

Deconstructing Violence against Women beyond Honour/Shame Schema in South Asian Context

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Abstract

Human civilization has progressed and it is being claimed that women in this post modern era are on equal footing with their counterpart males, but ground reality seems different. Many women are being inhumanly victimised and tortured beyond the level of tolerance. Many women are imprisoned, suppressed as well as killed in the name of honour or to control female sexuality in many countries. Violent customs and the code of honour/shame schema are implicitly and explicitly upheld by the economically determined social system, endorsed by religion, confirmed by law, and facilitated by the state institutions. Honour related violence does not occur indiscriminately. It is mediated through class, ethnicity, religion, education, age, and residential location with a specific combination of many of these forces. All major civilizations and religions have developed a code of honour and shame schema revolving around female sexuality.

This paper attempts to theorise violence and exploitation of women in special reference to socio-cultural and honour/shame schema. It also deals with various nature of crime in the name of honour and false prestige. It focuses on hidden and untold stories of violence against women of various countries.

KEYWORDS:- Gender, Honour, Killing, Shame and Violence.

Introduction

There is a local language old saying that *Zoru Zamin Zor ke, na to kisi aur ke...* which means the women and land remain in the possession of the powerful men only. Simply it reflects the drama of human society which is basically interplay of women's body, sexual drives and control over female sexuality and land and worldly thing. Thus, violence is all about inseparable deep connection between economic interest and sexual conduct. Today, in this global era it's pangful to note that the status and role of women in society as a whole has not changed much. Many women are being inhumanly victimised and tortured beyond the level of tolerance. Some women are killed in the name of honour. Some are being torturously burnt alive for dowry. Some are imprisoned to control their sexuality and some became victim of acid attack for their beauty.

Violence against Women (VAW) is not a phenomena specific to any one corner of the world; it is spread through-out the globe. It is a dramatic expression of gender inequality and tool of terror for women. Social history of the world is replete with the various kinds of violent acts against women such as wife beating, marital rape, imprisonment within the four walls of house, domestic violence, honour killing, sale and purchase of girls for sexual purpose etc have been occurring for many centuries. As the UN Declaration (1993) states: "it is a manifestation of the

historically unequal power relations between men and women and division of labour which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men...it is the essential and ultimate social mechanism by which women are forced into a subordinate position” (Goonesekere 2004). Exploitation has been structurally, functionally and culturally deep rooted in every society in its different shades. By and large, they are still victims of suppression, of stereotype, traditional and rigid roles all over the world-in the beginning as girls, later as women. In many societies, the ideal of masculinity is underpinned by a notion of ‘honour’ of an individual or a family or a community and is fundamentally connected to policing female behaviour and sexuality (Welchman & Hussain 2006). Thus, there is a close inter-relation between the regulation of sexuality and honour-shame schema.

Theoretical Perspective

Feminists have attempted to theorize the phenomenon of women’s oppression in the light of creation of patriarchy and the patriarchal socio-economic institutions of human society. We can classify theoretical thoughts into two categories - idealist and materialist thought. Idealist explanation purport that the inferior status and condition of women in society is natural, trans-historical, universal and immutable. For materialist theorists, the oppression of women is a social, historical, and alterable phenomenon. The institution of family and family relations are shaped by material forces such as the ownership of private property, the mode of production, social norms, cultural traditions, and religious dictates have been developed out of the material basis and economic system of societies (Khan 2006).

Marxist approach actually explains the phenomenon of women’s oppression at two levels: - personal as well as structural. The oppression of women in any society is result of an economic structure built on land ownership, systems of inheritance and the patriarchal family as an inbuilt social unit. Personal violence is direct, manifest, visible, ‘violence with a clear subject-object relation’, and there are individuals committing the violence. It can be easily expressed, registered and can be complained while in structural violence, there is no direct subject-object relationship. It is indirect, invisible, can’t be registered. Sometimes, it kills or forces people to commit suicide. Another dimension of violence is cultural violence. According to Galtung, Cultural violence is a culture that is used to legitimise violence in its direct or structural form. It does not kill in reality but it legitimises actual physical acts of direct violence and allows for the perpetuation of structural violence within institutional and structural frameworks. Thus, VAW is tri-dimensional: personal, structural and cultural. The occurrence, persistence, and increase in such violence are a close interaction between the actors from these dimensions.

