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Structural Violence: A Tale of Three Women from Marginalized Communities in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The notion of structural violations of human rights is increasingly gaining currency in international human rights arenas. Structural violence yields a complex picture of inequality in terms of social, economic, political and human rights arenas. The study intended to understand the extent of structural violence with a special reference to the state of human rights of the women of the marginalized communities *Bihari, Garo* and *Ahmadiyya* in Bangladesh. The study employed a qualitative approach, applying a case study technique that dealt with three women of these communities and aiming to substantiate structural violence in relation to human rights perspectives. The study revealed that the women of the three marginalized communities experienced diverse forms of violence, including psychological, physical, sexual, etc., that violated their human rights. There was also a failure to restore their peace and security. The theory of structural violence provides a useful framework for understanding the structural inequalities that systematically deny marginalized communities, especially women of these communities, from achieving basic human rights in their daily lives.

Keywords

structural violence – marginalized community – women – human rights – Bangladesh

1 Introduction

Unequal access to resources, political power, education, health care or to legal standing are all forms of structural violence. Structural violence occurs

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whenever people are disadvantaged by political, legal, economic or cultural traditions. Because they are longstanding, structural inequities usually seem ordinary – the way things are and always have been.[1] The term structural violence has roots in anti-colonial resistance movements and liberation theology, but was first coined in academia in 1969 by Johan Galtung, the pioneer in the field of peace and conflict studies.[2] Galtung originally framed the term structural violence to refer to any constraint on human potential due to economic and political structures. The social relations are violent because they prevent human beings from realizing their full somatic and mental potential.[3] Structural violence has been used in a variety of applications across the social sciences. A number of social scientists have already conceptualized the specific components of structural violence in different ways but the concept has been popularized more by Paul Farmer, a medical anthropologist; perhaps most notably, Farmer used structural violence to frame his analysis of the AIDS epidemic in Haiti in 2005. Structural violence is embodied in large-scale, historical processes of social and economic inequality that combine to constrain agency with adverse events, including epidemic disease, violations of human rights and genocide.[4] Renwick demonstrates how structural violence contributes to the escalating HIV risk of women in China through employment practices, restricted access to public goods, illegal trafficking and commercialized sex.[5] Mukherjee argues that structural violence, in the form of economic deprivation, gender inequality and lack of access to education and work opportunities, constrains choice and impedes HIV risk mitigation in poor countries.[6] In addition, poverty is comprised of a systematic or structural denial of basic freedoms, resulting in agency constrained to the extent that individuals are unable or lack the capability to meet their basic needs.[7] It reveals systemic reasons

1 D. D. Winter and D. C. Leighton, 'Structural violence', in D. J. Christie, R. V. Wagner and D. D. Winter (eds.), *Peace, Conflict, and Violence: Peace Psychology in the 21st Century* (New York, Prentice-Hall, 2001).

2 P. Bourgois, 'The Power of Violence in War and Peace: Post-Cold War Lessons from El Salvador', 2:1 *Ethnography* (2001) pp. 5–34.

3 J. Galtung, 'Violence, peace and peace research', 6:3 *Journal of Peace Research* (1969) pp.167–191.

4 P. Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005).

5 N. Renwick, 'The "Nameless Fever": The HIV/AIDS Pandemic and China's Women', 23 *Third World Quarterly* (2002) pp. 377–393.

6 J. S. Mukherjee, 'Structural Violence, Poverty and the AIDS Pandemic', 50 *Development* (2007) pp. 115–121.

7 A. Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlements and Deprivation* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983).

that explain why the poor bear a disproportionate burden of economic, health and human rights violations. Thus, structural violence is a contributing factor that constrains individuals of the marginalized communities from achieving their human rights.

