

Structural Violence on Women: An Impediment to Women Empowerment

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Abstract

Violence on women has been present in our society since times immemorial. The ethics, the values, the morals, the culture of the society has been framed in such a way or we can say structured in such a way so as to promote exploitation of this segment which is in reality the root of the society. The concept of STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE was introduced by Johan Galtung in 1969. It refers to a form of violence wherein some http://www.studylecturenotes.com/social-sciences/sociology/370-social-institution-definitions-a-structure-of-social-institution social institution may harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Violence against women has taken the form of a global epidemic which has taken its toll on the physical, psychological, sexual and economic life of the female. Johan Galtung in "Violence, Peace and Peace Studies", 1969 has rightly remarked "when one husband beats his wife, there is a clear case of personal violence, but when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance, there is structural violence". India has been slow in its pace for action against violence on women, but the brutal gang-rape of a 23 year old Delhi girl on December 2012 aroused the Indians from their deep slumber on this issue. Structural violence is a demon against women that is devouring the society. The combined efforts of Government NGO's and most important, the sufferers of this violence, the women have to take a major step to fight this dragon.

Keywords: Patriarchy, structural violence, women empowerment

INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Panel^[1] on Violence Against Women, 1993 stated, "Women will not be free from violence until there is equality, and equality cannot be achieved until the violence and threat of violence are eliminated from women's lives." Violence on women has been present in our society since times immemorial. The ethics, the values, the morals, and the culture of the society have been framed in such a way or we can say structured in such a way so as to promote exploitation of this segment. Which is in reality, the root of the society. There is ample evidence to suggest that women have been subordinated, subjugated, and exploited since the beginning of the civilization and is still facing the trauma of the day.

WHAT IS STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE?

This concept was introduced by Johan Galtung in 1969. It refers to a form of violence wherein some social structure or social institution may harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs; according to Galtung, rather

than conveying a physical image, structural violence is an "avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs." This new term was coined to bring to the limelight the degree of damage and harm it may cause to the lives of people which is many fold greater than that caused by inter- and intra-nation wars and armed conflicts. Structural inequalities are especially harmful for women because of the intersection of gender with existing conditions such as poor health, inadequate education, and care.^[2-4] Lack of good data on violence against women^[5-7] and on the prevalence of the public/private divide leads to relative reversibility of structural violence. This encourages researchers to focus more on public, political violence rather than violence that occurs in the private sphere^[8-10] where it is more prevalent.

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Violence against women has taken the form of a global epidemic which has taken its toll on the physical, psychological, sexual, and economic life of the female. A woman has to face violence in one form or the other throughout her entire lifespan, be it from her parents, her husband, later in life by her son and other relatives. Considering an alarming growth in the cases of violence against women all over the world, the General Assembly of UNO designated November 25th as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against women, by resolution no 54/134 of December 199. Article of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women states that “violence against women means any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life.” Violence *inter alia* is gendered, embodied, and institutionalized. Women are subjected to “structural violence” which results from sexism, rape, domestic violence, psychological violence, and other acts of violence resulting from the social structure.

Johan Galtung in “Violence, Peace and Peace Studies,” 1969, has rightly remarked “when one husband beats his wife, there is a clear case of personal violence, but when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance, there is structural violence.”

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE: INDIA’S PERSPECTIVE

India has been slow in its pace for action against violence on women, but the brutal gang rape of a 23-year-old New Delhi girl on December 2012, aroused the Indians from their deep slumber on this issue. This incident led to a sudden outpouring of anger and frustration about the situation that allowed such attacks to take place. People took to the streets in large numbers calling for change. However, the issue involved is complex and deeply rooted. The Indian women face the challenges of outdated and repressive governance structure, an inefficient legal justice system, a weak rule of law, and sociopolitical structures that are heavily male centric.

India has one of the lowest sex ratio in the world with approximately 35 million women “missing.” According to the 2011 census, the sex ratio between men and women indicates 940 women to a 1000 men which is a definite improvement over the 2001 census where the ratio was 933:1000. The sex ratio is worst in the northwestern state of Punjab, Rajasthan, and Haryana. This gap is 12% at birth which is increased to 25% in childhood.^[11] The main explanation of this missing number resides in sex-selective abortions and possible neglect of young girls during infancy, indicating a high preference for male children rather than female children. This preference is also evident in the literacy rate of 2011 census, which shows 82% of the males to be literate compared to 65% females. Indian women face violence in the form of domestic violence, dowry death, rape, abduction, and cruelty by husband and

in-laws. The NCRB statistics^[12] indicate that an Indian woman is most unsafe in her marital home with 43.6% of all crimes against women being “cruelty” inflicted by her husband and relatives.

WHAT IS THE NEED FOR BROAD-BASED STUDIES ON STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE?

“Any approach to a theory of violence needs to be with a look at the structural violence in this country. Focusing merely on those relatively few men who commit what we define as murder could distract us from examining and learning from those structural causes of violent death that are far more significant from a numerical or public health, or human standpoint.”^[13] This was the observation of Psychiatrist Gilligan who in his work, “Violence; Reflections on a National Epidemic” quotes these lines. He observed that structural violence differs from behavioral violence in many respects. Structural violence apart from being virtually invisible functions more or less independently of individual behaviors; further, its problematic effects operate continuously not just sporadically.

