

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: DECONSTRUCTING GENDER STEREOTYPES

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Abstract: Structural Violence as a term was conceived by Johan Galtung in 1969 in his article titled "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research". He opines that structural violence explains why social institutions and systems of social organisation have a negative impact on underprivileged communities. The social, cultural, political, economic, and historical elements that influence inequality and suffering can be more thoroughly analysed in light of structural violence. It provides a chance to properly evaluate how various forms of marginalisation, such as racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, and poverty, contribute to the creation of fundamentally unequal lived experiences.

The increasing problem of violence against women has had a negative impact on women's physical, psychological, sexual, and economic well-being. Structural violence, particularly has an effect on every element of a woman's life, including her health, her children's safety, and society at large. The fundamental rights of women are denied to them. The patriarchal structure has taken a toll on their mental health. The sexual and reproductive health of women has also long been neglected. Women being the other half of the human capital in the world, cannot be ignored at any cost. It is high time to end such structural violence against women to bring a wholesome progress for any nation.

Keywords: Structural violence, sexism, mental health, patriarchy

Introduction

Violence in any form is considered to bring indelible impact on the physical and mental health of human beings across all ages. Mahatma Gandhi advocated for refraining from violence in thoughts, words and deeds. When violence holds individuals and groups in thrall, moral disintegration follows. For we cannot control violence; violence controls us.¹ There are many facets of violence. Physical violence being the overt type is most recognizable. However, there are many other ways to persecute and humiliate people other than the physical violence which are equally, and in many cases more derogatory to human dignity.

Here comes in the concept of 'Structural Violence'. Structural Violence as a term was conceived by Johan Galtung in 1969 in his article titled "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research".² He opines that structural violence explains why social institutions and systems of social organisation have a negative impact on underprivileged communities. It is an ongoing state of violence that is ingrained in a society's social,

political, and economic systems. It is also referred to as indirect violence because there isn't a specific individual involved and it is disguised.

Structural Violence: An Overview

Fundamentally, structural violence is the outcome of hierarchical dynamics within and between societies that favour the powerful, and oppress and dominate those at the bottom. The mechanisms and manifestations of structural violence, as defined by Johan Galtung, are exploitation, penetration, segmentation, marginalisation, and fragmentation.

The social, cultural, political, economic, and historical elements that influence inequality and suffering can be more thoroughly analysed in light of structural violence. It provides a chance to properly evaluate how various forms of marginalisation, such as racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, and poverty, contribute to the creation of fundamentally unequal lived experiences.³ The complex and frequently interconnected processes that produce and maintain inequality on various levels, both for individuals and communities, are significantly explained by structural violence.⁴

In many aspects, structural violence differs from direct and behavioural violence intellectually and practically. Direct violence is defined as deliberate acts that cause harm or death to people or organisations. But structural violence kills people too, it does it more gradually since it takes the form of societal injustices which can be both psychological as well as physical affecting both the body and the psyche. The harm is made worse by socio-political structures and choices that deny people access to necessities for living up to their full potential.

The lack of direct violence defines negative peace. The absence of structural violence defines positive peace. Both types of violence—direct and structural—may be represented by physical and psychological acts of violence, whether they are directed at particular things or not. The acts can be planned or unintended, and are conveyed in overt or covert ways. However, it must be noted that direct and structural forms of violence are interrelated forces. There is no reason to believe that structural violence causes less suffering than direct violence, despite the fact that direct violence is typically more obvious and easily experienced.⁵

Structural Violence and Gender Disparity

The patriarchy, or endemic sexism, that results from systemic social structures breeds patterns of violence, exclusion, and discrimination against women. Gender inequality and male dominance are the foundations of patriarchy. It survives on the idea of macho, force-using masculinity. Even so, despite the fact that it takes many different forms and manifests itself in both public and private spaces, violence against women only has one dimension: structural. The horrifying kinds of violence—including rape, female infanticide, domestic violence, and governmental violence—violate women's

fundamental human rights. Patriarchy, caste and class systems, and the power dynamics that shape society all contribute to violence against women.

While gender and sex are constructs that are determined at birth and run along a spectrum, contemporary attitudes not only sustain the false dichotomy of "man" and "woman," but also reinforce the false conflation of sex and gender. Sexism is the term for prejudice or discrimination based on gender or sex, usually directed against women. The word, which has its roots in the feminist movement, refers to the false notion that men are fundamentally superior to women or more valued than them in some other way.⁶ Such ingrained "sexism" values, which first infiltrate homes from birth and childhood, subsequently manifest themselves in or spread to their public spheres.

Women are subjected to a social environment in which imposed unjust and unequal demands are viewed as natural in their day-to-day lives. The societal structures view women as cultural, sexual, and reproductive objects. The woman is just a sexual, reproductive, and cultural object for males, her family, her kids, the State and its institutions, and the market. The patriarchal system encourages male supremacy and a system of social reproduction based on sexual distinction. Patriarchy not only limits, trivializes, and dismisses the concerns of women, but also re-victimizes them.

As far as workplace is concerned, as per a global survey conducted jointly by International Labour Organization (ILO), Lloyd's Register Foundation (LRF) and Gallup, among people who had experienced violence and harassment at work, 31.8 per cent said they had experienced more than one form, with 6.3 per cent of victims having faced all three forms in their working life. Women were more likely than men to say they had faced more than one form of violence and harassment in their working life (34.1 per cent versus 29.6 per cent). Overall, women victims were the most likely to have experienced both psychological and sexual violence and harassment.⁷ Women are particularly vulnerable to sexual assault and harassment, which is the most common type of violence and harassment worldwide.