The notion of structural violations of human rights is increasingly gaining currency in international human rights arenas. As far as Galtung is concerned, structural violence is almost identical to social injustice. In more recent years, the idea of structural violence has become framed more by the issue of human rights and social justice.[8] Applying the theory of structural violence to the human rights discourse illuminates the often marginalized and neglected category of social and economic rights. Structural violence also illustrates the causal relationship between power differentials in structures and its effect on individual agency, and when applied to human rights illuminates structural causes of human rights violations.[9] Scheper-Hughes refers to this as everyday violence, and describes it as "the routinisation of human suffering" in "normal" lives filled with hunger and poverty. Structural violence is omnipresent and embedded in social structures.[10] So structural violence is a systematic form of oppression that produces suffering and harms the individual over time and is more subtle in nature, more common and more difficult to repair. The theory of structural violence provides a useful framework for the understanding of structural inequalities that systematically deny disadvantage communities from achieving their basic human rights in their everyday lives.

The study intended to understand the extent of structural violence with a special reference to the state of human rights of the women of the marginalized communities *Bihari, Garo* and *Ahmadiyya* in Bangladesh. The *Bihari* community refers to a large population of Muslim immigrants to Bangladesh from India – mainly the state of Bihar – after partition in 1947. In Bangladesh, the term *Bihari* also signifies Indian-Bangladeshi, non-local, non-Bangladeshi, stranded Pakistanis or Urdu speaking people. The people of the community have been living in the ghettos called *Bihari* camps, located in 21 of Bangladesh's 64 districts.[11] The *Bihari* also opposed Bangladeshi independence and wanted

8 B. Morvaridi, *Social Justice and Development* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2008).

9 K. Ho, 'Structural violence as a human rights violation', 4:2 *Essex Human Rights Review* (2007).

10 N. Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993) p. 16.

11 A. Khan and M. Samadder, 'Living like a prisoner: documenting the *Bihari* community's experiences of crime and insecurity in Bangladesh', 4:1 *Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences* (2011) pp. 1–9.

to go to Pakistan, but were unable due to complications in the repatriation process.[12]

The *Garo* is one of the indigenous communities that has been living in different parts in Bangladesh from time immemorial. They prefer to be addressed themselves as *Garo Adivasi, i.e. Garo* indigenous community. The community identified that different local agencies, including the forest department, local political parties and bandits of the forest, were considered the biggest insecurity to their lives and livelihood procedures.[13]

The third community in this study is the *Ahmadiyya,* which is considered a sect of Islam that came into being in 1889 by Hadrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who claimed to be endowed with divine revelation and was sent to Earth with a divine mission.[14] In Bangladesh, *Ahmadiyya* is a religious minority community that has a conflicting identity with the majority Muslim population in the country. Violence towards the *Ahmadiyya* community in Bangladesh has taken place for more than two decades. Intermittent attacks on the *Ahmadiyya* already aggravated their vulnerability in their daily lives.[15] Both physical and psychological violence against marginalized communities is a common occurrence in Bangladesh. However, the women of these marginalized communities are even more vulnerable. For this very reason the study considered three women of the communities *Bihari, Garo* and *Ahmadiyya* in Bangladesh.

The people most affected by structural violence are women, children and elders; those from different ethnic, racial and religious groups; and those of another sexual orientation.[16] Violence against women has increasingly become a concern in recent decades and has established for itself a special area in the study of violence. In response to the above concern Article 1 of the United Nations General Assembly's Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women provides that "the term 'violence against women' means 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

12 F. K. Farzana, 'The neglected stateless *Bihari* community in Bangladesh: victim of political and diplomatic onslaught', 2:1 *Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences* (2008) pp. 1–19.

13 A. Khan and M. Samadder, 'Weeping of the forest: Unheard voices of *GaroAdivashi* in Bangladesh', 19:3 *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* (2012) pp. 317–326.

14 K. N. Tiwari, *Comparative Religion* (Jainendra Prakash, Delhi, 1992) pp.169–171.

15 A. Khan and M. Samadder, 'Struggling Insecurity: Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh', 20:3 *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* (2013) pp. 371–379.

