



Intersectionality in Peacebuilding: Addressing Gender, Caste, and Disability: A Review

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Abstract: Peacebuilding initiatives have traditionally focused on political settlements, institutional reforms, and conflict resolution mechanisms while often overlooking the complex social inequalities that shape people's experiences of violence and recovery. Intersectionality offers a critical framework for understanding how multiple systems of oppression—such as gender discrimination, caste hierarchies, and disability-based exclusion—interact to produce unique forms of marginalization. This review examines the relevance of intersectionality in peacebuilding with particular attention to gender, caste, and disability. It explores the theoretical foundations of intersectionality, analyses how intersecting identities influence experiences of conflict and structural violence, and evaluates the implications of intersectional approaches for inclusive peacebuilding. Drawing on scholarship from feminist theory, peace and conflict studies, and disability studies, the review highlights how marginalized groups—especially women from lower caste communities and persons with disabilities—often face compounded discrimination that limits their participation in peace processes and access to justice. Evidence from South Asia demonstrates that inequalities rooted in caste and gender intersect with disability to intensify social exclusion and structural violence. The review argues that peacebuilding strategies must move beyond single-axis approaches to incorporate intersectional analysis in policy development, governance reforms, and community participation. By addressing overlapping systems of oppression and ensuring the representation of marginalized communities in decision-making processes, intersectional peacebuilding can contribute to more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable peace. The article concludes by identifying challenges and proposing policy recommendations for integrating intersectionality into peacebuilding frameworks.

Keywords: *Intersectionality, Peacebuilding, Gender, Caste, Disability, Structural Violence*

1. Introduction

Peacebuilding refers to the processes and mechanisms aimed at preventing the recurrence of violent conflict and fostering sustainable peace in societies affected by war or structural violence. Traditional peacebuilding frameworks have largely focused on political negotiations, security reforms, and institutional rebuilding. While these approaches play an important role in stabilizing post-conflict societies, they often fail to address deep-rooted social inequalities that shape experiences of conflict and peace. In recent years, scholars have increasingly argued that sustainable peace requires attention to the structural dimensions of inequality embedded within societies.

One of the most influential frameworks for analysing complex systems of inequality is intersectionality. The concept of intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how multiple forms of discrimination intersect and reinforce one another (Crenshaw, 1989). Rather than treating categories such as gender, race, or class as separate forms of oppression, intersectionality highlights how these identities interact simultaneously to produce unique experiences of marginalization.

In peace and conflict studies, intersectionality has become an increasingly important analytical lens for understanding how different social groups experience conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. Conflicts do not affect populations uniformly; rather, individuals experience violence differently depending on their social identities, economic status, and access to power. Women, marginalized caste communities, and persons with disabilities often face disproportionately high levels of vulnerability during conflict and in post-conflict settings.

In South Asia, the intersection of caste, gender, and disability represents a particularly significant dimension of social inequality. Caste hierarchies remain deeply embedded in social institutions, shaping access to education, employment, and political representation. At the same time, gender-based discrimination and disability stigma create additional barriers that marginalize individuals from full participation in society.

Studies show that individuals who belong to multiple marginalized identities—such as women from lower caste groups with disabilities—experience compounded discrimination that is often overlooked by policies addressing single forms of inequality (Kothari et al., 2019). These realities underscore the importance of adopting intersectional approaches to

peacebuilding that address structural inequalities and ensure inclusive participation in decision-making processes.

This review examines how intersectionality can inform peacebuilding efforts by addressing the interconnected dimensions of gender, caste, and disability. It analyses theoretical perspectives, empirical evidence, and policy implications to demonstrate the importance of intersectional frameworks for achieving sustainable peace.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Intersectionality

Intersectionality originated within Black feminist scholarship as a critique of legal and social frameworks that treated discrimination as a single-axis phenomenon. Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept in her analysis of employment discrimination cases, arguing that Black women's experiences could not be understood solely through the lens of gender or race but required recognition of the interaction between the two systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectionality emphasizes that systems of power—including patriarchy, racism, caste hierarchy, ableism, and class inequality—operate simultaneously and reinforce one another. According to Collins and Bilge (2016), intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how social identities intersect within structures of power to shape individual and collective experiences.

