

Protecting Women from Violence: A Study of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's Writings

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Abstract

Violence against women is a global phenomenon and is deeply embedded in the social fabric of all nations. It continues to be one of the most pervasive and prevalent human rights violations in the contemporary world. Violence against women not only results in severe physical damage but also causes profound emotional and psychological distress. It manifests the complex power mechanism of society for the subjugation and oppression of women. Despite the enactment of various laws in numerous nations to combat violence against women, inadequate enforcement and ingrained discriminatory social attitudes continue to pose substantial challenges. In most cases violence against women remains unreported due to the impunity, silence, stigma and shame associated with it.

Keywords: Violence, Gender, Discrimination, Social Attitude, Human Rights.

Violence against women is one of the major issues that Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born, Dutch-American writer, social activist and former politician, has prominently deliberated on in her writings. The term violence is basically described with negative connotations like repression or oppression of the less powerful beings. It can also be described as an obnoxious behaviour towards others whether it is physical, psychological or emotional that causes physical injuries, mental disturbances or any kind of loss to others. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the word violence as "violent behaviour that is intended to hurt or kill somebody" (1719). According to World Health Organization, violence is "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation" ("Definition and Typology of Violence"). Thus, the violence may not only be an act of physical aggression, but also of psychological or sexual damage.

In broad categories, violence against women can be defined in terms of physical, sexual and psychological harm to women and girls. The 1993 UN General Assembly's "Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against

Women” defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (UN 1993). According to Wikipedia, “Violence against women (VAW), also known as gender-based violence and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), are violent acts primarily or exclusively committed by men or boys against women or girls” (Wikipedia).

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a vocal critic of violence against women in Somali clan-based societies. She observes that in Somali Muslim societies, violence is not only behavioural, rather it is structural. Structural Violence, according to Johan Galtung, refers to a form of violence in which some social institutions may harm individuals by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Johan Galtung in his seminal work *Violence, Peace and Peace Studies* (1969), has rightly remarked that 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 (167-191).

A survey of the literature reveals that women have always been exploited and oppressed in all societies and religions. The ethics, the belief system, the moral framework of society, the cultural values, and religious practices have been structured in such a way that promotes violence against women. Thus, the violence in all societies is not behavioural, rather it is structural. Structural violence is a permanent state of violence, which is embedded in the social, political and economic structures that make up a society. Due to the absence of concrete perpetrator and its camouflaged nature, it is also known as indirect violence. The structural violence is often accepted as norms in the society. Primarily, structural violence is the result of hierarchical relations within and between societies that privilege those who are on top and exploit those who are at the bottom. Thus, the whole system of society is so structured that the violence against women, their oppression, and subjugation become a natural phenomenon. Women have also accepted these roles and these categorizations as natural and pre-determined. Here the process of socialization has an important role to play. The social institutions of each society—religion, law, family, educational institutions, literature and art reinforce the gender roles and gender stereotypes insistently so that through a process of internalization women come to accept these roles as natural. A value system of society and religion is constructed and acted upon in such a way that its acceptance becomes a matter of individual choice. Hirsi Ali emphasizes the need for reform within these structures to ensure gender equality, human rights, and individual freedoms for women. Her work often calls for a re-examination of traditional beliefs and practices that perpetuate systemic violence against women.

Hirsi Ali highlights how the social norms, traditions and harmful cultural practices contribute to the oppression against women. Hirsi Ali has extensively discussed structural violence in her writings, particularly concerning the treatment of women in conservative Islamic societies. She addresses issues such as forced marriages, wife beatings, female genital mutilation (FGM), honour killings and the lack of rights and freedoms for women within Somali Muslim societies. She argues that these practices are not merely individual acts of violence but are deeply embedded within

the social, religious and legal structures of these communities. She exposes the subtle nuances of structural violence inherent in the culture and society in which she was born and brought up.

