

# Gender Violence in Modern Indian Society: Challenges and Prospects

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Theorists from time to time and from divergent angles have attempted to explain the differences between men and women and tried to find out the sources of women's subordination to men. Biological explanation given by Mill suggests that the reason for women's submission was the superior strength of the men in the earliest stage of society. Anthropologists like Henry Maine and J.J Bachofen hold that the patriarchal system of authority was the original and universal system of social organization. Marxist thinkers like Engel's established that with the use of private property the status of women declined. To him, the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude and the female "became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for production of children".

The most extreme form of patriarchy as prevalent in India a hundred years ago was premised upon male predominance and female subordination and subservience, the woman's wife-mother role as her *raison d'être*, and her status as the legal, economic and sexual property of her husband.<sup>1</sup> This was sacralised through the ancient Hindu socio-legal treatises. A woman's life was confined to the walls of the extended family. The extended family spanned several generations and comprised the patriarch and his younger brothers with their families, all the unmarried sons and daughters were not entitled to a share in this indivisible property and were therefore compensated at marriage with a smaller share of the moveable property, especially jewellery, clothes and household articles. This bridal portion was intended to be treated strictly as her "woman's wealth" solely under her control; but was eventually transmuted into "dowry" to which her husband and marital family laid claim. The economic dependence caused by the loss of assets was considerably aggravated in those regions where women were largely economically inactive.<sup>2</sup> The male monopoly of domestic authority and decision making powers increased women's dependence on their husbands and grown up sons through whom alone they could access power.

The contemporary Indian society displays a wide spectrum of gender-related value system and cultural practices with related types of violence. But even in well-educated, urban and relatively well off backgrounds, though the value system is less harshly patriarchal, gender discrimination and oppression still continue. The undesirability of daughters still remains deeply entrenched in the Indian psyche and a new form of eliminating girl babies through female foeticide is becoming prevalent. This is a telling example of the ways in which "modern

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<sup>1</sup>Mies (1980) gives a detailed picture of the ancient Hindu variant of patriarchy.

<sup>2</sup>Miller (1981) points out a north-south divide in India on the basis of women's gainful employment outside the home which she correlates with the incidence of violence against them

“scientific knowledge is employed for anti-woman ends.<sup>3</sup> It is quite surprising that on the one hand women are glorified and worshipped as the symbol of power (shakti), while on the other hand they are always considered inferior and subordinate. The underlying socio-cultural values are intricately woven into all forms of violence perpetrated against women.

Recognizing the complexity of the issue and many forms of violence against women that exist, one cannot account for a single factor to be the reason for violence perpetrated against women. The social location of violence suggests that there are several complex and interconnected factors which occur at various social and cultural contexts that have kept women particularly vulnerable to violence. The violence directed at women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women. Factors contributing to these unequal power relations include: socio-economic forces, the family institution where power relations are enforced, fear of control over female sexuality, belief in inherent superiority of males, and certain cultural sanctions that have traditionally denied women and children independent social status. Feminists would reiterate the fact that male violence is integral to the patriarchal social order.

Violence against women in the social structure is supported and reinforced by gender norms and values that put women in subordinate position than men. This cuts across all social classes, religion and education levels. While there are still variation by class, race, geography or region, unequal gender relations has been identified by feminists and other scholars as a cornerstone of structural violence. The specific cultural context plays an important role in defining the mechanisms through which gender inequality and other factors affect violence. Many of the factors identified are closely related to norms and values around gender and social equity. While at the level of family, male dominance and male control of wealth appear important, at macro social level, it is notions of male entitlement/ ownership of women, masculinity linked to aggression and dominance, rigid gender roles, and acceptance of interpersonal violence as a means of resolving conflict. (Heise, 1998)

Cultural ideologies in a country like India provide a kind of ‘legitimacy’ for violence against women in certain circumstances. Religious and historical traditions in the past have sanctioned the chastising and beating of wives. The physical punishment of wives has been particularly sanctioned under the notion of entitlement and ownership of women. Male control of family wealth inevitably places decision- making authority in male hands, leading to male dominance and proprietary rights over women and girls. The concept of ownership legitimizes control over women’s sexuality which in many law codes has been deemed essential to ensure patrilineal inheritance. The National Research Council Review in the U.S.A. states that several studies support the fact that “men raised in patriarchal family structures in which traditional gender roles are encouraged are more likely to become violent adults, to rape acquaintances and to batter their intimate partners than men raised in more egalitarian homes”(National Academy of Science 1992). The cross-cultural anthropological and ethnographic studies of violence against women, such as that of Levinson (1989) and the review of 14 cultures by Counts, Brown and Campbell (1992), also identify the role of social and cultural mores, including those around gender relations, in the acceptance and promotion of violence against women. Counts et al found that

