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Unraveling the Web of Gendered Violence in South Asia; A Review Essay

Emmanuel Konde, Ph.D.

Professor

History, Political Science & Public Administration

Albany State University

504 College Drive

Albany, GA 31705

Introduction

The literature on gender violence in South Asia is vast and still growing. Much of this literature has focused on violence perpetrated on women by men, while some have documented the militarization of women to defend themselves against male perpetrators of violence. The literature is multifaceted with respect to research foci, which can be divided into different categories in accordance with the various aspects of the literature. Given that researchers have done more work in India than elsewhere in South Asia, this review will focus heavily on India. The review is divided into four sections, the first examine the sources and causes of gendered violence as discussed in the literature. Sections two, three and four analyze different aspects of gendered violence as treated in the existing literature. The organization of the sections is purposefully designed to chart the trajectory of change that is currently shifting relations of power in India and South Asia from men to women. Although the movement is very slow in materializing, it nonetheless points to eventual dramatic transformation. The four sections of this literature review are: (1) Causes and sources of gender violence; (2) Violence against women by men; (3) Militarization of women for self-defense and defense of property against men; and (4) Domestic violence against men by women.

Sources and Causes of Gender Violence

Gendered violence, whether in the domestic or public sphere, is skewed to the favor of men as perpetrators in most cases. Daniel Rapp et al. (2012) observed in their article, "Association between gap in spousal education and domestic violence in India and Bangladesh," that "Women are at higher risk to experience violence from an intimate partner (called intimate partner violence, IPV) than from any other type of perpetrator." They argued that this type of violence—IPV or domestic violence, DV—affects women across the globe and cuts across all social, cultural and religious groups. Some of the determinants of DV that Rapp et al. derived from numerous studies include level of spousal education in reducing the incidences of IPV.

In their 2008 article entitled "Narratives of Domestic Violence: Reconstructing Masculinities and Femininities," Pande Rekha, K.C. Bindu, Mumtaz Fatima and Nuzhath Khatoon assert that gender violence is rooted in the theory that the source or cause of domestic violence is one person's belief in his right to exert power over another person. This can occur in interpersonal interactions or interpersonal relations and is situated in the socio-economic and political content of power relations. The distribution of power in any given situation or relationship, if skewed to favor one gender at the expense of the other, is likely to elicit violence from the more powerful party.

In their review of quantitative studies on domestic violence against women in India spanning the last 10 years, Kalokhe et al. (2016) report that "National statistics that utilize a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) to measure the prevalence of lifetime physical, sexual, and/or emotional DV estimates that 40% of women experience abuse at the hands of a partner." They further refer to data from the World Health Organization (WHO), which confirm that women in SouthEast Asia (defined as India, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bangladeshi, and Timor-Leste) are at a higher risk of experiencing abuse during their lifetime than women in Europe, the Western Pacific, and potentially the Americas.

South Asia appears to be the region with the highest prevalence of gender violence. Why is violence against women so pervasive in South Asia? The literature suggests a confluence of factors. Niaz (2003) points to the influence of religion in violence against women in South Asian countries and writes: "... the amalgamation of Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu, Islamic, and Christian traditions have shaped the personalities of women and determined their social status." These religions have brought about a rigidity of "cultures and patriarchal attitudes which devalue the role of women."

The result, according to Niaz, is the "wide spread of violence against women." Vasaria (2000) also states that the causes of the high frequency of domestic violence in India are directly derived from deep-rooted male patriarchal values which stem from various socio-cultural complexities. Indeed, there is a wide consensus in the literature that points to socio-cultural values and practices. Hence, these cultural norms have been integrated with the economic and political structures, creating structural inequalities that tend to correlate with violence against women. Cross (2013) suggests that "the unequal social structures are themselves violent—public inequality fosters norms of dominance and ownership such that inequality in private places becomes 'justifiable'."

The nature and causes of gender violence in South Asia have been well described and explained in the literature. Religious rigidity and patriarchal values laid the societal framework for the subordination and devaluation of women. What seems to be missing in this discourse are two essential elements: human emotion, that is, parental love for children that produced women like Indira Gandhi of India and Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan. Researchers should be able to investigate why the parental sentiment that prompted the parents of Gandhi and Bhutto to raise their daughters differently, leading them to cultivate ambitions that resulted in their rise to positions of prominence in society, is not widespread and commonplace in the region.

The second shortcoming of the literature is its centeredness on South Asia. The countries of South Asia were colonized by European powers. These powers ushered into South Asia some degree of social and cultural change that affected the status of women. Gender violence is not as pervasive in Africa as it is in South Asia. Why? Is it because patriarchal culture was not as entrenched in Africa? Research that focuses on comparative analysis might yield some interesting results. Culture change, after all, occurs when two cultures meet—with the dominant culture prevailing over and altering the less dominant culture. This happened in Africa and the Americas. Why did it not happen in South Asia? If patriarchal culture in South Asia is static, and the colonial ethos is a force of social change, why is South Asia still plagued by an outdated culture? These are some of the questions that researchers should seriously consider in order to enhance the discourse on gender violence in South Asia.