16 S. L.T. McGregor, 'Consumerism as a Source of Structural Violence', *HS Working paper* (2003), <www.kon.org/hswp/archive/consumerism.pdf>, visited on 19 May 2013.

private life".[17] Violence against women remains a prevailing social problem in Bangladesh. Brutal attacks on women have become commonplace and widespread across the country. Different electronic and print media reports are filled with atrocities ranging from physical and psychological torture, sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, dowry related violence, trafficking, forced prostitution, coerced suicide to murder.[18]

The women in Bangladesh are not a homogenous group in terms of ethnicity and cultural identity. Women, especially those from marginalized communities, are subjected to discrimination and violence for many reasons. The women of marginalized communities are second class citizens when it comes to recognizing their basic rights to housing, education, health, *etc.*, and also have minimal political representation in local government agencies, *e.g. Union Parishad*, the smallest administrative unit of local government in Bangladesh. Insecurity is major concern of the women of marginalized communities, who live in insecure social circumstances within a fragile environment, and who are prone to sexual harassments in existing social structures. They are also the victims of social discrimination in that they are exploited or denied access to public and private goods and services in terms of the social safety net programmes (SSNP) that were introduced in Bangladesh to deal with the poverty and vulnerability encountered by the poor and marginalized communities.[19] Work opportunities are very limited and the women of the marginalized communities are exploited in many ways both in the wider community as well as within the household. Women of the marginalized communities are affected by structural violence in various dimensions, including oppression, exclusion, exploitation, marginalization, collective humiliation, stigmatization, repression, inequities, and lack of opportunities due to having a different identity.

17 United Nations, Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, RES/48/104, 85th plenary meeting, 1993, <www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm>, visited on 19 May 2013.

18 S.A. Farouk, *Violence against Women: A Statistical Overview, Challenges and Gaps in Data Collection and Methodology and Approaches for Overcoming Them: Expert Group Meeting* (Geneva, Switzerland, 2005), <www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/vaw-stat-2005/docs/expert- papers/Farouk.pdf>, visited on 1 December, 2011.

19 Z. Hossain, 'Extreme Poor Adivasis and the Problem of Accessing Social Safety Nets', 4 *Working Paper* (2011), <www.bangladesch.org/pics/download/Extreme-Poor-Adivasis-and-the-Problem-of-Accessing-Social-Safety- Nets.pdf>, visited on 9 December, 2013; and B.-E. Khuda, 'Social Safety Net Programmes in Bangladesh: A Review', 24:2 *Bangladesh Development Studies* (2011).

2 Methods

The study employed a qualitative approach, applying a case study technique. The study considered three women of the marginalized communities *Bihari*, *Garo* and *Ahmadiyya* in Bangladesh, so that the theory of structural violence can be internalized and interpreted in relation to human rights perspectives. The study was conducted in different periods between 2010 and 2012.

3 Data Analysis

Data was collected with the aid of repeated field visits, due to unavailability of the respondents who were selected for the case study in the respective communities. Initially, field notes were transcribed in Bangla. Subsequently, transcribed data was translated into English, including the features of local dialects of the interviews. The case studies were categorized and codified relating to the issues of vulnerabilities of these women in order to acquire a sense of the structural violence at play. Data analyses were processed manually.

4 Findings

4.1 *Case One: Urdu-Speaking* Bihari *Community*

Luna, a 27 year-old woman, worked as housemaid in her neighbouring areas, especially for the households of *Bangali*, the majority ethnic group in Bangladesh. She described the way in which she had encountered problems in her daily life. She stated in a soft voice that "they were vulnerable group in terms of the state of insecurity which prevailed in their camps or residential areas". She left school at the age of 12 because her identity as a non-*Bangali* or Urdu-speaker made it difficult to continue with her schooling. She was harassed sexually by abusive and vulgar language while she was going to the school. Consequently, she turned to income generating activities, such as weaving or knitting *Benarasi saris*, a kind of handmade cloth for women, in order to help her family, as she was oldest of four children. She had to give up her profession in two years' time because she could not sell her products at a lower price than *Bangali* women, because the *mastans*, musclemen who seizes property and resources by force, demanded extortion money from her weaving house. At the same time, her father became aged, and he became incapable of earning wages

