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RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE CITIZENSHIP OF ROHINGYA REFUGEE WOMEN LIVING IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

Rohingya refugee women are originally hailed from Myanmar. They are living in Bangladesh without any citizenship - as both status and practice, so they are not entitled to get any rights from or have obligations towards the country. Due to their different race, colour, ethnicity, gender and religion Myanmar does not recognize them as citizens, rather they were tortured by the state authority based on these different grounds. After migration to Bangladesh, they are still victims of various deprivations and violence. In this research, their deprivations and victimizations have been shown from intersectional perspectives.

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INTRODUCTION

Citizenship simply implies the membership of any individual living in a country. It is a very complex and contested issue for its variant nature. One of its very characteristic is full membership of any individual of a country. Full membership includes both rights and obligations which provide the individual an identity. This identity differs on the basis of rights and obligations, and it is not unique; it can be different, and one can have multiple identities and positionings. To show the multiple identities and the positionings of the individual, we can use the 'intersectionality theory'- a wonderful discovery of the black feminist-Kimberle Crenshaw. Intersectionality helps demonstrate women's multiple identities and positionings based on their race, color, ethnicity, class, age, nationality, disability and sexual orientation. It is such an approach which tries to clarify women's multiple identities and positionings from different angles. If any woman is identified as a 'refugee', is not the only identity of her. On the basis of gender, ethnicity, race and class, she holds multiple identities and positionings, and when she is discriminated, she suffers a lot than usual for her multiple identities and positionings. Her citizenship intersects with her other identities, and shows her real situations or positionings.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, documentary research method has been applied to present the intersectional analysis of Rohingya refugee women's citizenship. As the method is authentic like other methods of social research, and also cost effective, I have used it to generate this article.

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Conceptual Framework

Citizenship

Citizenship has been a very popular and debatable issue with the emergence of feminism and globalization. The concept of citizenship varies after a certain period due to the changing nature of the world, and the shifting pattern of this very issue affects women's life differently than men living in any state. It denotes the fluid relationships between the individual, society, and the state. According to T. H. Marshall (1950: 28-9): Citizenship is a status bestowed on those who are the full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed. In this definition, emphasis has been given to both rights and obligation. However, in ancient Greece, the birth place of democracy, obligations got priority over rights where men were citizens and women together with children and slaves were deprived of citizenship (Sweetman, 2004:3). Marshall's definition of citizenship is a multi-tier concept which enables the individual to be a full member on the basis of different collectivities of racial, ethnic, local, national and global perspectives. In the citizenship literature, generally two types of citizenship-constructions are seen; one is liberal construct and another is republican. According to Sandel, the former emphasizes on right over good, and the latter gives importance not only on status but also on active involvement and participation in the determination, practice and promotion of common good (Yuval-Davis, 1997:6). However, Peled (1992:433) wonders about how the republican community is constructed, and the qualities that are required for active participation. He posits that there are two different notions of community that are seen in the republicanism; one is weak

community where membership is voluntary, and another is strong community which is not formed rather discovered historically by its members. Here, the question arises about what happens to those- migrants, refugee, minorities and indigenous people- who cannot be the full members of that 'strong community'. Again, there are many other members who have common origin, but they do not experience hegemonic value system with the majority of population in religious, sexual and other issues (*ibid*: 7). Peled (1992) gives solution showing two-tier construction of citizenship where who can, and who cannot acquire a full membership in the 'strong community'. This notion shows contradictory nature of citizenship as individual and communal, inclusionary and exclusionary without giving importance to other dimensions and social positionings like class, sexuality, ability, gender, ethnicity etc., which are also important for constructing citizenship (*ibid*). Intersectionality approach tries to find these contradictory natures of citizenship giving importance to every aspect of the citizens' lives from multiple identities and positionings.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is not a new phenomenon. It finds its birth in the black feminists' criticism of the mainstream feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. US feminist lesbian group namely Combahee River Collective is one of the most influential actors that brought the term in forefront publishing a manifesto-Combahee River Collective Statement. In that statement, the group argued that gender, race, class and sexuality should be the integral part of feminist analysis of power and domination. They showed that sexism interacts with racism, homophobia, ableism and classism etc. Thus, they showed that intersectionality as an approach is able to recognize the black women's real positionings and multiple identities that only the gender is not. Intersectionality is a feminist theory that helps to show the ways in which gender intersects with other categories of identity and positionings of women, and reveal various forms of disparities occurred as the consequence of the combination of multiple identities and positionings. According to Davis (2008: 68): Intersectionality refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power.

