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Threatening Peace: Violence against Women
—A Universal Phenomenon

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Abstract

Violence against Women (VAW) is the most shameful act of human rights violation. It is like an epidemic which destroys the lives of women all around the world. VAW is actually a latent form of war that takes place in every corner of the world, affecting millions of women all through their lives. This heinous act is not only a threat to the enjoyment of basic human rights but it also affects the future potentiality of women's involvement in both the private and public sphere. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyze the relationship between VAW and peace. As long as women are subject to violence, we cannot achieve a truely peaceful world. As women constitute half the world's population, it is high time that we should give earnest effort eradicating this problem and paving way for peace.

Keywords: Violence against Women, physical violence, structural violence, negative peace, positive peace.

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Introduction:

Violence against Women (VAW) is a global epidemic that kills, tortures, maims millions of women physically, psychologically, sexually and economically. It is one of the most pervasive of human rights violations, denying women their equality, dignity, security, self worth and their right to enjoy fundamental freedom. It is as old as human civilization and it crosses all social, cultural, educational, ethnic, religious and regional boundaries. It's a major problem in every country that occurs both in private and public sphere instilling fear and insecurity in women's lives. The global dimension of this violence is alarming and no country can claim to be free of this problem. In USA, a woman is raped in every six minutes, in North Africa 6000 women are genitally mutilated each day and nearly 15000 women are sold in the sex industry every year in China (Amnesty International, 2005). This statistics shows that VAW is rooted in a global culture of discrimination denying women's equal rights with men. Violence against Women has been taking place for a long time, affecting the lives of many women but only recently, in the decade of 1990's to be more precise, it has recognised as a violation of human rights and an obstacle to the achievement of peace.

Defining Violence & Peace:

Traditionally violence means illegal use of force. To many people, violence is associated with physical incapacitation with killing as the extreme form by an actor who intends this to be the consequence. (Smoker, Davies, Munske, 1990) It is the definition of direct violence which is more visible in the society. This means that violence is present when –

- someone is physically hurt or killed,
- there has to be an actor who is doing this and
- violence is intentional.

Direct violence is highly talked about issue in every society because the victim can instantly recognize it and often can make complaints against the perpetrator. For example, personal violence, riot, war etc. The absence of this type of violence is negative peace.

But, according to famous peace researcher Johun Galtung there is another type of violence which is present in almost every society. More hidden in nature, it is called structural violence (Smoker, Davies, Munske, 1990). This means that the society is structured in such a way that violence is taking place. In structural violence there is no single actor to blame and most of the time the victims take it for granted as they are not aware of this type of violence. The inequalities in world resources, trade balances resulting in increased number of starving population in the developing worlds, malnutrition among the children, increasing number of dropping children from the schools, internal displacement of people can be unique example of structural violence. To be more precise poverty, hunger, discriminations like racism, sexism, apartheid etc can be associated with structural violence. This structural violence is often synonymous with social injustice and absence of this, is positive peace. There is another type of violence which is cultural violence. Cultural violence is associ-

ated with those cultural aspects which are used for direct or structural violence (Smoker, Davies, Munske, 1990).

It is to be noted that all these examples of violence are inter-related and one type of violence can trigger another one. For example, cultural violence can influence structural violence and then it can easily lead to direct violence. This broader definition helps us to realize that in order to have a stable peaceful world we need to tackle not only direct violence but also structural and cultural violence. At the same time our goal should be not only to achieve negative peace that is only absence of war, conflict or personal violence but also to achieve positive peace that is social justice.

From Johun Galtung's view, we get the broader definition of violence which simultaneously gives us the idea of the broader version of peace. Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations (Smoker, Davies, Munske, 1990). Here, violence is the difference between what could be and what it is. For example, if in a developed country like Japan, a person dies from tuberculosis, it will reflect the presence of violence because this person was supposed to live longer and get proper medical facilities. Similarly, in Bangladesh when a girl drops out from the school because of poverty, it also reflects violence. Because, the girl has been deprived of the right to get education and failed to use her potentiality. Although, there is consensus on somatic realization based on average life expectancy but there is no agreed consensus on mental realization because it may vary from people to people. But, the most important thing about Galtung's idea is that it gives us the opportunity to work on violence and peace from a broader platform which encompasses all the aspects of human society.