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<sup>3</sup>Agnes (1995) has made analysis of the legislations pertaining to women

the presence and severity of wife beating range from very frequent to almost non-existent, although physical chastisement of wives was tolerated and even considered necessary in most societies. Cultures with a 'macho' concept of masculinity, associated with dominance, toughness or male honour also were found to have higher overall levels of violence against women (Campbell, 1985). Cultural norms around violence, gender and sexual relationships are not only manifested at the individual level but are re-enforced by the family, the community and the broader social context, including the media.

Dobash and Dobash (1992) have shown how historically husbands' domination over wives, including the use of violence, has been sanctioned by cultural beliefs. In many societies violence is considered 'normal' and a prerogative of men. The socialization of boys and girls often reflects related cultural norms and values. In this regard Kenneth Boulding in his 'three faces of power' addresses the distribution of power by examining the social structure of power. He focuses on the hierarchical nature of power thereby claiming that exercise of power over humans is greatly complicated by persons' independent wills. The old saying that "power corrupts" recognizes the potential for some exercise of power to become pathological. Boulding holds that it is not merely power which may be corrupting but also its influence and even powerlessness. So, unequal distribution of power within the patriarchal structure can have harmful consequences for women.

### **Structural Violence and Its Costs**

The consequences of violence against women are far reaching. It impacts all aspects of women's lives, their health and that of their children, and also on larger society. In addition, there are innumerable ways in which violence perpetuates itself. Violence is sustained by inequality and in turn perpetuates inequality. However the most crucial consequence of violence against women is the denial of fundamental rights to them. Violence within these patriarchal structures though increasingly recognized as a cause of injury among women, its impact on women's mental health and on their sexual and reproductive health is less well recognized. Structural violence within the family like forced sex can directly lead to an unwanted pregnancy or a sexually transmitted infection, including HIV/AIDS. Violence also occurs during pregnancy with consequences not just for the woman, but also on the foetus or the infant. A study in India found a powerful association between women's experiences of 'wife-beating' and infant and foetal loss, even after controlling for education and parity (Jeejeebhoy, 1998)<sup>4</sup>.

Mental and health consequences of structural violence are described below:

- Physical health consequences include injury, unwanted pregnancy, miscarriage, HIV/AIDS,
- Mental health consequences include depression, permanent disabilities, low performance rates etc. Fear, anxiety, sexual dysfunctions, neurosis, obsessive behaviour etc.

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<sup>4</sup>Jeejeebhoy, S, Associations Between Wife-Beating and Fetal And Infant Death: Impressions from a Survey in Rural India, 1998

Structural violence embedded in the patriarchal structures of Indian society has many harmful consequences for women and it lower their performance levels due to increased subordination and subjugation to the established patriarchal order. Invisible forms of violence have considerably affected women and impact of violence on women's mental health leads to severe and fatal consequences. There is growing recognition that countries cannot reach their full potential as long as women's potential to participate equally in their society is denied. Data on the social, economic and health costs of violence leave no doubt that violence against women undermines progress towards human and economic development. However, calculating the cost of violence is a strategic intervention to make policy makers more aware about the importance and effectiveness of prevention.

The problem becomes more serious when we analyze the costs of social violence which are numerous. the direct costs for violence against women include lives lost as well as costs of services provided such as expenditures on medical treatment and psychological counselling, legal protection, providing housing and shelters for women and social services. On the other hand indirect costs for any form of violence include days of work lost reduced productivity and its impact on overall economy. There are many indirect costs which are difficult to measure like increased morbidity and mortality, suicide and homicide, chronic pain, suffering, drug abuse, depressive disorders, loss of opportunities to pursue one's goals, and loss of self-esteem. Violence also affects interpersonal relationships and reduces the quality of life. Moreover violence undermines women's sense of self-worth, their sense of autonomy, their ability to feel and act as independent, capable women.