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. She argued that theorists need to take both gender and race en masse to show how they interact to form multiple dimensions of Black women's experiences. United Nations (2001 in Riley, 2004:110) defines intersectionality as: An intersectional approach to analyzing the disempowerment of marginalized women attempts to capture the consequences of the interaction between two or more forms of subordination. It addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems create inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, class and the like....racially subordinated women are often positioned in the space where racism or xenophobia, class and gender meet. They are consequently subject to injury by the heavy flow of traffic travelling along all these roads.

Intersectionality is such an analytical tool which has a great theoretical and political relevance in social science issues. There are three forms of intersectional analysis: structural intersectionality, political intersectionality and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality refers "to the ways in which women of colour are situated within overlapping structures of subordination...[and] how the dynamics of each hierarchy exacerbates and compounds the consequences of others" (Crenshaw, 1993:114). Political intersectionality refers "to the different ways in which political and discursive practices relating to race and gender inter-relate, often erasing women of colour" (*ibid*: 115). Representational intersectionality refers to "the way that race and gender images, readily available in our culture, converge to create unique and specific narratives deemed appropriate for women of colour" (*ibid*: 117). There is a huge debate on intersectionality with its vagueness about whether it is a theory or concept, but whatever it is, its vagueness and open-endedness are the secret of its success. Intersectionality today 'promises an almost universal applicability, useful for understanding and analyzing any social practice, any individual or group experience, any structural arrangement, and any cultural configuration' (Davis,2008: 72). However, this very notion of intersectionality brings different aspects of citizens' lives in terms of multiple identities and positionings, so I have used the concept to analyse the citizenship of Rohingya refugee women.

Linking Citizenship and Intersectionality

Citizenship is, perhaps, the notion which holds all identities and positionings of both women and men, in a comprehensive way, whereas intersectionality segments all identities and positionings into different possible parts to show the very reality of the citizens. It is mostly an exclusionary political status for women worldwide that intersectionality portrays. Intersectionality shows difference of citizenship in terms of gender, class, race, caste, age, ethnicity and disability etc. It portrays women's citizenship of difference in a very subtle way - how one identity interacting with another deteriorates women's position from the fore one, or brings another privilege for them. Citizenship has no unique positive status for women; in most cases citizenship is discriminatory towards women, especially for the poor marginal and the minorities. They are always the victims of state violence and also the violence by the dominant males. When the state itself is biased towards the males, the males avail the opportunity of victimizing women. If the women are ethnic people with lower class and caste, then their sufferings continue to multiply in different deteriorating scales. Public-private binary is an important issue to describe women's citizenship. It is impossible to comprehend the gendered patterns of entry to citizenship without considering the sexual division of labour in the private life. In the same way, for the poor condition of asylum laws, women's refugeeship is denied and they are sexually persecuted; it goes through the notion of public-private division which gets priority to discuss on women's citizenship by the feminists. They are successful to challenge the positioning of the division in relation to a number of issues (Lister, 1997:42). Thus multi-layered citizenship addresses the discriminations one by one, and it is the business of intersectionality to show the discrimination of citizenship from different angles at a time.