Elaborating Violence against Women:

According to the United Nations Declarations on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) the term VAW implies any act of gender based violence that results in or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, as well as threat of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life (UNICEF, 2000). This definition refers to the roots of gender based violence, which is part of social mechanism where women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men. Women's lives and potentiality continue to be endangered by violence simply because they are women. The definition of violence includes both the physical and psychological harm done towards women and also includes acts occuring in both the private and public life. VAW takes place even before birth and continues until a woman becomes old. There are many types of violence that occurs in the society, including domestic violence by intimate partner, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, female genital mutilation, honour killing etc. But VAW is seen differently in different parts of the world. For example, the right of a husband to beat his wife is a widely held conviction. But, this type of act by intimate partner is violence against women. Female genital mutilation, which is another act of violence towards women, is a widely practiced traditional system in North Africa (UNIFEM, 1998). To them, it

is a useful procedure for women's health. Or, the so called Honour killing where a woman who has been raped, is killed by the male member of her family to protect the honour of the family and most of the time the man does not get any punishment for doing it (UNICEF, 2000). So, it can be said that an act which tantamount to be violence is seen as completely normal practice in many parts of the world. Moreover, in many societies the victims are either too shy or ignorant to bring this issue to justice. That is why, although VAW exits in all around the world in large scale, only a small section of women get proper justice and others suffer this inhuman violation of human rights.

Major Types of Violence Committed against Women:

VAW is rampant in all corners of the world. It is a cycle of abuse that manifests throughout a woman's life. Even before a girl is born, she may be the target of gender selective abortion. In infancy she may be subject to female infanticide. In adulthood she may be a victim of batter, rape, forced prostitution or sometimes killing. It is a major cause of violation of human rights that manifests in a number of ways, including—

a) Domestic violence:

Family is the place where a person can seek safety and security but reports show that for many women family is the breeding ground of brutal forms of violence. It is the most prevalent but relatively hidden and ignored form of violence against women. It occurs in all countries and often referred to as violence by intimate partners. Violence in the domestic sphere is usually perpetrated by males who are, or who have been, in positions of trust and intimacy and power – husbands, boyfriends, fathers, fathers-in-law, stepfathers, brothers, uncles, sons, or other relatives. It can take a variety of forms including physical assault such as- hits, slaps, kicks, beating, killing; psychological and emotional abuse such as-constant belittling, intimidation, humiliation and of course sexual abuse. This violence is universal occurring in developed countries with the same frequency as in the developing countries. For example, in Canada, 29% of women reported of being physically assaulted by their former or current partner since the age of 16 (UNICEF, 2000). Also, according to another report, 62% of Canadian women murdered in 1987 died at the hands of their spouse. In France, 95% victims of violence are women and 51% of them are the victims of domestic violence. In USA, a woman is battered in 15 seconds and domestic violence poses the single largest threat of injury to adult women in USA (UNIFEM, 1998). Out of ten counties surveyed in a 2005 study by the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 50 percent of women in Ethiopia, Peru and Tanzania reported having been subjected to physical or sexual violence by intimate partners, with figures reaching staggering 71 percent in rural Ethiopia (UNIFEM, 2007). In Bangladesh, killing of women by their husbands account for 50% of all murders (Sheparuddin, 2001).

b) Sexual Violence:

Sexual violence is pervasive throughout the world. Women suffer from this violence not only by their intimate partners but also by non intimate partners like- relative, friend, acquaintance, neigh-

bour, work colleague or stranger. Estimates of the prevalence of sexual violence by non intimate partners are difficult to establish because in many societies, sexual violence remains an issue of deep shame for women and often for their families. Some of the major forms of sexual violence are mentioned below:

Rape: It is the worst form of intimidation used by men to demonstrate their dominant position. It is estimated that worldwide, one in five women will become a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime (UNIFEM, 2007). Rape by an intimate partner is not considered as a crime in most countries. The assumption is that once a woman enters into a contract of marriage, the husband has the right to unlimited sexual access to his wife. Surveys in many countries reveal that approximately 10 to 15 percent of women report being forced to have sex with their intimate partner (UNICEF, 2000). In South Africa, a woman is raped in every 90 seconds, totalling approximately 320,000 women raped each year. In USA, a woman is raped in every 6 minutes (UNDESA, 1995). An average of seven women was raped daily in the Philippines in 2002, the same average recorded in 2001 (www.nscb.gov.ph). According to the Pakistan Human Rights Commission, a woman is raped every two hours in Pakistan, and in Punjab, a woman is raped every six hours and gang-raped in every four days (Amnesty International, 2005).