Violence against women's bodies has a long history, occurring both during times of peace and during times of war. History demonstrates that sexual violence against women during armed war is specifically designed to shatter society through displays of dominance and racial purity. No story is any different in "peacetime," when racism and casteism are accepted as normal social norms and sexual assault is motivated by the same things. Because of the larger marginalisation narrative, those who are targeted not only experience cultural and overt violence but also structural and systemic violence in the form of gatekeeping, where those with privilege are denied access to the legal system, the security system, and social capital.

Structural Violence: India's Case

India has been sluggish to take action against gender-based violence, but the violent gang rape of a 23-year-old New Delhi woman in December 2012 jolted the country's citizens out of their deep sleep. This tragedy was followed by a sudden outpouring of rage and disgust over the circumstances that led to such atrocities. Many people flooded the streets with calls for reform. But the problem at hand is intricate and ingrained.

Indian women struggle with an antiquated and oppressive system of government, a broken legal system, weak rule of law, and largely patriarchal societal institutions. Across the globe, India has one of the lowest sex ratios, with almost 35 million women "missing." The 2011 census says that there are 940 women for every 1000 men, which is a significant increase from the 2001 census where the ratio was 933:1000. Punjab, Rajasthan, and Haryana are the three states with the worst sex ratios. At birth, this disparity is 12%; during infancy, it rises to 25%.⁸ This missing number has sex-selective abortions as its primary cause, as well as potential neglect of young girls throughout early childhood, which suggests a strong preference for male offspring over female children. This preference is also demonstrated by the literacy rate from the 2011 census, which reveals that 82% of men and 65% of women are literate. Indian women frequently experience domestic abuse, dowry murder, rape, kidnapping, and brutality from their husbands and in-laws. According to the statistics of National Crimes Record Bureau (NCRB), an Indian woman is most at risk in her marital household, where her husband and family members are responsible for 43.6% of all crimes against women. Crime against women rose by 15.3 per cent in 2021 from the previous year, with 4,28,278 cases registered last year following 3,71,503 cases in 2020. The NCRB report also shows that the rate of crime against women (number of incidents per 1 lakh population) increased from 56.5 per cent in 2020 to 64.5 per cent in 2021.⁹

The Way Forward

Structural violence has an effect on every element of a woman's life, including her health, her children's safety, and society at large. Although the patriarchal society has a negative impact on her mental health, it is seldom realized how it also affects her sexual and reproductive health. Another factor is the financial burden brought on by social violence, whether it be direct or indirect. The direct costs of violence against women include the loss of life as well as the cost of services rendered, including those for social services, legal protection, housing and shelters for women, and medical and psychological care.

The preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties, and directive principles of the Indian constitution all explicitly state the principle of gender equality. In addition to guaranteeing women's equality, the Constitution gives the state the authority to enact laws that positively discriminate in favour of women. Many laws, bills, and other pieces of legislation have been passed to support the empowerment of women. The following significant women-specific laws have been passed since India became independent: The Immoral Traffic (prevention) Act, 1956, The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 and The protection of women from Domestic Violence Act 2005. In January 1992, The National Commission for Women was set up as statutory body under the National Commission for Women Act, 1990 (Act No.20 of 1990 of Govt.of India) to review the Constitutional and legal safeguards for women; recommend remedial legislative measures, facilitate

redressal of grievances and advise the Government on all policy matters affecting women.¹⁰

The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution (1993) allowed for the reservation of seats in panchayats and municipalities for women, facilitating their involvement in local decision-making. In an effort to advance, develop, and empower women, the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women was put into effect in 2001. The goals of this programme focused on providing equal access to health care for women, high-quality education at all levels, career and vocational advice, equal pay for equal work, and workplace health and safety. It placed a strong emphasis on getting rid of prejudice and all sorts of abuse against women and young girls.

In the aftermath of the Nirbhaya incident, the parliament passed the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013 that provides for the amendment of the Indian Penal Code, Indian Evidence Act, and the Code of Criminal Procedure. In addition, it passed the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prohibition, Prevention, and Redressal) Act 2013—16 years after the Indian Government was ordered by the Supreme Court to establish a legal framework to address the problem of sexual harassment. To handle cases of sexual assault against women, five exclusive fast track courts were established. In addition, numerous Indian cities launched the 1091 women's distress helpline number.

These instances highlight some actions performed at the national level to end violence against women. Increased and coordinated efforts to safeguard women at the local, national, and international levels are necessary to combat and eradicate this epidemic. The Government should make sure that once national legislation is passed, it is implemented. It should take all reasonable precautions to stop, look into, and punish acts of violence against women, whether those actions are committed by the State or by private individuals, in line with national law. Any strategy to stop violence must be multifaceted, tackling both the underlying causes and the symptoms of the issue. To alter the social attitudes and ideas that support male aggression, society as a whole—including judges and police officers—must be educated.

Conclusion

To end violence against women, it is necessary to question how society defines gender roles and power relationships. The need of the hour is not only to take legal action to defend women's human rights but also raising awareness of the problem of violence against women and teaching boys and men to see women as valuable participants in life, in the advancement of a community, and in the achievement of peace. The use of non-violent methods to settle disputes among all members of society is crucial for preventing violence. Governmental and non-governmental organisations must work together and take coordinated action to end the cycle of abuse.

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