### **Intervention Strategies**

While women 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, it would be naïve to assume that women have always been the passive victims of violence. Like any oppressed category, the given (patriarchal) structure in their everyday life and offer resistance in many ways and degrees at the individual and collective levels. Bina Agarwal (1994) 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. She refers to a kind of resistance which may range from various degrees of non-compliance to patriarchal authority in everyday life to open and organized confrontation.

The women's movement in India launched campaigns against rape, domestic violence and sexism in advertisements as well as against state repression during caste and communal riots in the early eighties. The decade of the eighties was marked by the campaign culture in which women's groups with different priorities and ideological positions had to evolve a network amongst them to combat powerful patriarchal forces operating within the institution of family, state and civil society. Building up campaigns in an atmosphere of large scale ignorance about women's constitutional provisions forced the women's groups to approach the print media. In the initial period of campaign building, the most empowering influence was that of sharing of experience of violence in one's own life, in the neighbourhood, in the community and at the workplace. This broke the isolation brought about due to guilt and helplessness in which women find them when confronted by violence. Several campaigns were launched against the degrading portrayal of women in films and against

newspaper forefronts on victims of violence which concentrated on their attire and nature. An increasing number of women joining or film and theatre division has also helped the process.

Many women's rights activists have overcome the initial antipathy towards writing for mainstream newspapers or magazines and participating in radio or television programmes. Women's groups have published their newsletters and periodicals in regional languages to reach out to their sympathizers. However the initiative of the campaign against gender violence came from the government of Maharashtra around the end of the 1975-1985 U.N. Decade. It sponsored the poster exhibition prepared by a Pune based feminist group and circulated it nationally. The same government passed an act to regulate antenatal sex determination tests. Legal awareness about the constitution to deal with gender violence has received top priority in recent times on the electronic media. The National Commission for women set up by the government of India has taken up several cases of violence against women perpetrated by the custodians of law and order in different parts of India.

There is no denying the fact that in the era of globalization campaigns against gender violence has crossed boundaries. The efforts of women's organizations all over the globe have culminated in campaign resulting in slogans like "violence against women is the violation of human rights" included in the U.N charter on human rights. Women's groups in India have taken the campaign initiated by the centre for global issues and women's leadership quite seriously. In the U.N tribunal on violence against women –rape as a war crime, many feminists made presentations on the Indian situation. The women's movement in India has gained a lot in terms of successful campaignbuilding from resource material from the international women's tribune centre. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) is also working towards gender equality. A three-day regional conference on 'Development Effectiveness through Gender Mainstreaming' was jointly hosted by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IRDC) on 10th may 2005. The Conference addressed important issues on gender equality thereby focusing on attitudinal transformation which was more important than economic returns. In today's multiculturalism, with electronic media penetrating the remotest corner of the global village, international campaign –building has become the only answer to combat newer forms of violence against women that are marketed from different parts of the world.

Despite the long history of women's movement in India and several other countries, however, it has not been possible to institutionalize some counter strategies and deal with the pervasive issue of violence effectively. Violence against women is a complex problem and the strategies adopted should be multi-faceted order to facilitate various sections of society. Considering the interconnections between factors like gender dynamics of power, culture etc there is a growing need to design strategies and interventions within a comprehensive and integrated framework. An effective strategy is one that is designed to be culture and region specific, providing victim-survivors easy access to wide-ranging services, and involving the community and individuals in the design of interventions.

The interventions have traditionally focused on the police, the legal and judicial system, and increasingly the health sector. But occasionally the training may include looking at the social construction of gender and power

relationships, but most often it does not and training programmes rarely address the structural barriers that may make it difficult to put the training into practice. For example training programmes in health care settings would be most useful if they address broader issues of interaction and communication with patients, and gender and sexuality, rather than focusing exclusively on violence. In order for training to be effective, there must be long term goals and strategies to ensure that the necessary structural changes accompany the training. However the intervention strategies at various levels of the family, community and society at large can be adopted. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, which was notified on October 25, 2006, has come to the fore. It offers women victims of domestic violence civil remedies of a kind not available to them earlier.