Sexual abuse: It is part of the daily indignities women suffer on the street, in the work place and even in home. Teasing, jeering, unwanted touch and punching of their bodies are common examples. In the national sample surveys in Barbados, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and USA, 27%-34% of women interviewed reported sexual abuse during their childhood or adolescence (UNDESA, 1995). According to the 2005 multi-country study on domestic violence undertaken by the WHO, between 10 and 12 percent of women in Peru, Samoa and Tanzania have suffered sexual violence by non-partners after the age of 15 (UNIFEM, 2007).

Forced prostitution and trafficking: Trafficking and forced prostitution is internationally recognized human rights violation. Despite the presence of international legislations, this heinous crime is taking place all around the world. Trafficking involves the recruitment and transportation of persons, using deception, coercion and threats in order to place and keep them in a situation of forced labour, slavery or servitude (UNICEF, 2000). Persons are trafficked into a variety of sectors of the informal economy, including prostitution, domestic work, agriculture, the garment industry or street begging. While exact data are hard to come by, estimates of the number of trafficked persons range from 500,000 to two million per year, and a few organizations have estimated that up to four million persons are trafficked every year (UNIFEM, 2007). Although women, men, girls and boys can become victims of trafficking, the majority of victims are female. In South Africa, child prostitution is on the rise and has become an increasingly organized activity (UNICEF, 2000). According to UNICEF, each year at least 10000 women enter into Thailand and end up in commercial sex work. Some 5000-7000 young girls from Nepal are sold into Indian brothel each year (UNDESA, 1995). In Northern Ghana and parts of Togo, girls are "donated" to priests, and are forced to live as "wives" and submit sexually to the shrine priests in return for protection for the family. A similar practice

exists in southern India where young women and girls (*devadasis*) are "donated" to serve a temple; and very often end up being prostituted (UNICEF,2000). A 1992 report of the Netherlands Advisory Committee on Human Rights suggests that trafficking of thousands of women take place in Netherlands only for the purpose of prostitution (UNIFEM, 1998).

Female Genital Mutilation: Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a part of ritualistic practice where the actual cutting and removal of sex organ takes place in the name of chastity and genital purity. It has been estimated that nearly 130 million women worldwide have undergone FGM and approximately two million undergo the procedure every year (UNICEF, 2000). FGM takes place in 28 countries in Africa (both eastern and western), in some regions in Asia and the Middle East, and in certain immigrant communities in North America, Europe and Australia. It can lead to death and infertility, and long-term psychological trauma combined with extreme physical suffering.

Gender selective abortion and infanticide: Some girls are rejected even before birth. Access to prenatal tests such as ultra sound scanning, which select the sex of an unborn child, is sufficiently widespread in many countries. When this technology was widely available, thousands of female foetuses which were identified were aborted. This reflects the traditional attitude of the society where higher value is placed on sons. In India, a survey reported 10000 infanticides annually (UNICEF, 2000). Even if the female baby survives the womb, she may not survive infancy because of systematic discrimination against baby girls. Girls in many developing countries receive less nourishment than boys and they are more likely to suffer mental or physical disability or even die, as a result of poor nutrition. Less access to health care also exacerbates the much higher mortality rate among girls (UNICEF, 2000).

c) Women in Conflict & Marginalized Situation:

When war breaks out, women and girls face the most risk and danger. Not just the risk of being killed and injured but also the risk of being raped, sexually assaulted. Sexual violence against women is an integral part of nearly every armed conflict and is often committed by every party involved. In addition to armed opposition groups, women living in conflict situations are routinely subject to sexual violence at the hands of security forces and even peacekeeping troops. Rape is a weapon of war that is systematically employed for a variety of purposes, including intimidation, humiliation, political terror, extracting information, rewarding soldiers, and "ethnic cleansing." In recent years, mass rape as a systematic weapon in war has been documented in the former Yugoslavia, Cambodia, Liberia, Peru, Somalia and Uganda (UNIFEM, 1998). In 2003, when the humanitarian crisis began in Western Sudan, thousands of women were subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence by the armed groups (Amnesty International, 2005).