for his family. Her father was a day-labourer in a local market. She remained unmarried as her family was unable to arrange a dowry either in the form of cash or kind, *i.e.* household items, including furniture, utensils, *etc.* Earlier she had experienced sexual harassment by a head of household where she worked. She also added that other members of her family had had similar experiences in their daily lives. In the camp, she faced the never-ending problems of poor sanitation and access to clean water because of the limited number of such facilities. She was attempting to get a prestigious job in the garments industries or handicraft where she already had developed some expertise. In sum, economic insecurity combined with social insecurity impeded her from receiving social justice in her daily life.

4.2 *Case Two: Indigenous Garo Community*

Sangma, a 38 year-old women, was a widow with two sons. Her oldest son was a rickshaw puller, a type of three-wheeled vehicle that is manually powered. The villagers, especially *Bangali*, were reluctant to ride in his rickshaw due to his different ethnic identity. He was often humiliated by being called the derogatory term *upojatir bachha*, child of an ethnic minority. One time he went to the local market to buy betel leaves for her but the vendor refused to trade with him. Her youngest son was beaten up severely by his classmates, who were *Bangali* while returning home from school. After the incident, she met with the parents of the boys in order to settle the matter, but the parents of the boys assaulted her with abusive language instead of ensuring justice. She wept on the way home due to this treatment. She had also approached a non-government organization (NGO) for a loan to set up a small business, but her *Bangali* neighbours tried to prevent her from getting the loan. In the end, she received a loan due to the intervention of the officials of that NGO. She invested the loan in rearing cattle and chicken at her dwelling in the forest areas. However, the villagers, especially *Bangali*, scolded her with abusive language when she came out to collect fodder from her neighbouring areas. She usually collected fodder for the cattle during the dead of night while the dwelling areas remained tranquil in order to avoid humiliations. She often went to the periphery of the forest to collect wood in order to avoid sexual harassment. She added that they were solely dependent on the forest for their livelihood in terms of collecting wood, honey, herbs, cultivating various fruits, etc.

Unfortunately, they did not receive a fair price for their cultivated goods or commodities because of their limited bargaining capacity due to their having an indigenous identity. Although one of the elected representatives

of *Union Parishad* had taken an amount of BDT 1,600 as a bribe to assure that a card called a widowed allowance, a type of SSNP, would be issued to her, she had not yet received the card. She had to finance the bribe by selling items important to her household, such as chickens, vegetables, utensils, etc. She was unsure as to whether the card would be issued, but knows that many *Bangali* neighbours in a similar situation had already received such a card. She was looking forward to receive this widowed allowance so that she could procure three squares meals for her family and improve her living circumstances.

4.3 *Case Three: Religious Minority Ahmadiyya Community*

Latifa, as 45 year-old women had converted to *Ahmadiyya* along with other family members a few years back. Her husband was an affluent farmer in terms of possessing a tractor, rice mill and grocery business, but he had had to quit all those businesses due to his becoming a follower of the *Ahmadiyya* community. The anti-*Ahmadiyya*, including different Islamic groups and political parties, forcefully stopped their business institutions. She was unable to visit her non-*Ahmadiyya* neighbours as this was prohibited. Their neighbours also scolded them and hated that they had become *Ahmadiyya*. Her children were reluctant to go to school because the teachers and classmates, who were non-*Ahmadiyya*, forbade them from attending school. Her children had to collect fodder for the cattle from distant or neighbouring villages. Everyone called them a "rotten community". She was living in constant fear that anti-*Ahmadiyya* followers might attack her family at any given time. Her family members confined themselves inside during the day and shut the doors and windows due to the fear of harassment. The anti-*Ahmadiyya* prohibited her family from trading their cultivated agricultural products in local markets. They could not go to the latrine facilities located outside of the household because anti-*Ahmadiyya* wandered beside the latrine. They also were scared that they would be abducted from the latrine areas as most of these facilities were far from the households. Without any alternative option, her family had to defecate in a bushy area besides their house. In case of emergency, she left her residence wearing a *purdah*, a veil for women, so that no one could recognize her. Her family members hardly came out after evening due to the fear of being persecuted. Her younger brother who had not yet converted to *Ahmadiyya* was nonetheless denied work as a wage labourer in non-*Ahmadiyya* households. Her brother had to tolerate a lot and everything in his life had collapsed in terms of his social and economic position. She raised a few questions during the study: "Who would rescue her from such brutality?" and "Could she survive in her society?"

