

A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Intergenerational Trauma in the Context of Political Violence

Xinxin Liu

School of European Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok 10330, Thailand

Abstract: Large-scale political and structural violence and social conflicts can inflict unique and long-lasting psychosocial trauma on women, which can be passed down across generations through biological pathways, family memory, and social structures. Based on the historical facts of the dictatorship of the Argentine military government and the genocide in Rwanda, combined with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1820, this article uses a feminist research perspective to explore the gender characteristics of political trauma and the transmission logic of women's intergenerational trauma. This paper analyzes international legal norms, regional reconciliation practices, and current practices of trauma recovery for women, analyzes the underlying reasons for the invisibility and marginalization of women's trauma under the patriarchal system and political violence. Research has shown that political violence has a distinct gender orientation, with women being both the main victim group and the core carrier of intergenerational trauma; The existing institutional practice still faces challenges including the lack of historical narrative and insufficient implementation of rights protection. Only by facing up to the gender attributes of political trauma, establishing women's narrative subjectivity and improving the institutional guarantee and healing system, can we block the intergenerational continuation of trauma and offer implications for promoting gender justice and ethnic reconciliation in post-conflict societies.

Keywords: Women's intergenerational trauma, political trauma, feminism, gender-based violence, Agenda for Women's Peace and Security.

1. Introduction

In modern times, many countries have experienced military dictatorship, ethnic conflicts, and political cleansing, and such major political events have always been accompanied by targeted violence against women. The forms of infringement include physical detention, violent persecution, sexual assault, and reproductive rights violations, resulting in long-lasting physical and mental trauma that has a wide impact and exceeds the scope of ordinary individual psychological trauma [1]. During the military government rule in Argentina from 1976 to 1983, cases of forced disappearance and secret detention occurred frequently. According to official records, women accounted for about 30% of the missing persons. Women with different political views not only have to endure political suppression, but also face institutionalized gender-based violence, sexual abuse and humiliation and degradation in detention facilities, and their experiences of victimization have long been obscured by official historical narratives.

During the 1994 Rwandan genocide, sexual violence was directly used as a means of ethnic cleansing. According to United Nations archives, approximately 100000 to 250000 women have experienced sexual assault, with survivors suffering from physical illnesses and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as social prejudice and identity dilemmas. The trauma is further transmitted to subsequent generations, forming intergenerational continuity of female trauma.

Previous trauma research has mostly focused on individual psychological interventions, with little in-depth analysis of political systems and gender structures. Feminist theory fills this gap in research by drawing connections between the individual traumas of women and the broader systems of

power and patriarchy. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1820 in 2008 defined sexual violence in conflict legally as both a war crime and crime against humanity, contradicting the traditional perception of sexual violence as merely an auxiliary effect of war. The current paper is based on the historical data and global regulatory framework and it focuses on discussing the gender construction of political trauma, the paths of intergenerational transmission, the feminist interpretation and the response of international institutions and social healing transformation in five aspects and can be used as references in research and practical governance.

2. The Gendered Construction of Political Trauma: The Dual Oppression Mechanism of Violence

Political violence is a traumatic experience that could place women into both the pressures of the state power and the patriarchal order at the same time. Political repression does not occur without systematic violence, and existing gender norms limit the ability of women to survive and express themselves. The combination of state violence with patriarchal norms represents a structural oppression of women. Women that held different opinion were singled out as an enemy by the Argentine military government in 1976-1983. They face sexual humiliation and physical control in the secret detention centers and their personal dignity and social identity are systematically denied. CONADEP has indicated that the percentage of women experiencing gender-based violence within detention settings is very large. Such violence is not only a form of punishment, but the most widespread way in which the military government maintains its regime

and forces its people to be obedient.

Sexual violence had been actively used as part of the strategy of ethnic cleansing in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The perpetrator will assault the girl's body, destroy the reproductive system, and attempt to undermine the ethnicity at the blood level. Based on available information from the UN, between 100000 and 250000 women have been raped in wars. Most of the survivors usually experience long term physical ailments and post trauma symptoms along with social marginalization, the collapse of a family, and issues of identity. The effects of trauma do not go away automatically at the end of a conflicting situation but remain in the life of women [2].

There is a strong gender disparity in historical accounts in public. Women frequently suffer violence and pain that are restricted to the private sphere and do not get a political interpretation or acknowledgement. In their experience, the power structure and the gender logic have been wiped out in a systematic manner. This story is likely to entrench the disadvantaged role of women in the process of discussion in the public arena but also interferes with identifying, writing about, and mending the wounds caused by the shared trauma.