Some groups of women like refugees, migrant workers face extra risk of these problems (UNICEF, 2000). For example, women and girls constitute half the refugees of the world today (Amnesty International, 2005). Refugee women are particularly vulnerable to crimes like rape and sexual violence. These women often become victims of rape and sexual violence at the hands of security forc-

es, border guards, locals, smugglers, and other refugees. Camp guards and male refugees may look upon unaccompanied women and girls as common sexual property and they are forced to have sex in exchange of food, documents and refugee status.

Migrant workers who mostly work as domestic helpers in different countries frequently face sexual abuse from their employers (Amnesty International, 2005). Women who have entered the country without documentation, or who have been trafficked and robbed of their papers, often cannot seek legal redress for the abuses they have suffered.

d) Violence from Traditional & Cultural Practices:

Around the world women face severe forms of violence in the name of cultural and traditional practices. Some of those are listed below:

Honour killing: Throughout the world, perhaps as many as 5000 women are killed by the members of their own family in the name of upholding honour (UNIFEM, 2007). Honour killing is associated with the family's demand for sexual chastity and virginity. Any allegation such as being raped, adultery and premarital relationships give the male member of the family the right to kill the woman concerned. Perpetrators of such act often receive light sentence or are excused by the courts because defence of the family honour is treated as a mitigating circumstance. Such killings have been reported in Jordan, Pakistan, Lebanon, Turkey, Brazil and immigrant community in Sweden and UK (UNICEF, 2000).

Deaths from dowry and acid throwing: The dowry was originally a wedding gift to a daughter from her family. Now, it has become a tradition for the groom and his family to demand a huge amount of money at the time and after marriage. Dowry related violence is very common in South Asian countries. According to official crime statistics in India, 6,822 women were killed in 2002 as a result of such violence (UNIFEM, 2007). Small community studies have also indicated that dowry demands have played an important role in women being burned to death and in deaths of women being labelled as suicides (UNICEF, 2000). In Bangladesh, there have been many incidents of acid attacks due to dowry disputes, leading often to blindness, disfigurement, and death. In Bangladesh it is estimated that there are over 200 acid attacks every year (UNICEF, 2000).

Deaths from Fatwa: Fatwas are religious opinions which have been in practice for hundreds of year in different Muslim countries. The number of victims has increased in Bangladesh in the recent time (Sheparuddin, 2001).

Causes Behind VAW:

In all societies, to a greater or lesser degree women are subjected to violence. Violence against women both violates and nullifies the enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedom. There is no single factor to account for violence perpetrated against women. Several complex and interconnected institutionalized social and cultural factors have kept women particularly vulnerable

to the violence directed at them; which is rooted in the historically unequal power relations between men and women.

Societies do not consider men and women as equal. That is why violence is often associated with the social, economical and political inequalities that women experience as a part of their daily lives. Various types of discrimination can be found in almost all societies which are related to customs, values, rituals, resource distribution, inheritance, marriage, child birth, accessibility to education, healthcare, resist behaviour, domestication, legal system etc. It is the society that has been constructed in such a way that triggers the violence towards women. VAW is a unique form of *structural violence* where the whole social system is incorporated. For example, one of the main reasons behind VAW is the presence of patriarchal values in the society. The unquestioning acceptance of women's subordination to men is the starkest reflection of patriarchy in the society. This type of patriarchy establishes male dominance resulting in gender discrimination in the family and in socio-economic, legal and political life. A much common example can be physical assault of women by their husbands. 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. In the society, norms granting men control over female behaviour, acceptance of violence as a way of conflict resolution, notion of masculinity linked with dominance, aggression are associated with violence against women. This type of sex based discrimination (sexism) shows that VAW takes place because the societies are structured in such a way that elicits these crimes.

Another important factor that is instigating VAW in the present day world is *globalization*. It has influenced the scope and nature of VAW. It has made different and more opportunities to entrap, exploit, abuse women specially who are in marginalised situation. For example, economic globalization has broadened the gap between rich and poor. The women from the poor and developing countries are the easy targets of being trafficked. The so called offer of better employment and a self sufficient life motivate these women to migrate. Ultimately they either find themselves in slave like situation working as domestic workers or end up being in the sex industry. Advancement in the information technology is also instigating human trafficking into prostitution and sexual slavery. As this is a very big business, perpetrators use technologies like web, sms to lure the potential targets (Radford and Kaname, 2004). These facilities also give them easy and cheap access to maintain their underworld relationships. Globalized world has created opportunities for women to work in different factories but simultaneously it has put them in vulnerable situation in terms of physical insecurity. Sexual abuse of young female garments workers while they are returning from their jobs is a common phenomenon in countries like Bangladesh, Mexico i.e. the developing countries (Jahan nad Mahmuda, 1997). Globalization and the growing increased poverty, unemployment, hardship, income inequality lead to stress, and alcohol abuse and all these have increased violence in society in general, including VAW.