Multiple kind of violence stem from the interaction of patriarchy with structural factors such as culture and economic opportunity. But how do we assess the degree of structural violence? Various investigators and theorist have put forward different methods of assessment. Heise argues for an integrated ecological framework which can account for the interplay among personal, situational, and sociocultural factors.^[10] Koenig *et al.* stressed on the interrelated effects of contextual and community level factors, individual and household level characteristics, and women’s autonomy.^[14] Farmer discusses the particular impact that poverty has, upon women who are driven to accept jobs which put them in a position of vulnerability in Haiti.^[3] There are others who emphasize the important connection of armed conflict to violence against women in their own homes.^[15,16] Most of the investigators and researchers are focusing on individual factor as all of these studies have been conducted with individual or household level data within a single country or city. However, according to Anderson,^[5] a multiple level of gendered violence should be examined. In “Gendering Coercive Control,” she writes “to date, studies have generally conceptualized and examined gender at only one level. We need to identify the ways structural gender inequalities, gender performances and accountability, and gender identities interact to facilitate or challenge coercive control”.

There is a need for cross-national studies on violence against women. The breadth of such a study should help to confirm the structural factors that impact violence against women all across the world, regardless of content. An article published in "Institutional Security in 2009", connected violence against women to multiple structures within a society.^[7] However, their causal arrow goes from treatment of women to condition within society. This opposes the direction hypothesized by Galtung’s concept of structural violence in which social

structures themselves cause harm, especially to the poorest and the most vulnerable.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Structural violence impacts all aspects of women's lives, their health, safety and that of their children and also society as a whole. The women are denied of their fundamental rights. Although her mental health is ruined by their patriarchal structure, effect on her sexual and reproductive health is less well recognized. A study in India found a powerful association between women's experiences of "wife beating" and infant and fetal loss, even controlling for education and parity.^[17] The physical health consequences include injury, unwanted pregnancy, miscarriage, HIV/AIDS, permanent disabilities, and low-performance rates, while the mental health consequences include depression, fear, anxiety, sexual dysfunction, neurosis, and obsessive behavior. We all know very well that a country cannot reach its full potential until and unless women's potential is allowed to participate equally in their society.

Another aspect is the cost incurred due to social violence, be it direct or indirect. The direct costs for violence against women include lives lost as well as cost of services provided such as expenditures on medical treatment and psychological counseling, legal protection, providing housing and shelters for women, and social services. Indirect costs include days of work lost leading to reduced productivity and its impact on overall economy.

HOW AND WHO WILL CURB THIS STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE?

While woman have been victims of violence for long and even after centuries of feminist struggle, resistance to patriarchal violence is not so phenomenal, conspicuous, and pronounced. Agarwal^[18] in her "Gender and Land Rights in South Asia" has tried to delineate the different ways in which women offer resistance to violence and patriarchal control inflicted upon them in private and public domains.

The women's movement launched campaigns against rape, domestic violence, and sexism in advertisements as well as state repression during caste and communal rights. Indian society and its patriarchal structure has been a major hub of structural violence. Early eighties was marked by campaign culture in which women's groups with different priorities and ideological positions had to evolve a network among them to combat powerful patriarchal forces operating within the institution of family, state, and civil society.

INTERVENTIONS DONE BY THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian constitution in its preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties, and directive principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women but also empowers the state

to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women.

Laws, legislations, and bills have been passed time and again to promote women empowerment. Since the advent of independent India, the important women specific legislations which have been passed are:

- The Immoral Traffic (prevention) Act, 1956
- The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
- The protection of women from Domestic Violence Act 2005.

The National Commission for women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990, to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of panchayats and municipalities for women, helping them for their participation in decision-making at the local levels.

The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women was laid down in 2001, with the goal to bring about the advancement, development, and empowerment of women. The objectives of this policy stressed on equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment equal remuneration, occupational health and safety. It laid special emphasis on elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and girl child.

As a result of Nirbhaya effect, the parliament passed the criminal law (amendment) Act 2013, which provides for amendment of the Indian Penal Code, Indian Evidence Act, and the code of criminal procedure. It also enacted the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prohibition, Prevention, and Redressal) Act 2013, 16 years after the Supreme Court directed the Indian Government to provide legal framework to deal with the issue of sexual harassment. Five exclusive fast track courts were set up to deal with cases of sexual violence against women. In addition, a women's distress helpline number, 1091 was launched in various Indian cities. While government's efforts to end the caste system and overturn women's disempowerment by advocating for policies focused on gender equality, fight against sexual violence, the government's failure to enforce these policies due to corruption has left patriarchy and the caste system intact. Indeed, the policy/practice gap in India cuts across all sectors and initiatives as a result of rampant corruption and lack of good governance practices; financial corruption hinders the government's ability to invest in social capital, including initiatives to advance women's empowerment. Once the government and its policies prove unsuccessful to empower women, opportunities open for NGO involvement. However, without an effective government, the question arises of whether NGO policies can be effective in tackling the vast array of government policies. Furthermore, NGOs currently in India tend to focus on the manifestations of the structural violence, initiating programs that help victims of domestic violence or child marriage. While these programs serve as a step in the

right direction, they do not necessarily cut to the root cause of these issues: the structural violence perpetuated by cultural attitudes concerning women and their role in society.

CONCLUSION

Structural violence is a demon against women that is devouring the society. It has been present since times immemorial. Its base lies in the deeply engraved notion of patriarchy. To change a cultural mindset begins with dialogue at the roots of society with the people. The combined efforts of government NGOs and most important, the sufferers of this violence, the women have to take a major step to fight this dragon.

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