Hirsi Ali's writing proceeds from a lived experience of oppression, exploitation, violence, rejection and sufferings. In her writings, she openly criticises the culturally and religiously legitimized violence against women that she finds inherent in Somali Muslim societies. Hirsi Ali addresses the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM), a deeply rooted harmful practice, describing it as a form of violence against girls and women. According to Jacinta K. Muteshi, a renowned expert in gender equality, women's rights, reproductive health and constitutional processes from Kenya, "Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) comprises different practices involving cutting, pricking, removing and sometimes sewing up external female genitalia for non-medical reasons" (Muteshi 2016). World Health Organization defines female genital mutilation (FGM) as "a traditional harmful practice that involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia or other injury to female genital organs for non-medical reasons" (WHO 2008). In many societies, mutilation is considered a necessary precondition for marriage or a marker of honour. Like many countries across Africa and the Middle East, the practice of female genital mutilation is common among Somali Muslims as a means of maintaining "purity" in unmarried girls. Hirsi Ali writes: "Female genital mutilation predates Islam. Not all Muslims do this, and a few of the peoples who do this are not Islamic. But in Somalia, where virtually every girl is excised, the practice is justified in the name of Islam" (*The Caged Virgin* 31). Consequently, many girls die during and after their circumcision. Hirsi Ali condemns this practice, viewing it as a harmful tradition that subjects women to physical and psychological suffering. She advocates for its eradication and speaks out against cultural justifications for such practices.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali shares her personal experience with female genital mutilation and the physical and emotional impact it had on her. As young girls, Hirsi Ali and her sister Haweya have to undergo the traditional practice of female genital mutilation also known as female circumcision so that they would remain "pure" for their future husbands. Hirsi Ali's grandmother makes all the arrangements for their excision. A traditional circumciser from the blacksmith clan is called who performs this act of genital mutilation with a pair of scissors, and that too, without giving any anaesthesia to the girls. Hirsi Ali writes:

Then the scissors went down between my legs and the man cut off my inner labia and clitoris. I heard it, like a butcher snipping the fat off a piece of meat. A piercing pain shot up between my legs, indescribable, and I howled. Then came the sewing; the long, blunt needle clumsily pushed into my bleeding outer labia, my loud and anguished protests.... The sharp pain was still there, and my legs were covered in blood. I was sweating and shivering. (*The Caged Virgin* 32-33)

The entire process was a torture for both the girls, but the one who suffered the most was Haweya because the man made some bad cuts on her thighs. She carried the scars of them her whole life. Hirsi Ali is quick to point out that this didn't just happen to the women of her family, it happened to 140 million women around the world. And that is not counting the many millions of girls who died from their infections following surgery and others are traumatized for life from the experience and later suffer recurrent infections of their reproductive and urinary systems. And, of course, while circumcision is more a tribal, pre-Islamic practice than an Islamic practice, Hirsi Ali maintains that it has always been justified in Somalia in the name of Islam.

Hirsi Ali points out the high rates of domestic violence in Muslim families and the disproportionate number of Muslim women in women's shelters. Hirsi Ali narrates how she herself and her sister Haweya have to suffer a lot at the hand of their parents. They are brutally beaten by their parents at slight excuses and forced to do household duties. As the oldest daughter, Hirsi Ali is responsible for a great deal of domestic labour, and is punished by her mother if she fails to perform it unquestioningly. She writes:

When we were disobedient, we were beaten. My mother would catch me, pull my hair, fix my hands behind my back with rope, and put me down on the floor, on my belly. She tied my hands to my ankles, and then with a stick or a wire she would beat me until I begged for mercy and swore I would never do it again. (*Infidel* 70)

However, instead of making her submissive and obedient, her mother's beating her gradually turns her into a more defiant and argumentative girl. She says to her mother, "Go on. Get it over with – kill me. And if you don't do it now, I'll do it myself when you've let me go" (*Infidel* 76). In 2004 Hirsi Ali, in collaboration with Theo van Gogh, directed a short film *Submission*, a film about the oppression of women under Islam. In *Submission*, Hirsi Ali cites the example of Amina, a highly dedicated Muslim woman who adheres to the rules of the sharia dutifully and religiously. She is surrounded by many Muslim women who are treated brutally in the name of religion and cultural values. They suffer lots of abuse, marital rape, incest, and physical punishment. These acts of cruelty are justified by verses from the Quran. Amina feels sorry for the victims and identifies with their fate. "Every day she turns to Allah and prays fervently for an improvement in their circumstances, but Allah remains silent and the cruelties continue" (*The Caged Virgin* 142).

Hirsi Ali considers the arranged marriage as a socially sanctioned act of sexual violence as well as a blatant denial of the worth of the individual. She argues that "although the recently wedded pair often doesn't even know each other, they nevertheless must have intercourse on their wedding night. Even if the girl doesn't want to, and her body closes up in fear or disgust, she must. And even if her husband doesn't want to, either, he must demonstrate that he's a man and that he can perform. The wedding guests will wait outside until a bloodstained sheet has been displayed" (*The Caged Virgin* 24). She further asserts that marrying someone off is to make a young girl or a woman available to

a person completely unknown to her who is then allowed to use her body as an object to gratify his sexual desire. The younger the bride is, the greater are the chances that she will be a virgin. In essence, Hirsi Ali views it as an arranged rape of a girl approved of by her entire family. Moreover, to marry off a young girl usually implies that she is unable or not allowed to complete her education and rendered to the subservient position in the family where she completely loses her individuality and becomes a mental slave. Tragically, innumerable Muslim girls and young women still have to comply with this tradition.

