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GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

CULTURAL DETERMINANTS AND POWER DIMENSIONS

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ABSTRACT

Gender Based Violence (GBV), a sub-type of violence, has strong social and cultural determinants. The intentional use of power - physical, social and economic – against women results into physical, emotional and psychological injuries. Gender Based Violence reflects the uneven power relations existing in society and the social contexts in which violence is perpetrated. Determinants of gender based violence perpetuate these offenses and the social and cultural contexts provide reasons for the supposed admissibility of these violence.

Key words : Violence, Gender-Based Violence, Social Determinants, Cultural Determinants, Domestic Violence, Honour Killings, Acid Attacks, Physical Violence, Emotional Violence, and Psychological Violence.

INTRODUCTION

Gender Based Violence (GBV) of various types and intensities is universally seen in all societies. It is important to recognise that such violence is not restricted to any particular period of time or any particular community. Spatially and temporally, gender based violence has persisted in spite of the fact that a great majority of society considers it as an evil. Violence as an intentional use of physical force or power leading to harm occurs at all levels – individual, group, community and national and international levels. Therefore, the phenomenon of gender based violence has evoked significant degree of

sociological interest. These explorations into gender based violence, its causative factors and manifestations, have yielded considerable insights into violence in general and gender based violence in particular which connect practically all social institutions and processes at various levels.

Sociologically, the phenomenon of violence has been a focus of study considering its pervasive nature. Before discussing the various dimensions and causative factors of violence and gender based violence as a type of violence, it is necessary to understand the meaning of violence. World Health Organisation (WHO) defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development, or deprivation”. This popular definition clarifies that the various forms of violence vary considerably in terms of degree of severity and injury to the victim.

Sociologists have been studying incidences of violence for ascertaining whether violence is a manifestation of a disorder or a determinant of a disorder. While analysing violence, two major aspects come to the fore. The first one clarifies that violence has a social context. In other words, violence like any other form of behaviour is highly contextual. It is impossible to think that there could be a universal parameter for violence that will objectively determine what is or is not violent without accounting for factors. The second aspect of violence is that it has social determinants. Social determinants of violence proceed from the assumption that violence has a social context or violence is perpetrated in social interactivity.

The sub-category of violence that has strong interactivity with social context is gender based violence. This form of violence indicates the uneven power

relations that are defined by society for men and women. "Gender-based violence is the general term used to capture violence that occurs as a result of the normative role expectations associated with each gender, along with the unequal power relationships between the two genders, within the context of a specific society" (Bloom, 2008).

TYPES OF VIOLENCE

Generally violence is categorised as

- (i) physical violence,
- (ii) emotional violence and
- (iii) psychological or mental violence.

This categorisation is primarily on the basis of the nature of damage caused by violence. World Report on Violence and Health (WRVH) makes a more relevant classification of violence based on the nature and direction of violence. The first category 'Self-directed' violence refers to violence in which the perpetrator and the victim are the same individual and is subdivided into self-abuse and suicide. Examples of self-abuse could be drug habits, alcoholism etc. The second category is 'Interpersonal' violence which refers to violence between individuals. Interpersonal violence is subdivided into family and intimate partner violence and community violence. Wife-battering, dowry harassment child maltreatment, abuse of elders and similar violence happening within families fall in this category. Similarly, intimate partner violence is further broken down into acquaintance and stranger violence and includes youth violence, assault by strangers, violence related to property crimes, and violence in workplaces and other institutions. The third form of violence is 'Collective' violence which refers to violence committed by larger groups of individuals. Collective violence can be subdivided into social, political and economic violence.

GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN INDIA

Like any other society, Indian society has always been struggling to contain Gender Based Violence of different types. Though the incidence of such violence varies from region to region and community to community, it is seen in all groups and communities in uneven numbers and severities. Number of violence and crimes appearing in newspapers is indicative of the extent of violence in Indian society. The major types of commonly reported gender based violence in India are sexual violence, domestic violence, honour killings, acid attacks, economic violence, emotional violence and physical violence.

The types, pattern and extent of violence in India indicate strongly that gender based violence has underlying social determinants. This, however, does not imply that all forms of violence are entirely social in nature. While admitting that violence can be caused by other determinants, it needs to be clarified that many forms of violence have social precipitating factors. A pointed inquiry into the major forms of violence like honour killings, caste-based violence, gender-based violence and violence in families will reveal the sociological aspects of violence.

