in an absolute sense, and even if my research may not be a complete work on the subject, the research is significant because it brings new findings that may encourage new knowledge and more research on the subject. As Cockburn stresses, although substantial work has been done on nationalism, war and armed conflict there is a need for new research in this field because 'every country study in the world would bring substantially different conflict and a fresh kind of experience by women and men' (2007: 4). The forms of gendered violence that have occurred in the CHT, and the implications of this violence in indigenous women's and men's lives, are contextual and they present a discourse analysis of the history, politics and culture of that region. I embarked on a project to explore the contextual differences of the armed conflict, as well as to exhibit the similarities of this conflict with other conflicts and to make feminist sense of these differences and similarities.

In the above discussion, I have also argued that we need to consider various sources of knowledge and different feminist approaches for a gendered analysis of armed conflict and violence in a society like Bangladesh. Although it is not a common trend and it involves a question as to whether the boundaries of the feminist "epistemological community" and "coalition politics'" would work – in the context of the specific historical conditions, which can vary so much, in which any specific feminist campaign might be carried out – and 'given the fact that there are so many strands among self-identified feminists, among whom there may be very serious divisions of opinion' (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 132), I intend to apply "transversal politics" for feminist praxis, research and knowledge production. I believe that an analysis of gender relations in the indigenous society and armed conflict in Bangladesh needs to combine various feminist approaches as long as they facilitate our understanding of the subject. I draw on feminist work on the subject that is different in approach but connected in ways that substantially inform our understanding of the conflict, violence and gendered (power) relations in the CHT

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