Women need to be empowered through education, employment opportunities, legal literacy, and right to inheritance. Human rights education and information regarding violence should be provided to them which are a matter of their absolute rights. The local community needs to be mobilized to oppose any form of violence. Community information and education programmes regarding the nature and unacceptability of any form of violence should be developed. Violence also demands new levels of coordination and integration between varieties of government sectors including the criminal justice system, health, education and employment. In terms of other interventions it becomes certainly important to have more men address violence against women as an issue and to take some responsibility for changing the social norms and values that allow this gross violation of human rights to go on unquestioned (Piot P, 1999). Finally, it can be said that interventions that focus on programmes aiming at an early age that help to shape and promote more equitable gender relations and on violent forms of conflict resolution may be important interventions to initiate change in the prevailing norms.

## Conclusion

Structural or cultural violence against women in the form of access to education, jobs, and leadership opportunities act as serious impediments in the peace building process. Because of the patriarchal context that discriminates against women and women's experiences, women's group require ongoing opportunities to analyze and articulate the forms of violence women experience in each particular context. The social location of structural violence helps in unmasking the gruesome patriarchal structures where women are victimized and their social roles are limited. Though our country has witnessed immense women's activism yet violence against women continues to be perpetual phenomena, the reason being certain invisible forms of violence are confined to the four walls of the patriarchal structure without any resistance offered by women. Here, structural violence would continue to exist if women do not realize the seriousness of the consequences which such invisible forms of violence would have on them. The social location of violence becomes imperative in order to understand and interpret the meaning of such forms of violence so that it becomes easy to remove violence from its roots which is so deeply embedded in the patriarchal structure.

The post-modern world is about images; treating social suffering so that it is as "natural as the air around us". We do so by managing images and interpretations of what is going on. Social workers and other professionals are, too often, there to help us 'cope'. Structural violence persists because we are, in considerable measure, trained to forget and encouraged to reframe public problems as personal, or, as Farmer puts it with regard to a

country like Haiti, “social suffering is structured by historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces that conspire ... to constrain agency.”<sup>5</sup> It would therefore become an important strategy to combat violence if women become active participants in socializing men with certain moral standards and inculcating in them certain values of patience and perseverance and above all preaching them equality.

Women who are silent victims of the established patriarchal order need to break the silence and take responsibility to combat violence in a peaceful manner. Moreover in this vicious cycle it would be wrong to premise that men are always perpetrators. In fact, it is increasingly becoming evident that to break this cycle of violence against women, men have to be made equal partners in the process and as a part of solution.

However genuine peace would mean the elimination of unjust social and economic relations, including unequal gender relations. The values concerning “attachment with community” needs to be inculcated among the people. A sustainable notion of peace and security would not mean that “autonomy” and “power” which were conventionally seen as masculine values be replaced by feminine values. The idea here is not to replace a masculine discourse with a feminine discourse, but rather to transform the highly gendered contemporary discourse into one that privileges the values of pluralism, inclusivity and equity for human beings.

It is women who most often are victims of such structural violence. Just as violence is more than its physical manifestations, peace is more than its “negative” that is the absence of any violence. It is a belief that women’s accessibility to the understanding of peace in its most positive sense is more highly tuned than that of men since the entire notion of nurture and associated with them. Positive peace means a peace that includes the notions of “enough for everyone” and universal access to educational, cultural and political opportunities. Women, because they have more invested in building positive peace by virtue of their roles as caretakers and nurturers of the next generation, have more often than men advocated for viewing peace in this more holistic way. In the United States, and also in other countries, during the early days of the development of peace studies as an academic discipline, it was women researchers who argued consistently for a more broad and inclusive way of looking at the concept of security.

Some feminists have been reluctant to go too far with this conceptualization, at the risk of “essentializing” women, meaning that women in this context are seen as inherently pacifist, loving, giving and nurturing all of the time. These views of women have, historically, excluded women from the more public and political sources of power. Seeing women only as pacifist ignores the reality that there have been many women warriors and that men who go to war have mothers and wives who often support their endeavors. Women may not be inherently more peaceful than men. It may be that perception of close relationship between women and peace is a result of our shared cultural and social history. However, seeds of societal transformation lie in those skills possessed by many women, rooted as they are in female cultural socialization toward relationships, connectedness and networking.

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<sup>5</sup>D Levinson, *Family Violence in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1989).

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