India has a very strong patriarchal system which has not only been defining roles of men and women but reinforcing these traditionally defined role systems with a normative framework. Indian society, since it being a patriarchal edifice, has traditionally accorded greater importance to men as compared to women. The differences in social positioning and the resultant role domination of men have led to several forms of violence in which women are pushed to the receiving end. Analysis of three types of violence targeted at women i.e., honour killings, gender-based violence and acid attacks on women will clarify to a great extent the social determinants of violence in Indian context.

Honour Killings: Though honour killing is reported from various parts of the world, India – particularly – north Indian states have witnessed high number of killings for purportedly protecting the pride of a family. An honour killing is the homicide of a member of a family or social group by other members, due to the belief the victim has brought dishonour upon the family or community. The death of the victim is often viewed as a way to restore the reputation and honour of the family. In states like Haryana honour killings were justified by ‘*Khap* panchayats’ or kangaroo courts that generally consist of male village elders who hold values that covertly endorse killings in the name of saving ‘family’s honour’. Many sociologists and activist groups hold ‘*Khap* panchayats’ responsible for endorsing patriarchy and reinforcing the subjugation of women in society which result in honour killings. Generally, in Indian society, the onus for upholding the family morality falls only on women. If woman dares to choose a life partner, other than the one chosen by her family, she violates family’s honour. In such cases, she and her lover face death as a consequence. The number of honour killings in India has risen alarmingly over the years. It is reported that one in five cases of honour killing internationally every year comes from India. Of the 5000 cases reported internationally, 1000 are from India (*Honour Based Violence Awareness Network*). With the increasing number of honour killings ‘*Khap* panchayats’, kangaroo courts and self-elected village councils have become infamous.

Domestic Violence: Women have historically been at the receiving end of violence at home. Some of the most common forms of domestic violence are dowry killings, battering and abuse. In India, the incidence of gender based violence has been disquieting. “It is estimated that one in every five women faces some form of violence during her lifetime and in some cases leading to serious injury or death” (*Himanshu and Panda, 2007*). The number of dowry deaths reported from 2001 to 2012 had touched 91,202 (*National Crime*

Records Bureau, 2012). The NCRB report of 2012 also says that the average dowry death per 1,00,000 in India is 0.7. It touches as high as 1.1 - 1.4 in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Odisha. 24,771 dowry deaths were reported in the country from 2012-2014 (*Written reply in Lok Sabha, by Maneka Gandhi, July 2015*). Besides, the incidents of dowry deaths had increased by 14.4 per cent from 1998 (*NCRB-2012*).

Acid Attacks on Women: Another disturbing form of violence that has shaken the country's conscience in the recent past is acid attacks on women. 309 acid attacks on girls were reported in the year 2014 alone (*Indian Express, Apr 10, 2015*). Uttar Pradesh had topped the list of acid attacks with 185 cases till November 2014, followed by Madhya Pradesh with 53 cases. Thousands of young women who have survived acid attacks are forced to live with physical, psychological and social scars. It is found that husbands use acid on wives for disciplining or punishing them. Acid attacks are nowadays used as revenge against a woman who rejects a proposal of marriage or sexual advances. In India's patriarchal society, men who take offence at being spurned turn to acid as a retributive weapon. There are instances when religious fanatics have had acid thrown on the face of girl children as a punishment for attending school. Such attacks are common where there is a high level of gender inequality and women occupy a subordinate position in relation to men.

UNFPA appropriately sums up the nature and severity of gender based violence. "The primary targets of GBV are women and adolescent girls, but not only are they at high risk of GBV; they also suffer exacerbated consequences as compared with what men endure. As a result of gender discrimination and their lower socio-economic status, women have fewer options and less resources at their disposal to avoid or escape abusive situations and to seek justice" (UNFPA Strategy and Framework for Action to Addressing GBV, 2008-2011).

CONCLUSION

All actions of individuals and groups are in many ways influenced by various social factors like traditions, customs, values and norms. These cultural factors start influencing persons from the time of their birth and thus determine their perceptions, behaviour and social relationships. Several cases of violence where women are targeted have revealed that the perpetrators had resorted to violence when the victim deviated from the traditionally reinforced image or role-set of women.

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