Rohingya refugee women and intersectional analysis of their citizenship

Background of the Rohingya

The Rohingyas are a Muslim community living in the Northern part of Rakhaine (Arakan) state of today's Myanmar having more than 1.4 million people. The state was between the two worlds: South Asia and Southeast Asia, between Muslim-Hindu Asia and Buddhist Asia, and amidst the Indo-Arian and Mongoloid race, and at times of 1784, the state was with the Chittagong region in the southern part of today's Bangladesh. However, in 1784, when Burman (Myanmar) king conquered, some 200,000 Arkanese were killed by guerrilla war, and were forced to build Buddhist temples. In 1796, two thirds of Muslim Arakanese as exodus were forced to migrate into the Chittagong area of Bangladesh. Later in 1885, the British managed to make the two conflicting communities (Buddhist and Muslim) to live together, and then many refugees returned to Arakan from Bangladesh (Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2002:9). The situation was stable until Second World War. In 1942, advancement of Japanese army triggered communal riots between the Rakhaine Buddhist and especially Muslim Rohingya, and some 22,000 Muslims had to flee from Myanmar to Bangladesh. It should be mentioned here that the Rohingyas were under the loyalty of the British and the Buddhist were under the Japanese block. In 1948, Myanmar got independence and after that the Muslim Rohingyas were very much vocal for the autonomy demanding independent Muslim state. The demand was quashed in 1954, but Muslims were highly discriminated and removed from the civil posts; restriction on movement was imposed, and property and land were confiscated. Although, the Rohingyas were about to get their autonomy in 1950 under the democratic government of U Nu, the plan was stopped by the military coup of General Ne Win in 1962. Central government took measures in 1974 to drive them out denying their citizenship rights, and rendering them foreigners in their own land. And this denial of citizenship is the root cause of the forced migration of the Rohingya. An operation by military government caused 200,000 Rohingyas to enter into Bangladesh. Within 16 months of their arrival some 10,000 refugees mostly women and children died due to malnutrition as their food rations were cut to compel them to leave Bangladesh (*ibid*: 10). Again, from 1991 to 1992 violence, impoverishment and religious intolerance triggered 250,000 Rohingya Muslims to enter Bangladesh (*ibid*: 11). Now they are still living in Bangladesh without any citizenship rights, and especially the women are in most vulnerable situation.

Citizenship of Rohingya refugee women and its intersectional analysis

The basic tenets of citizenship are not seen in the Rohingya refugee women while they are living in Bangladesh. They are the citizen of Myanmar, but their rights as citizen is denied there. Now they are living in Bangladesh as refugee or other as they were seen in Myanmar-their own land. As they are not citizen of Bangladesh, they have no rights and obligations. What they receive from the country is for the sake of international humanitarian provisions. They have no obligation towards the state like Bangladesh; they do not have to pay any tax while paying tax might consider them as active citizens,

according to the universal definition of citizenship. She has no voting rights or representations. She is bound to be passive according to the notion of citizenship, but she may be the struggling mother maintaining her whole family managing the livelihoods one way or another; she is a confident woman. In Bangladesh, not only her private, but also her public life is also threatened. She has no security in both cases. Her public life is also private, because she has not the rights of mobility outside of the refugee camp. She has limited rights to be out from the camp for a very short time, otherwise they are to face unwanted situation like agreeing with ill offer by the authority. Her identities and positionings are multilayered intersecting with one another.

All women are discriminated on ground of gender, but when gender intersects with other categories, some women face multiple violences and got their positions changed with multiple identities. The notion 'intersectionality' challenges the notions of multi-layered oppression. The notion of a road map of a busy town helps understand the meaning of the intersectionality of oppression and discrimination. There are different roads like racism, patriarchy parade, sexism, colonization, religious persecution, indigenous disposition, class, caste and what not. When the road is full of huge traffic and a woman from a marginalized group has to cross the main intersection, a range of the situations of that woman comes out Abeysekera (2002 in Bartolomei, 2003:90) posits "An intersectional analysis involves of situation from a perspective based on the understanding that we all have shifting and multiple identities". Bartolomei used this very notion to show the situations of Kakuma refugee of Northern Kenya from the perspectives of their citizenship and intersectional identities and positionings. She showed that refugeeship is not the single identity of those refugee women, rather they have multiple identities and positionings from the intersectional perspectives of their race, class, sex gender, ethnicity, age and so on. And thus oppression on them was various folds on the basis of their different identities. Similarly, the Rohingya refugee women living in Bangladesh had/have also the multiple identities and positionings on the basis of their different categories of identities intersecting with each other. Rohingyas living in Bangladesh had no access to social, political and economic systems of Myanmar. They were restricted in their movement. They required to attain permission to marry, and were denied of access to work, education and freedom to practice their religion and cultural customs as they were one of the many ethnic minority groups in Myanmar with different racial (darker appearance with different physical and facial features) background, language, faith (Islam) and culture. As a result, they were/are not considered Burmese. Rohingyas were subjected to living as 'non-citizens' in their own homeland.