Feminist approach may disrupt the pattern of this simple story. It has the ability to readjust the political nature of women body and mind injuries, which shows how both state violence and patriarchal system work together, i.e. The interaction mechanism between the two. This approach of the gender can revive the deleted narratives of victimization of female victims and explain the gendering qualities of political trauma [3]. It offers the means of analysis of dual oppression and the theoretical approaches to the repair of a trauma and gender justice. The sphere of academics could also utilize gender-sensitive analysis models to revisit past events involving women experiencing political violence and contribute to the reconstruction of history memory in general.

3. The Transmission Pathway of Intergenerational Trauma: From Physiological Representation to Collective Memory

Intergenerational transmission of female trauma does not only come as easy inheritance on the psychological and emotional planes. Physiological representation, family memory and social structure coexist side-by-side with each other, making up the essence of the intergenerational transmission of trauma.

The study of epigenetics and clinical psychology has a mature body of research. Intense political trauma can modify the way the gene expression pattern in the human body changes by changing DNA methylation. This kind of physiological epigenetic variability manifests with relatively steady intergenerational transmission features. Children who have been exposed to genetic effects of the trauma are much more prone to psychological sensitivity features, which might cause psychological susceptibility like anxiety, major depressive disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder. The results of Yale research on female victims of wars prove that the epigenetic signals associated with trauma may be passed down to grandchildren directly, which is excellent empirical confirmation of intergenerationally physiological transfer.

Daily family life is a potent medium of the imperceptible dissemination of trauma. Women who have personally experienced political turmoil and violence often hold the

authority over family narratives. Oral sharing of past experiences, preservation of old life objects, and a family atmosphere that has been suppressed and silent for years can all implicitly transmit traumatic experiences to the next generation. A social survey of descendants of the Argentine military government shows that young people who grew up in traumatic families generally have a heightened vigilance and emotional distress, and their daily social habits and self-identity are deeply influenced by the traumatic atmosphere of their original families [4]. Women, as the main carriers of family memories, have also become a key link in the intergenerational transmission and circulation of trauma.

The lack of social system construction and collective historical memory has invisibly prolonged the survival cycle of trauma. Many countries that have experienced authoritarian rule and ethnic conflicts generally choose to avoid real history and suppress human rights archives. The suffering experiences of female victims have always been difficult to enter the perspective of public history.

In reality, there has been a long-term lack of specialized protection for survivors and their descendants, and the rights support system for this group is still relatively weak. The hidden discrimination and identity dilemma at the employment level have long plagued this group [5]. The deep-rooted structural social exclusion prevents trauma from being recognized by society and lacks institutional support, ultimately leading to a cycle of intergenerational trauma that is difficult to break through.

4. Trauma Interpretation from a Feminist Perspective: Deconstructing Power and Reconstructing the Subject

Feminist theory can provide an effective analytical framework for the intergenerational transmission of female trauma in political contexts. The given theory provides a critical perspective that is based on deconstruction of power hierarchies that are concealed by violence and restore the forgotten narrative subject position of women.

Other research works tend to see the war and political persecution as non-discriminatory mass damage whereas they are commonly neglecting gender differences. In the analysis of a feminist, the violence towards women based on gender in the conflict is not a coincidence, it is a targeted form of control of power [6]. This core is to repress the female bodies and identities, patriarchal organizations, and the existing condition of governance. The implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1820 cannot be separated with the years-long endeavours of the international feminist movement and the legal establishment that sexualized violence during conflicts may also be referred to as war crimes.

At the level of trauma narrative, feminism has always rejected the practice of simply framing women as passive victims. During the period of the Argentine military government's rule, the group of mothers and grandmothers in May Square turned their personal traumatic experiences into a public cause for the whole society through collective marches, searching for missing relatives, and public appeals. This also allows the suffering suffered by women to be seen by the public, regaining the discourse power of trauma narratives. Women are no longer just silently enduring harm, but can also actively pursue historical truth and fight for the

fairness they deserve.

After the Rwandan genocide, local victimized women spontaneously formed mutual aid communities, provided collective testimony, supported one another, and also carried out small-scale livelihood projects. Slowly reversing the stereotypical bias of society towards victimized women, and also making the entire society begin to face the deep harm caused by gender-based violence in conflicts.