Within peace and conflict studies, intersectionality challenges the assumption that communities affected by conflict are homogeneous groups. Instead, it highlights the diversity of experiences within communities and the need to consider multiple social identities when designing peacebuilding strategies.

Crenshaw (1991) further distinguished between structural intersectionality and political intersectionality. Structural intersectionality refers to how individuals experience overlapping forms of discrimination due to their position within multiple systems of power. Political intersectionality, on the other hand, refers to how political movements and institutions may overlook the needs of individuals who occupy marginalized positions within multiple identity categories.

These theoretical insights are particularly relevant to peacebuilding because many peace processes prioritize elite political actors while excluding marginalized groups. Intersectionality reveals how social hierarchies shape access to political participation and decision-making power in post-conflict societies.

Furthermore, intersectionality aligns closely with the concept of structural violence. Structural violence refers to social structures that systematically disadvantage certain groups by limiting access to resources, opportunities, and rights. By highlighting the interconnected nature of discrimination, intersectionality provides a valuable framework for addressing structural violence in peacebuilding initiatives.

3. Gender and Peacebuilding

Gender has become an increasingly central issue in peace and conflict studies, particularly following the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security in 2000. This landmark resolution recognized the importance of women's participation in peace negotiations, conflict prevention, and post-conflict reconstruction.

Research has demonstrated that women often play critical roles in community resilience, conflict mediation, and reconciliation processes. However, women remain significantly underrepresented in formal peace negotiations and political institutions.

Intersectional analysis highlights that women's experiences of conflict are not uniform. Factors such as caste, ethnicity, class, and disability significantly influence how women experience violence and access resources. For example, women from marginalized caste communities often face additional barriers to education, employment, and political participation compared to women from dominant social groups.

Studies of peacebuilding in India demonstrate that women's activism and community leadership can contribute to conflict resolution and social transformation. However, these contributions are often overlooked in mainstream peacebuilding narratives (Riddle, 2020). Intersectional analysis reveals that women's peacebuilding roles are shaped by their social locations within caste hierarchies, economic structures, and cultural norms.

Dalit women in particular experience a form of "double discrimination," facing oppression both as women and as members of marginalized caste communities. These overlapping inequalities can limit their ability to participate in decision-making processes and influence peacebuilding initiatives.

Intersectional peacebuilding therefore emphasizes the need to recognize diversity among women and to ensure that marginalized groups are represented in peace processes.

4. Caste and Structural Violence

Caste remains one of the most significant forms of social stratification in South Asia. Rooted in historical hierarchies, the caste system assigns social status and occupational roles based on birth. Despite legal reforms and affirmative action policies, caste-based discrimination continues to shape access to education, employment, and social mobility.

Intersectional research demonstrates that caste hierarchies intersect with gender and economic inequality to produce complex patterns of discrimination. Individuals belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes often experience systemic exclusion from social and economic opportunities.

Empirical studies have shown that caste identity significantly influences individuals' aspirations, opportunities, and life outcomes. For instance, research on skill-training programs in India found that individuals from marginalized caste groups reported lower economic aspirations due to structural barriers and social discrimination (Sarkar et al., 2025). These findings highlight the enduring impact of caste hierarchies on social mobility and development.

Caste-based discrimination also contributes to structural violence in conflict and post-conflict contexts. Marginalized communities may experience higher levels of poverty, limited access to healthcare, and reduced political representation. When peacebuilding initiatives fail to address these inequalities, they risk reinforcing existing power structures rather than promoting social justice.

Intersectional peacebuilding approaches therefore emphasize the need to address caste discrimination as a central component of conflict transformation. Policies aimed at reducing inequality must consider how caste interacts with other forms of discrimination, including gender and disability.

5. Disability and Peacebuilding

Disability is an often-overlooked dimension of peace and conflict studies. Persons with disabilities frequently face barriers to social participation, political representation, and economic opportunities. In conflict settings, the number of persons with disabilities often increases due to war-related injuries, psychological trauma, and inadequate healthcare services.