Besides arranged marriage, Hirsi Ali also addresses the prevalent issue of forced marriages in Muslim societies, and the impact they have on women's lives. She emphasises that in forced marriages individuals, particularly women, are compelled to marry against their will. She argues that this practice can lead to significant personal and social distress. She strongly condemns this practice and calls for the recognition of individual autonomy in matters of marriage. She observes that many Muslim women have no say in choosing their husband. Hirsi Ali discusses her own experience with a forced marriage against her will, shedding light on the lack of freedom of choice that she faces in conservative societies. She narrates her journey of escaping from the forced marriage and seeking asylum in the Netherlands. This experience reflects the challenges faced by individuals who seek to break free from oppressive social norms.

Hirsi Ali's account of her forced marriage serves as a focal point, revealing the oppressive nature of cultural traditions that curtail individual freedom, particularly for women. The emotional and physical toll of this experience becomes a lens through which she critiques societal norms that undermine personal choice. At the age of 23, her father arranges her marriage to a man she had never met. But Hirsi Ali did not want to live the kind of life which her mother had lived. She writes:

I was given in marriage to a distant cousin, a nephew of my father's. Had we been married, I would have lived out my days in isolation as a housewife and mother. But I refused to attend the wedding ceremony, which was to be held in Canada, and shortly afterward I escaped to the Netherlands. (*The Caged Virgin* 1)

If Hirsi Ali had gone through with the ceremony, she would have lived her days in isolation as a housewife and mother or possibly much worse. She would have never had the opportunity to have the education and work experiences she has now. Her decision to escape from this arranged marriage can be seen as an act of resistance to the patriarchal system of society where the marriage renders women as an exchange object to unite families and society.

Wife beating is considered the recognized right of man and it is practiced by the poor as well as the wealthy. The daughter who refuses to marry the person of the parent's choice can be confined in the house and beaten by the parents. Marriage is not the outcome of love between two persons; instead, daughters are married off to a stranger to uphold the family's honour. Child marriages are not news at all. Women are puppets in the hands of men. But women

in fiction, as Virginia Woolf argues, are the other way round. Imaginatively, they are given higher position, they pervade poetry from cover to cover but practically they have no importance at all.

In addition to the violence against women such as domestic violence, female genital mutilation, forced marriages and wife beating, Hirsi Ali also delves into the disturbing practice of honour killings within families, where women are murdered by their own family members in the name of preserving family honour. Honour killings are not specific to any particular religion, nor are they confined to any one region of the world. Honour killing is a global phenomenon. It is the consequence of socio-psychic milieu of typical societies where certain patterns of human behaviour are recognized as disgrace or dishonour to families and communities. Human Rights Watch defines honour killings as “the acts of violence, usually murder, committed by male family members against female family members, who are held to have brought dishonour upon the family. A woman can be targeted by (individuals within) her family for a variety of reasons including – refusing to enter into an arranged marriage, being the victim of sexual assault, seeking divorce – even from an abusive husband or (allegedly) committing adultery. The mere perception that a woman has behaved in a specific way to dishonour her family is sufficient to trigger an attack” (“Violence Against Women and ‘Honor’ Crimes”). According to the Oxford Dictionary of Law Enforcement, “Honour killing is the purposeful pre-planned murder, generally of women, by or at the command of members of her family stipulated by a perception that she has brought shame on the family” (Gooch 77). According to Amnesty International, “Honour killing of a woman by a male relative is not an individual act of violence, but one which is collective, planned, sociologically predictable, and socially approved by both men and women in the family and community concerned” (3). Hirsi Ali states, “The fear of being killed in the name of honour weighs heavily on the shoulders of many young Muslim women” (*The Caged Virgin* 124). Hirsi Ali strongly condemns this practice and calls for its abolition. In her books, she sheds light on honour-based violence within families, where the reputation and perceived honour of the family are prioritized over the well-being and rights of individual family members. This can lead to practices such as honour killings. Hirsi Ali highlights instances where cultural and religious factors are invoked to justify violence against women, such as honour killings and female genital mutilation. She condemns these practices and calls for a re-evaluation of religious teachings that support such actions. She challenges the cultural and religious justifications for such acts, emphasizing the need to protect individual lives. She admits that honour killing is not an exclusively Muslim phenomenon. She asserts that honour killings predate Islam. However, she argues, honour killings are common in the Muslim world and Islamic clerics have shown a tacit acceptance of them (*Heretic* 146).