Violence against Women

One of the most heinous acts of gendered violence is acid violence or acid attacks. Pio and Singh deal with this form of violence in their article "Vulnerability and resilience: critical reflexivity in gendered violence research" (2016). Although their main subject is not exclusively acid violence but on researcher vulnerability in the field and offered, from an ethical perspective, some useful tips on how researchers should be resilient in "research involving sensitive and dangerous foci such as acid violence" (229), they nonetheless meticulously describe and explain what this form of gendered violence entails:

'Such attacks involve intentional throwing of sodium hydroxide, ammonium hydroxide, sulphuric, nitric or hydrochloric acid on a person, usually on a woman's face, as an act of punishment or revenge. Clinical consequences commonly include multiple lesions, melted facial flesh and exposed bones resulting in severe scarring, partially destroyed skull with hair loss, sightless eye cavities, destroyed nose cartilage and destruction of lips. Thus, many taken-for-granted modes of functioning, such as hearing, speaking, eating and seeing, are severely constrained or permanently lost, with long-term psychological trauma and social isolation' (227).

Admittedly, these attacks occur and are reported in many countries, but especially in South Asian countries. Some of the key reasons why acid violence is inflicted on women include rejection of a marriage proposal or romantic advances, disputes over land and money, family disputes, revenge, robbery, gang assaults, racial bias and jealousy.

Pio and Singh (2016) aver that even though "acid violence is on the rise, it remains relatively under-researched in the context of violence against women."

In writing the paper, however, Pio and Singh reveal their main aim as seeking “to encourage scholars to build research momentum for investigating this largely unexplored area” (228). This, they felt, might possibly pave the way for developing prevention strategies, policies supportive of victims of acid violence, and improved rehabilitation programs.

The Militarization of Women

Hindu nationalism in India has emerged as a violent force in Indian politics. Seghal’s (2013) “Defending the Nation: Militarism, Women’s Empowerment, and the Hindu Right” analyzes the discourse surrounding the practices of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti (Samiti) organization and how these practices employ a feminized siege mentality. The study depicts how the Samiti transforms Indian women, mostly young girls, into militants under the guise of empowering them. She identifies the Samiti’s place in the Hindu Nationalist Movement and their paramilitary camps. The Hindu Nationalist Movement subscribes to the notion that Hinduism is the foundation of Indian identity and, therefore, those who are not Hindu are second-class citizens. The goals of this organization are to gain political power in order to produce policies which discriminate against non-Hindus. Seghal argues that this empowerment promotes what she calls a “feminized siege mentality,” and defines it as “a learned disposition by which female members of a community perceive themselves as potential prey to male members of a community of outsiders.” By embodying this mentality, Seghal finds that the hatred of these women is legitimated and is directed at the outsider who, in this case, are Muslim men.

Seghal’s study reveals that the Samiti women are central to the maintenance of hostilities directed at Muslim men. The propagation of sexual violence committed by Muslim men against Hindu women fuels the discursive framing of Muslim men as invaders of the Hindu Nation. Hindu nationalism posits the Hindu female as symbol of the Hindu nation. Hence, to violate the body of the Hindu woman is tantamount to the violation of all Hindus. This violation also showcases the perceived weakness inherent in the Hindu male’s ability to protect their nation, and, therefore, an inherent weakness in Hindu masculinity.

Björkert’s (2006) “Women as arm-bearers: Gendered caste-violence and the Indian state” is organized around three intersecting themes: (i) lower caste citizens have been excluded from the material structures of economic development and political governance; (ii) the Indian State has failed to give proper protections to lower caste persons; and (iii) lower caste women have been forced to engage in militancy in order to protect themselves and their property from the violence of upper caste men. The central concern of these themes are relations of power and privilege and social change, prompting challenges from the lower caste and responses from the upper caste.

Björkert discusses the tenurial structure created during the British Administration known as the *zamindari* system, in which an intermediary existed between the tillers of the land and the state. The intermediary performed no actual labor, but it exploited the peasantry. The abolition of the intermediary was an important land reform made in post-Independence India. However, this gave rise to many middle-sized owned/tillers, referred to as the Backward Castes. This group grew to own more land than the higher castes. The higher castes responded by blocking subsequent legislation that would have caused them to lose power. The Dalits are thus excluded from any of the material gains that accrue to the upper and growing middle castes. Any attempt at upward mobility by the Dalits threatens the power of the higher castes. This has led to violence and counter-violence as the Dalits challenge the upper castes.

Björkert’s study is based on field research that draws on recent and ongoing caste conflicts in rural Bihar, as well as Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Gujarat, North India. It depicts a complex state of affairs. It portrays Dalit women, thrust by circumstances beyond their control, as primary actors of their own bodies and property. The women have assumed roles that were previously reserved for Dalit men (murdered by the upper castes). Dalit women have become victims as well as perpetrators of violence. Whereas they have no control over what upper caste men might want to inflict on them, the Dalit women have gained control with respect to protecting themselves and property with arms. Self-preservation, after all, is the first law of nature.