Despite these realities, disability has historically received limited attention in peacebuilding frameworks. Research indicates that intersectional studies involving disability remain relatively rare, highlighting a gap in academic literature (Wolbring et al., 2024).

Persons with disabilities often experience discrimination in multiple areas of life, including education, employment, healthcare, and public participation. When disability

intersects with other marginalized identities—such as gender or caste—the effects of discrimination can become even more severe.

Studies conducted in India show that individuals with disabilities frequently face compounded discrimination when their disability intersects with gender, religion, or minority status. Such overlapping identities intensify social exclusion and limit access to resources and opportunities (Thompson et al., 2023).

In peacebuilding contexts, persons with disabilities are often excluded from decision-making processes and community dialogues. Physical barriers, communication barriers, and social stigma can prevent their participation in peace initiatives.

Intersectional peacebuilding approaches advocate for inclusive policies that recognize the rights and agency of persons with disabilities. This includes ensuring accessibility in public spaces, incorporating disability perspectives in policy development, and promoting the participation of persons with disabilities in peace processes.

6. Intersectional Approaches to Peacebuilding

Intersectional peacebuilding emphasizes inclusive participation, recognition of diverse experiences, and transformation of structural inequalities. Rather than focusing solely on political settlements, intersectional approaches seek to address the root causes of conflict by examining how systems of oppression interact within societies.

One key component of intersectional peacebuilding is inclusive governance. Peace processes must ensure representation of marginalized groups, including women, lower caste communities, and persons with disabilities. Without such representation, peace agreements may fail to address the needs and concerns of vulnerable populations.

Another important dimension is community engagement. Intersectional approaches encourage collaboration with grassroots organizations and local communities to understand how different social groups experience conflict and recovery.

Legal and policy reforms are also essential for addressing intersectional discrimination. In many countries, legal frameworks recognize discrimination based on individual categories such as gender or disability but fail to address the combined effects of multiple forms of discrimination. Research on intersectional discrimination in South India highlights the absence of legal protections that specifically address overlapping identities (Kothari et al., 2019).

By incorporating intersectional perspectives into policy development and peacebuilding programs, governments and international organizations can develop more effective strategies for promoting equality and social justice.

7. Challenges in Implementing Intersectional Peacebuilding

Despite its theoretical strengths, implementing intersectional approaches in peacebuilding presents several challenges. One major challenge is the complexity of intersectional analysis. Policymakers and practitioners may struggle to translate theoretical concepts into practical policy interventions.

Institutional resistance also poses significant obstacles. Peacebuilding institutions often operate within bureaucratic frameworks that prioritize efficiency and standardized approaches. Intersectionality, however, requires context-specific analysis and flexible strategies.

Another challenge is the lack of data on intersectional inequalities. Many statistical systems collect information on individual categories such as gender or disability but do not capture the interactions between multiple identities.

Additionally, political resistance from dominant social groups may hinder efforts to address structural inequalities. Efforts to dismantle caste hierarchies or challenge ableist attitudes may face opposition from those who benefit from existing power structures.

Despite these challenges, scholars argue that intersectional peacebuilding remains essential for addressing the root causes of conflict and promoting sustainable peace.

8. Conclusion

Intersectionality provides a powerful framework for understanding the complex relationships between social identities, structural inequalities, and experiences of conflict. By examining the intersections of gender, caste, and disability, this review highlights how overlapping systems of oppression shape individuals' access to resources, participation in governance, and vulnerability to violence.

Traditional peacebuilding approaches that focus primarily on political settlements and institutional reforms often overlook the social inequalities that sustain conflict and marginalization. Intersectional peacebuilding emphasizes the need to address these inequalities by promoting inclusive participation, recognizing diverse experiences, and implementing policies that address structural discrimination.

Women from marginalized caste communities and persons with disabilities often face compounded forms of discrimination that limit their opportunities and participation in peace processes. Recognizing these realities is essential for developing peacebuilding strategies that are equitable and sustainable.

Future research should further explore the intersections of gender, caste, disability, and other social identities in conflict-affected societies. By incorporating intersectional

perspectives into policy development and peacebuilding initiatives, scholars and practitioners can contribute to more inclusive and transformative models of peace.

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