Hirsi Ali calls Islam not a religion of peace but one that breeds violence and relegates women into a secondary position. She critiques certain interpretations of the religious texts of Islam namely the Quran and the Hadith especially pertaining to the treatment of women, and goes to the extent of challenging the infallible position of Prophet Mohammad and sanctity of the Quran. She quotes the verses from the Quran which state that ‘men have authority over

women because God made one superior to the other'. She argues that Muslim religion and its cultural values have played a crucial role in the socialization, victimization and oppression of women in Islam. The dominance of men over women is reflected in verses where men have the right to subjugate, torture and reprimand their wives, physically too, if they do not comply with them. According to the Quran:

Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another, and for that they have expended of their property. Righteous women are therefore obedient, guarding the secret for God's guarding. And those you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches, and beat them. (Arberry 105-6)

In courts, it takes two women's testimony against one man's; divorce is unilateral preventing women from seeking divorce. The 'veil' and 'hijab' become the symbol of Islam's oppressive structure. Thus, it is the precepts of religion and the socio-cultural values that permit such punishments as wife beating, honour killing, domestic violence, etc. She considers Muhammad as a real man in the context of his time and the Quran as a historically constructed text, and not a divine instruction manual for life today. She advocates for a reinterpretation of religious texts to foster a more progressive and egalitarian approach within the faith.

Although the condition of women in all societies and religions throughout the world has remained the same, yet their position in Islam, Hirsi Ali argues, is worse than in any other religion and society, the reason being that the moral framework of Islam, unlike that of Christianity, Hinduism and Judaism, has not changed much with the passage of time. Since the violence against women in Islam is based on the treatment of women in the Quran, Hadith and the sharia laws, their violence is more severe and constant. The condition of women, as Ayaan Hirsi Ali puts it, is nowhere as bad as it is in Islamic world. She writes: "A Muslim woman is effectively the property of her father, brother, uncles, grandfathers. These men are her guardians, responsible for her behavior, in charge of her choices. Above all, she must remain sexually pure" (*Nomad* 154).

Hirsi Ali expresses her anger at the violence committed on men and women in the name of religion and cultural values in Saudi Arabia. In a subtly ironic manner, she writes: "If God was merciful, why did he demand that His creatures be hanged in public? If He was compassionate, why did unbelievers have to go to Hell? If Allah was almighty and powerful, why didn't He just make believers out of the unbelievers and have them all go to Paradise?" (*Infidel* 94). In her writings, Hirsi Ali also criticizes the acts of domestic violence. Hirsi Ali describes how she and her sister Haweya have to suffer a lot at the hand of their parents. They are brutally beaten by their parents at slight excuses and forced to do household duties. As the oldest daughter, Hirsi Ali is responsible for a great deal of domestic labour, and is punished by her mother if she fails to perform it unquestioningly. She writes:

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Although Hirsi Ali finds certain interpretations of Islam oppressive, she does not, altogether, reject its positive aspects. She acknowledges many good things in it, but when it comes to the position of women in Islam, she finds it oppressive and subjugating. She writes: "I do not despise Islam. I am thoroughly conscious of the noble values that the religion promotes, such as charity, hospitality, and compassion for the weak and poor. But for women, the situation is very different. In the name of Islam, women are subjected to cruel and horrible practices, including female genital mutilation and disownment, the latter a common practice in which women are cut off from their families both emotionally and financially for any perceived misbehavior" (*The Caged Virgin* 2-3). The British writer and journalist, Christopher Hitchens, in his best-seller *God Is Not Great* (2007), has rightly stated that organized religion is "the main source of hatred in the world," calling it "violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism, tribalism, and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children: [and that accordingly it] ought to have a great deal on its conscience" (72).

To sum up, violence against women remains as the central theme in Hirsi Ali's writings, shaping her narrative and emphasizing the importance of challenging oppressive systems to create a more equitable and free society, especially for women within Islam. Her writings extensively portray the violence against women committed in the name of religion and cultural values in Somali Muslim societies. She uses her personal experiences to advocate for women's rights, empowerment, and autonomy. Her personal narrative serves as a vehicle to shed light on the challenges faced by women in conservative Muslim communities. In her writings, Hirsi Ali critically examines and challenges traditional Islamic practices and beliefs, encouraging discourse on reform within Islam. Her writings aim to provoke thought and discussion regarding the need for change within conservative religious frameworks.

Violence against women functions as a barrier to attaining progress, equality, peace and the realization of women and girls' human rights. Moreover, the commitment of any nation for the Sustainable Development Goals to ensure inclusivity for all cannot be realized without ending violence against women and girls. The Canadian Panel on Violence against Women (1993) aptly states: "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" (qtd. in Parul Sinha 2017). In 2007 Hirsi Ali founded the women's rights organization, the Ayaan Hirsi Ali (AHA) Foundation, to protect and defend the rights of women in the United States from harmful traditional practices. Today the foundation is the

leading organization working to end violence that shames, hurts, or kills thousands of women and girls in the United States each year and puts millions more at risk.

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