Humiliation, Conflict and Public Policy

© Gay Rosenblum-Kumar
Public Administration officer in the Governance and Public Administration Branch of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Short note prepared for the "Workshop on Humiliation and Violent Conflict," November 18-19, 2004, at Columbia University, NY

In my pondering it is the lack of justice, and no foreseeable way to get it, that causes the humiliation which leads to such frustration that people are impelled to violent conflict. The difference between developed and developing countries is that in the Global North (mostly) there are more structures that work by which we can theoretically achieve justice, i.e. we have recourse to courts, elections, ombudsman, laws that give protection, etc. It doesn't always work, but sometimes it does and there is some faith that the system can work.

In many developing countries with illegitimate governing structures, there is no recourse to these avenues and no faith in the system. People feel (and are) abused by this – politically, economically, psychologically, and so on.

I think people mobilize around that which they are humiliated about. That could very much relate to public policy planning. One could say governments should have humiliation-sensitive policies, i.e. hold policies up to a yardstick to ensure that they don't increase individual or sub-group's feelings of humiliation, like marginalization, exclusion, unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity, unequal access to representation, and so on.*

*But this can be manipulated too. Can governments figure out ways to not give people real justice, but to avoid making them feel humiliated in order to maintain the status quo? Probably.