As a Rohingya woman, a woman has gender identity, and she has also the identity of Rohingya itself. She is a Muslim woman with an ethnic identity as she is different from the Buddhist people of Myanmar, so at times she is the victim of ethnic cleansing and victim of racism. For all her identities, she has no status in the society; she belongs to lower class. Being denied of citizenship rights, she did not get any permission from the Burmese government to marry as practice of basic human rights. And now she is a refugee in Bangladesh. She is a bread winner, if she is the poor female head of her household.

With different identities, the ambit of Rohingya women's suffering is much more, which gives them multiple positionings. They were/are discriminated both structurally and politically.

Refugee Rohingya women are not well cared of by the Bangladeshi authority as they are not the citizens of Bangladesh. They are victims of different types of violence including sexual harassment by the law enforcement bodies (Human Rights Watch, 2007). Women are also beaten up by their husbands, fathers and other male family members, as domestic violence is not a criminal offence in Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2007: 20). Rape is very common inside and outside the camps by the refugee males and the local villagers; when young women go for collecting firewood around the camps, they are more prone to kidnapping and sexual assault. Rape and sexual abuse in detention is also a prevalent protection problem. Sexual violence is more prevalent in female headed households. For lack of work approval, women depend on survival sex (*ibid*: 21). *Mahjees*- unelected refugee leaders - also exploit and abuse women (*ibid*: 23). Even during the 'voluntary repatriation' from Bangladesh to Myanmar in 1992, women were the first targets. Amina, a widow in her early forties with five children under 12, said, 'When they started pushing they pushed us first' (Wahra, 1994:46). Here they are discriminated based on gendered social structure. Before entering into Bangladesh, Amina was raped by Burmese paramilitary force 'Lone Htein'. She stated, '[T]hey took me to their camp and they kept me there whole night. Next day they released me but took me again the following day for another two nights' (*ibid*: 47). Thus, violence on Rohingya refugee women is seen with different forms as they have not any dominant identity of citizenship like a Burmese or Bangladeshi. They are bound to hold multiple identities and positionings, and to suffer from different grounds.

Conclusion

Rohingya women are stateless people although they are living on the earth; they have not a single right to have a piece of land for their own where they can make their own house, and can dream for their betterment and also for a better world. Identity as women is the first cause of violence and deprivation, and lacking citizenship rights brings them different types of cyclic deprivation and oppression. Other categories of their identities in terms of class, race, gender, racism and so on give fuel to their existing discriminatory positionings. With all the inhuman positionings, Rohingya women are the poorest of the poor and more vulnerable than any other hegemonic communities, and with the denial of citizenship rights they not only hold the identity of refugee, but also the multiple identities, and these identities throw them mostly in different inhuman positionings.

For the betterment of the lives of the Rohingya women, both Bangladeshi government and international organizations are working, but they are not fruitful in terms of efforts. Bangladesh with its large population is completely unwilling to approve them as citizen, and international body has nothing to do without the consent of Bangladesh government. Myanmar is also not agreed to accept its so called citizens as citizen. Thus Rohingya refugee women are denied of citizenship rights and suffering a lot from the intersectional perspectives of their multiple identities and positionings.

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