Inter-relation between Violence, Honour and Shame

We have to know the root cause of violence and how violence gives honour to male members of the society?? And, also why and how shame as well as honour both themselves be the reason for violence?? VAW is a crucial social mechanism by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men. And, relation between male and female developed like bourgeois and proletariat respectively. The root cause lies in a universal patriarchal state of minds that suppress and exploit women worldwide. Thus, it is an outcome of the social structure of any society, reflection of family background and mirror to show individual’s personality. Violent

customs and the code of honour/shame schema are implicitly and explicitly upheld by the economically determined social system, endorsed by religion, confirmed by law, and facilitated by the state institutions. Honour related violence does not occur indiscriminately. It is mediated through class, ethnicity, religion, education, age, and residential location with a specific combination of many of these forces. All major civilizations and religions have developed a code of honour and shame schema revolving around female sexuality. Crime like honour killing, domestic violence, wife beating etc has had the silent approval of the society and it is culturally acceptable in some parts of the world. The unawareness and silence in the name of custom, culture, honour, false prestige, and shame are the symbolic message to promote to do such.

As we have seen in the case of recently occurred rape case on the name of controlling female sexuality and restoring community honour at Birbhum in West Bengal in which village head man had ordered the gang rape of a 20 year old tribal women for alleged sexual relation and love affair with a man of other community. Such punishment in this modern era reflects the attitude and intensity of violence against women to control their sexuality and show the real hidden picture of crime in the society (Jan 23, 2014 Times of India). It is a form of repressive law of kangaroo court and against democratic law of an organic society. Male members of the society i.e. so called thakedars of the society claim that they do such violent acts to control pathological facts and deviant phenomenon of the society to only send powerful message to the female as well as marginalised section of the society.

Honour-Shame Schema

According to Bhasin & Menon, 'most men and women we spoke to agreed that honour, for losing and preserving, is located in the body of women'. Honour is most precious moral attribute of mankind. It is deeply ingrained in its nature. Defence of honour even at cost of life has been prevalent in human being since ages (Shah 1997). Crime like honour killing, bride burning, domestic violence, dowry, wife beating etc has had the silent approval of the society and it is culturally acceptable in some parts of the world. The unawareness and keeping mum on the name of custom, culture, honour, false prestige, and shame are the symbolic message to promote to do such violent acts. Thus, violence is more or less deep rooted in the structure of our society, tradition, culture, various institutions such as marriage, family, caste, etc.

Bakel et.al (1999:166) argue that 'honour' should be part of any current conceptualisation of patriarchy in comparative and cross cultural analyses and that 'honour systems are an integral part of the process of killing women by their families or intimates regardless of where the women lives(1999:164). Their theory includes three comparative areas related to honour systems-the control of female behaviour, male feelings of shame at cost of that control and community participation in 'enhancing and controlling this shame'.

In my opinion few male commit violent act only because other family member or society men provoke him to do such. And, to restore the family honour and to show their dominance, male do violent act like beating of wife, killing of sister or daughter, asking for dowry, to show that they have power, dominance, to show false prestige and control female. Thus, men by focusing on honour rationales such as control, feeling of shame, dominance, and level of community involvement established their mindset and use such rationales for VAW. Thus, the cultural theme of violence more

or less revolves around binaries such as honour and shame, tradition and modernity, dominance and submission, superiority and inferiority etc either it is a case domestic violence or honour killing or wife beating or rape and many more.

Shame is equated with both female sexuality and social deviance in contemporary Asian cultures. Fear of shame routinely acts to silence women about their experiences of violence and encourages them not to resist sexual coercion. The social significance of female shame is also reflected in the prevalence of victim blaming. In forced marriage, domestic violence, marital rape, women are often compelled to protect family interests rather than defend their individual rights. Many women are socialised from birth not to distinguish between personal and family honour, and will consequently endure great personal suffering to avoid actions they believe will injure their families. The occurrence of explicit violence within the family in South Asia is complex, often considered taboo, a private matter not to be discussed publicly. The everyday violence to which women are subjected simultaneously reflect overlapping social hierarchies that are based not only on gender but also on women's age, marital status, class, race, religion and ethnicity. Thus violence against women routinely functions to sustain multiple inequalities, reinforcing women's subordination within complex hierarchies of oppression (Manderson & Bennett 2003).