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The women of the three different communities had very similar experiences with regard to their living circumstances. Insecurities were intensified while their identities were revealed as ethnic and religious minority respectively. Different forms of vulnerability are present in these three case studies, and all of the women experienced a denial of their basic human rights. Many women and girls directly experience or face the consequences of gender based violence in different communities throughout the world. Gender based violence has profound impacts and long-term consequences as it deteriorates the situations of the women of the marginalized communities.

> Every person anywhere in the world, irrespective of citizenship, residence, race, class, caste or community, has some basic rights which other should respect. The existence of human rights is obviously not like the existence of, say, Big Ben in the middle of London. Nor is like the existence of a legislated law in the statute book. Proclamations of human rights, even though stated in the form of recognizing the *existence* of things that are called human rights.[20]

Economic, social and cultural rights are a broad category of human rights guaranteed in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Bangladesh is party to this legally binding treaty that guarantees, *inter alia*, the right to work, right to education, cultural rights, right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, right to adequate housing, right to food, right to water, *etc.*[21] The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes several dimensions of human rights for all people. Some are tangible and quantifiable, such as access to education, health and a decent standard of living and ability to take part in the government of the country. Others are intangible, such as freedom, dignity and security of person and participation in the cultural life of the community.[22] In addition, different agencies,

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20 A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Penguin Books, London, 2009) pp. 355–357.

21 United Nations, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, UN General Assembly Treaty Series, 1966, vol. 993, p. 3. <www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b36co .html>, visited on 19 May 2013.

22 D. Prakash, *Rural women, food security and agricultural cooperatives: Rural development and management centre* (2003), <www.acdivocacoopex.org/acdivoca/CoopLib.nsf/35dofi 40112b2c7e8525682a007811bo/A6918DA2DA25D6F885256EFA00653C07/$FILE/ Rural+Women+coops.pdf>, visited on 2 December 2011.

including the United Nations, adopted various policies and strategies to protect human rights. Why do the different agencies fail to restore human rights for everyone despite their efforts and endeavours? The essence might be cultural differences among the ethnicities. Therefore, identity is attached with the ethos of one's ethnicity that cannot be undermined.

In response to the above question, here is employed the concept of 'cultural violence', which was supplemented by Galtung in his violence typology in the 1990s. Cultural violence mean those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence. In addition cultural violence appears as symbolic violence built into a culture and does not kill or maim like direct violence or the violence built into the structure.[23] I can therefore infer here that structural violence is legitimized or justified through cultural violence that consists of symbolic domains of culture such as religion, language, *etc.* The marginalized communities of this study have different cultural patterns, comprised of religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science, in contrast to the *Bangali* culture.

In short, the concept of structural violence is intended to inform the study of the social machinery of oppression. The adverse effects of the structural violence found in this study took on many forms in terms of subjugation, stigmatization and even psychological terror. Social scientists, especially anthropologists and cultural psychologists, who have explored the meanings of human rights violations and their effects have suggested that terror has symbolic effects on entire communities and across generations.[24] Thus, structural violence yields a complex picture of inequality in terms of social, economic, political and legal factors. The women of these communities are disadvantaged by ethnic background, creed and socio-economic status along with cultural traditions. However, the women of these communities are not able to realize their potential due to the invisible form of structural violence that not only destroys the present state of security but also threatens the future.

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23 J. Galtung, 'Cultural Violence', 27:3 *Journal of Peace Research* (1990) pp. 291–305.

24 Y. Danieli (ed.), *Intergenerational Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma* (Plenum, New York, 1998).

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