In terms of trauma repair, we cannot only focus on personal psychological counseling [7]. Traditional healing methods mostly focus on emotional comfort, without addressing fundamental issues such as gender discrimination and lack of relevant systems. Feminism places greater emphasis on making changes to the social structure itself, improving gender equality related regulations, establishing judicial channels that facilitate women's rights protection, and offering exclusive psychological assistance services. By improving the overall system and coordinating with individual physical and mental recovery, we can not only implement gender equality, but also truly help survivors recover from trauma.

5. International Law and Policy Response: Feminist Practice from Institutional Recognition to Social Implementation

The international community's understanding and normative construction of the issue of psychosocial trauma of women in conflict areas has gradually moved towards institutionalized norms after long-term neglect and absence. Feminist social organizations and academic research continue to promote the improvement of relevant international regulations. In 2008, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1820 was officially adopted, defining the illegal nature of sexual violence in armed conflicts and requiring member states and conflict parties to implement measures to protect women's rights and prosecute perpetrators [8]. The United Nations has subsequently issued a series of supporting resolutions, establishing a normative framework for women, peace, and security, providing a solid international legal basis for global women's political trauma rights relief.

The response measures for women's psychosocial trauma management in various countries show distinct regional differences. After the end of military rule in Argentina in 1983, a special commission for truth and reconciliation was established to systematically document human rights violations during the dictatorship period, archive and organize case records of female victims, and simultaneously carry out judicial accountability work. During the military government's reign, nearly 500 children of dissidents were illegally appropriated and adopted by military families. After long-term judicial prosecution, core figures of the former regime such as Weidila and Binone have been convicted in accordance with the law, and related accountability work is still being carried out in an orderly manner.

After the end of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, a special law on gender equality and anti-gender violence was introduced locally, establishing specialized trial courts for gender crimes and community mediation courts, providing women survivors with channels for safeguarding their rights and a legal protection system, clarifying historical crimes through institutional mechanisms, and alleviating the trauma, stress, and psychological difficulties of women [9].

Looking at global governance practices, there are still significant shortcomings in the implementation of international regulations and national policies at the grassroots level. Most post-conflict countries are constrained by political patterns, traditional beliefs, and a lack of governance resources, making it difficult to establish a comprehensive system for trauma assistance and gender-based violence prevention and control for women. Some policies are only retained at the textual level, lacking supporting implementation rules and grassroots implementation measures. Women's rights organizations advocate that policy-making should incorporate the opinions of female survivors and grassroots women's organizations, rely on international organizational resources to assist vulnerable countries in improving institutional construction, and bridge the gap between legal texts and practical implementation.

6. Trauma Healing and Social Transformation: A Practical Path Guided by Feminism

To achieve interruption and repair of women's intergenerational trauma, it is necessary to simultaneously pay attention to three levels: individual psychology, family relationships, and social structure. Feminism advocates the concept of empowerment and also advocates for structural change. This approach can effectively connect trauma healing with social transformation.

In the individual healing process, standardized and one-size-fits-all psychological intervention models should be avoided, and gender-sensitive assistance programs that are more in line with the trauma characteristics and emotional expressions of the female population should be adopted. We can rely on community groups, narrative therapy, expressive arts therapy, and other methods to help female survivors sort out their traumatic experiences and rebuild their self-identity. Helping them gradually emerge from social isolation and self-doubt, this model is suitable for different cultural contexts in different regions and is easily accepted by local women. The practical application value has also been recognized by many academic studies [10].

The core task at the family level is to disrupt intergenerational transmission of traumatic emotions. We can provide guidance for parent-child communication and also offer family emotional counseling. Let younger generations understand the traumatic experiences of their elders in the past. Relieve intergenerational anxiety and alienation, and build stable and healthy family emotional connections. Latin American women's organizations have long been involved in family reunification and identity recovery. Help children who were abducted or fostered during the dictatorship era confirm their identity and blood roots, and complete the reconstruction of their self-identity. Weaken the intergenerational transmission cracks of trauma within families from the root. The Argentine May Square Grandmother Organization has been persistently searching for relatives since 1977. As of 2025, they have successfully recovered 140 missing children, providing critical support for family healing and historical justice.