The literature suggests that the militarization of women in India is linked to the need for women to defend themselves against gender violence, that is, male sexual aggression. There is, however, another dimension to transforming women from victims to perpetrators of violence even if in the name of self-defense. The militarization of women is an exercise in education. All forms of education are transformative, and sometimes in ways that that the educators cannot imagine.

Thus, one cannot but wonder about all the reasons behind Hindu nationalists arming women. If it is for self-defense against Muslim sexual aggressors in order to advance the Hindu nationalist political ideology of establishing a Hindu Indian state, then it can be said that their thinking is short-sighted. Indian women are not pawns to be manipulated by Indian men. They are capable of thinking on their own and for their own interests. This is clearly demonstrated in an unrelated study of economic abuse Asian women in Britain and South Asia suffer at the hands of their husbands.

In “Women’s Narratives of Economic Abuse and Financial Strategies in Britain and South Asia,” Chowbey (2017) studies the subjection of Asian women in Britain and South Asia to economic abuse by their husbands. In short, their husbands seek to deny them the opportunity of attaining economic independence by deploying four constraints: “(a) preventing acquisition of economic resources through interfering with education, training, and employment...; (b) preventing use of resources/controlling of other economic resources that are already available to women on an individual or shared basis through control of distribution and monitoring expenditure; (c) refusing to contribute; and (d) exploiting women’s resources and/or generating economic costs” (460). The women, very much aware of what their husbands are doing, quietly devise and implement their own strategies to overcome these constraints. Chowbey’s study reveals that the women’s responses challenge the notion that South Asian women are submissive.

Violence against men

The least researched aspect of gendered violence in South Asia is women’s violence against men. Hence, the literature is almost silent but for the work of Anant Kumar (2012), entitled “Domestic Violence against Men in India: A Perspective.” Another informative article that is markedly difficult to read because the writing style is Diwakar’s “Domestic Violence against Men: A Legal Aspect” (2012). Women’s violence against men in the domestic sphere stems from the changing social relations of power. Increasingly, the absolute power once exercised by caste and men is weakening, thus eliciting differentiated gendered responses from the dominant groups.

Women’s position, power, and status in Indian society are changing, and so are relations of power between men and women. This is the central argument of Kumar (2012) in “Domestic Violence against Men in India: A Perspective.” She documents various forms of violence perpetrated against men by women in domestic settings in India. What are the causes of this change with respect to perpetrators and victims? Why are women inflicting violence on their husbands and male partners? Which types of violence do women inflict on men? Why do men tolerate this? Kumar presents us with the reality of how women’s changing position, power, and status in society have empowered them with awareness of their rights. These factors, including education, changing values and gender roles empower women in realizing that they are not inferior to men, even stronger and more powerful than men in some places, and are better placed to understand this perceived difference in power relations.

Much has been researched and reported on violence against women but not on violence against men. The changing gender roles and power relations between men and women—with men afraid of losing power and women excited by their empowered position—has created a new social dynamic. Given this new context, situating power within men and women, husband and wife, is important. Kumar opens this article with a very poignant statement: “Men do report spousal violence in private, but they hardly report it in public.” This explains why there is no systematic record on domestic violence against men in India. However, it is estimated that in every 100 cases of domestic violence, approximately 40 involve violence against men. This fact notwithstanding, there is little evidence available on the actual number of women’s violent acts against men in India.

Kumar cites a study conducted by Save Family Foundation, in which 1,650 husbands in India were interviewed. It reported that 32.8% of the men suffered economical violence from their spouses; 22.2% emotional violence; 25.2% physical violence; and 17.7% sexual violence. The men who were interviewed were drawn from professionals in marketing (19.76%), doctors/engineers (38.48%), government employees (15.8%), and unemployed (1.70%). The study also found that men do not report violence perpetrated on them by women because no one listens to them; instead, people laugh at them; most people do not believe them; many men are ashamed of sharing stories about being beaten up by their wives.

Some of the reasons why men tolerate abusive and violent relationships include the belief that things will get better, fear of losing social respect and position, protection, and love towards their children and family.

Violence against men is not considered serious because it is different, since in most cases women use mental, verbal, and emotional violence rather than physical violence. Hence, there are no visible scars that men can show for the violence perpetrated on them by their wives. Diwakar (2016) also admits of the existence of domestic violence against men in India but avers that when a “man tries to talk about his problem, torture, struggle, and harassment of marriage and family, no one listens; instead they laugh at him. Many men feel ashamed to talk when they are beaten at home by their wives and family” (2). Thus, most of the crimes men suffer at the hands of women “are not reported because of the sick mentality of people” (3).

Diwakar laments the fact that men have no recourse to the law, noting that Indian Legislation does not accept that men can also be victims of sexual violence and physical assault. In conclusion, the facts presented show that violence is not exclusively a male domain. Women are as violent as men, and in some cases even more violent. It can be surmised that violence is a function of power. Those who possess, and control power are more often than not actuated to use it. This goes for both men and women.

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