VAW as a Major Threat to Peace:

VAW has severe and long lasting impact not only on women's lives but also on the family and society. As mentioned earlier, this VAW is a global phenomenon and its impact is also global. It is a clear obstacle to the achievement of both negative and positive peace. If we consider the major consequences of VAW, we will see how it is affecting each and every aspect of human life.

The most crucial consequence of VAW is it denies women and girls their basic human rights. Every human being is entitled to enjoy these rights but women are denied of these rights simply because gender based discrimination. This is the reflection of the overall situation all around the world and as long as it will continue peace will be far-fetched. If we consider few other outcomes of the violence, then we will be able to grasp how VAW is impeding the creation of stable peace.

Let us start with the health outcomes of the VAW. The fatal outcomes of violence lead to homicide, suicide, maternal mortality and in many cases increase the risk of getting HIV/AIDS. Injury, poor subjective health, permanent disability, unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, unsafe abortion, miscarriage, gynaecological problems are some of the non fatal physical outcomes of VAW. Not only the physical aspect, women are psychologically tormented by violence too. Depression, fear, panic disorder, post traumatic stress, low self esteem are common symptoms for the women who have experienced violence in their life time. Physical pain as well as lifelong mental sufferings minimizes the natural freedom of life and potentiality of women. Physical and psychological devastation depict the absence of peace as women's enjoyment of a healthy life is totally nullified.

Not only the present but also the future is distorted with VAW. Especially when children witness marital violence they tend to exhibit physical and behavioural problems in the future. Physical problems like eating and sleep disorder; psychological problems like anxiety, depression, low self esteem, poor school performance are common example. It affects the proper well being of the future generation of the world. Such children are also more prone to violence in their adolescence period. This affects the potential of the children and their participation in the society.

VAW undermines progress towards human and economic development too. Women's participation has become key in all social development programmes, be they environmental, for poverty alleviation, or for good governance. There is a growing recognition that countries cannot reach their full potential as long as women's potential to participate fully in their society is denied. VAW hinders women's participation in development projects and lessen their contribution to social and economic development. As development is related with peace, disturbance in this sector creates barrier for the achievement of peaceful society.

In a nut shell we can say that VAW physically, psychologically, economically drains the potential of women. And women constitute almost half of the world's population. Physical consequences of violence show the absence of negative peace and the patriarchal structure which generates the violence shows that positive peace is still a distant goal to achieve.

Suggested Measures to Prevent VAW:

VAW is a major issue of concern all around the world. There are major international conventions like CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women) which deal with the issue of women's human rights and violence against them. Many countries in the world are also making new laws or improving the existing laws to tackle this issue. But each year the number of women being victimized by violence shows that more needs to be done both at the national and international level. It should be a combined effort from the family, society and all the countries of the world. In order to prevent VAW, cultural attitudes in all parts of the world and as well as the power relationship between men and women need to be changed. Unless the unequal relationship between men and women, men's power and control over women and their treatment of women as property are recognised, no amount of legal reforms can reverse the phenomenon. There is a great need for educational programmes and also legislations to be formulated so that societies can change the way women are perceived. Socially constructed norms that create inequality between men and women should be changed by raising awareness. Women's education, the building of self esteem and economic empowerment should be given equal importance. The challenge ahead is to educate the next generation to prevent it's occurrence in the future. All types of support services for the victims of violence should be increased both at national and international level. Loopholes of existing laws should be removed. We have to develop new and effective strategies and strong public opinion against violence. Women must have their right to live without fear of violence. We can overcome this problem only by sincerity.

Conclusion:

We have to remember that women are our mothers, wives, daughters, sisters and friends. VAW is the most shameful human rights violation. It is a tragic consequence of the world community's collective failure to recognize and salute the resilience, loyalty, and dedication of women. VAW shows the existence of both direct and structural violence. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real peace.

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