The key to social transformation lies in optimizing public governance through gender equality. Post-conflict countries set quotas for women's political participation and support the development of grassroots female communities. Steadily

enhance women's voice and participation space in public affairs. The improvement of women's social status and increased participation can promote society to face up to the phenomenon of gender-based violence in history. Breaking down fixed traditional gender biases and weakening the social and cultural soil of trauma from a cultural and institutional perspective [11]. Trauma healing is no longer limited to personal psychological comfort, but is integrated into the process of social equity construction and gender equality, forming a stable mechanism that can prevent sustained intergenerational transmission and spread of trauma across generations.

7. Conclusion

The group trauma caused by political conflicts and authoritarian rule exhibits significant gender differentiation characteristics. Women are disproportionately targeted by political violence in such social unrest, while also becoming the main bearers of trauma and intergenerational transmission. The interweaving of physiological genetic traits, family memory inheritance, and social structural constraints constitutes the internal mechanism of the continuous spread of intergenerational transmission of female trauma. The dual constraints of patriarchal tradition and state power directly prolong the trauma's duration and expand the scope of harm of trauma in families and society. This trauma transmission mechanism shaped by gender power structures not only affects individual and family development, but also long-term constrains the process of achieving social justice, becoming a critical challenge that post-conflict social reconstruction must face.

This article uses feminist theory as an analytical tool to clarify the inherent logic of power operation behind political trauma, and re-establish the subject identity of women in the construction of trauma narratives, historical fact tracing, and the pursuit of rights and justice. Based on relevant United Nations resolutions and reconciliation policies of various countries, this article summarizes the current institutional protection framework, providing practical support for legal remedies for women's political trauma. Practical cases such as folk psychological therapy, community mutual aid and assistance, and women's political empowerment all confirm that the combination of social structural change and individual psychological intervention is a feasible path to alleviate the intergenerational transmission of female trauma.

Currently, most post-conflict areas are still plagued by practical obstacles such as historical memory avoidance, rigid traditional gender concepts, and insufficient supply of assistance resources. Under the constraints of multiple factors, the progress of trauma repair and intergenerational blockade work for women is slow.

Subsequent research can be based on different regional cultural backgrounds and social governance status, further

exploring the formation mechanism of gender differences in political trauma, building locally adapted healing systems according to local conditions, and improving supporting policies and implementation mechanisms. Facing up to the special experiences of women being victimized in political changes and blocking the intergenerational transmission chain of trauma is not only a just response to the historical victimized groups, but also a foundation for advancing gender equality and supporting the stable transformation and long-term peaceful development of post-conflict societies.

References

- [1] Rubini, E., Valente, M., Trentin, M., Facci, G., Ragazzoni, L., & Gino, S. (2023). Negative consequences of conflict-related sexual violence on survivors: A systematic review of qualitative evidence. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 22(1), 227.
- [2] Kahn, S., & Denov, M. (2022). Transgenerational trauma in Rwandan genocidal rape survivors and their children: A culturally enhanced bioecological approach. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 59(6), 727-739.
- [3] Hesse-Biber, S. N. (Ed.). (2012). *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis*. Sage.
- [4] Wohl, M. J., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2011). Is identifying with a historically victimized group good or bad for your health? Transgenerational post-traumatic stress and collective victimization. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 41(7), 818-824.
- [5] Sangalang, C. C., & Vang, C. (2017). Intergenerational trauma in refugee families: A systematic review. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 19(3), 745-754.
- [6] Bardall, G., Bjarnegård, E., & Piscopo, J. M. (2020). How is political violence gendered? Disentangling motives, forms, and impacts. *Political Studies*, 68(4), 916-935.
- [7] Isobel, S., Goodyear, M., Furness, T., & Foster, K. (2019). Preventing intergenerational trauma transmission: A critical interpretive synthesis. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 28(7-8), 1100-1113.
- [8] Barrow, A. (2010). UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820: Constructing gender in armed conflict and international humanitarian law. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 92(877), 221-234.
- [9] Kaitesi, U. (2013). Genocidal gender and sexual violence: The legacy of the ICTR, Rwanda's ordinary courts and gacaca courts. *Intersentia*.
- [10] Raghuraman, S., Stuttard, N., & Hunt, N. (2021). Evaluating narrative exposure therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder and depression symptoms: A meta-analysis of the evidence base. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 28(1), 1-23.
- [11] Bowen, E. A., & Murshid, N. S. (2016). Trauma-informed social policy: A conceptual framework for policy analysis and advocacy. *American Journal of Public Health*, 106(2), 223-229.