Thus, Honour is generally seen as residing in the bodies of women. Framework of 'honour', and its corollary 'shame', operate to control, direct, and regulate women's sexuality and freedom of movement by male members of the family. Women who fall in relationship, seek to divorce, or choose their own life partner are seen to transgress the boundaries of 'appropriate' i.e socially sanctioned sexual behaviour. "Regulation" of such behaviour may in extreme cases involve horrific direct violence including honour killing, suicide, stove burning, acid throwing, forced marriage, sale of girls, and rape of enemy's women perhaps the most overt example of the brutal control of female sexuality. In such situation they live, eat and sleep violence (Welchman & Hussain 2006).

Violence beyond Honour and Shame

One latest form of such heinous crime being committed against women is by labelling a woman of a family as immoral and then selling her through the broker who traffic her to the urban areas for the purpose of prostitution in the tribal/rural areas of Pakistan, Afghanistan, south eastern parts of Turkey, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and many more countries. Many times allegation is made on women for material benefit. Here, notion of dishonour/honour is used to cover up the covert economic motives and material greed. We can understand it through a true story of Sindh mentioned in the book Beyond Honour that a man was passing by his nearby village and he saw a graveyard on his way. He saw a freshly made grave with some flowers on it, so he stopped, and raised his hands to preach religious prayer. A man watching him praying, accused him of being the one with whom his wife had an affair. He further said that her father had murdered her after the husband accused her of being kari (immoral women). But he did not know who karo (immoral male partner) is?? The husband accused the passerby of being the karo and threatened to take him to the police station. Later the man pleaded that he did not belong to that village and neither know his wife. Then the husband of the murdered woman changed his tone and offered to make a deal with him to pay some amount within a fixed period of time. Thus

the moral of the story is that many people made it as business and money making activity and an outsider would not even think of such kind of economization of the concept of honour and level of crime and violence against women beyond the honour. The mere allegation on girls and women having entered illicit sexual relationship is sufficient for their male relatives to take the law into their hands and to kill or harshly punish them. An allegation is enough to defile a man's honour and therefore enough to kill a woman. A strange fact is that accused women are normally sold at higher price in market than 'innocent' women. If an ordinary woman is sold at 11 lac rupees than kari is sold for 1.5 lac because kari women are seen as sexually active and more responsive. Such form of violence in today's world is threat to social world.

Women responsible for their own misdeeds

Women always played overt and covert role in the oppression of their own sex. During socialisation process, women learn to define themselves that they are incomplete without men and treat them as second sex. And they accept and justify their own oppression. It has made them 'enforcers and re-enforcers' of the stereotypes of the concept of honour. Family and community make girls to believe that they are always expected to sacrifice their life, happiness and further for the sake of honour of their father, brothers and husband and son. Several times, women are victimised because they treat themselves as inferior, submissive, and powerless. They feel happiness by their submissiveness. And, this unequal and subordinate status made them target of sexual as well as domestic violence. Many times victims think that it is as private matter and as a matter of shame. Thus, they keep mum and always be the target of male members. By remaining silent, obedient, and sexually passive, a woman maintains a state of honour for the men of the family, which many times lead to extreme form of direct as well as indirect violence against women.

Conclusion

Explaining the nature of violence is very complicated task. But I have tried to conclude with a local language old saying that the causes of all crimes, conflicts, and violence lie in three Zs. They are *Zar* (money), *Zoru* (women) and *Zamin* (property). Simply, it meant that the drama of human society is basically 'interplay of economic and sexual drives'.

Few lines of poem written by illiterate poor sindhi girl, which will present the true fear of violence faced by girls:-

*What is there to my body?
Is it studded with diamonds or pearls?
My brother's eyes forever follow me.
My father's gaze guards me all the time.
They always stern and angry*

*Then why, do they make me labour in the fields?
All day long, bear the heat and the sun,
Sweat and toil and we tremble all day long,
Not knowing who may cast a look upon us.*

We stand accused, and condemned to be

***Declared KARI i.e SHAME
And murdered.....***

Source Amir H Jafri 2008

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