

Income Inequality and Gender-Based Violence: Impediments to Women's Reproductive Health

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Abstract—*Ramification of gender based violence on women's reproductive health holds a dominating place in the global human rights dynamism. Over the years, nexus of gender based income inequalities has manifested violent state of affairs within households leaving manifold impressions on women's overall physical, mental and social well-being. Gender based violence along with poor entitlements within a conjugal relationship strategically hampers a woman's self-worth creating multifaceted doubts on her individual identity and self-determination.*

Patriarchal connotations presuming men as bread earners and females as sexual subordinates to male partners often lead to situations of powerlessness limiting woman's sexual autonomy on her body, needs and preferences. Limited or no control and access over resources directly influences a woman's health seeking behavior. Consequentially, traditional gender norms apparently, approve male partners to inflict their masculine control in the form violence which may be physical, sexual, verbal or emotional.

It is an appalling scenario to realize that legal provisions, policies and programmes of our nation state have miserably misunderstood the concept of women's financial dependence thereby ignoring the consequences of gender based violence and its impact on woman's reproductive health.

This paper is a conscious attempt to highlight and comprehend the grave impressions of violence on women's reproductive health as an outcome of gender based income inequalities. The paper also seeks to delineate the role of human development professionals in the construction and expansion of effective gender sensitive and conducive social systems and institutions across all levels.

Introduction

World economies have experienced upsurge shift from being mere agro based subsistence economies to a comprehensive productive commercial global hubs. Rapid convergence of critical knowledge base, services and multiculturalism with the advent of new-economic policies of globalization, liberalization and privatization has contributed phenomenally towards economic growth. However, it is essential to understand that economic growth in terms of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) cannot be substituted for development

indices pertaining to key human development segments of health, education, social security etc.

Global development discourses have witnessed a paradigm shift from core economic approaches to holistic humanistic approaches. Development may be perceived as a key umbrella term for 'Economic', 'Social' and 'Human' development perspectives which may be obliged to operationalize in synchronization to achieve sustainable development. However, it is pertinent here to realize that sustained development cannot be achieved in isolation to gender development. Gendered aspects to development are often seen as separate or supplementary verticals to the development paradigms rather being embedded within the already existing development models. Gender discrimination and exclusion in economic, political, social and cultural arenas showcase the appalling facets of various international, national and institutional frameworks aspiring to achieve sustainable development.

Economic policies of developing nations expediently chose to overlook population policies thereby transferring the onus of gendered human development issues exclusively to population policies of nation state. Over the years, gender-based violence has been propounded as one of the crucial worldwide public health challenges. Rigid gender norms, faulty gender socialization and exclusive gender roles coupled with low literacy rate and poor health-seeking behavior can be delineated as the commonly understood primary factors manifesting situations of gender-based violence. Undoubtedly, at this juncture it is pertinent to acknowledge that gender based income inequality is a precursor to complex gender norms presuming gender division of labour which has a subsequent influence on individual's overall personality and resultant health-seeking behavior too.

The next section of the paper seeks to explain that gender based violence, income inequality and reproductive health must be viewed in conjunction with each other to assure sustainable development.

Alliances between Income Inequality, Gender-Based Violence and Reproductive Health

Gender-based violence has been recognized as one of the most significant concern of human rights discourses. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against women (1993) explains violence against women as “*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 private life*”. [1]

Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) also recognized “*...that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women, and that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men*” [1]

Elaborating further, UNHCR emphasized that “*sexual and gender-based violence refers to any act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and is based on gender norms and unequal power relationships. It encompasses threats of violence and coercion. It can be physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual in nature, and can take the form of a denial of resources or access to services. It inflicts harm on women, girls, men and boys*”[2]. Highlighting the magnitude of gender-based violence, WHO (2018) estimated that one in three women worldwide have experienced violence (physical and/or sexual violence) generally by an intimate partner [3]. In India, NFHS-4 data reflected that 29% women in rural areas and 23 % in urban areas have reported physical abuse. The data also points out that 28.8 % ever married women (15-49 yrs) have suffered spousal violence [4].

Violence against women certainly translates into risky consequences leading to serious physical and mental health complications. WHO (2018) delineates that “*the short and long-term consequences of such violence on the health and well-being of women are many and significant. In addition to the immediate trauma and injuries, women may have to face other health issues including unintended pregnancy, mental health problems, sexually transmitted infections, and, in some regions, HIV*”[3]. Violence against women and women’s reproductive health must be previewed in congruence to each other. Several studies [5-10] suggested that victims of gender based violence develop added risks of gynecological complications and higher susceptibility to acquire RTIs/STIs and even HIV.

Findings of the study [11] explained the causal relationship between violence, poverty and reproductive health assessing that woman from lower socio-economic strata and from minority communities are more subject to violence and are

affected disproportionately due to multiplicity of factors when compared to women from decent socio-economic background. The study suggested that income may be viewed as a shield against violence and subsequent health seeking behavior. It is imperative to understand at this stage they women with poor financial stability are more vulnerable to violence and gynecological complications due to a set of manifold factors.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Factors Advancing Gender-Based Violence and Women’s Reproductive health

Gender-based violence may be regarded as the by-product of various socio-cultural and economic factors leading to women’s poor reproductive health. The World Conference on Cultural Policies, Mexico City (1982) outlines culture as “*the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material and intellectual features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letter, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs*”. Certainly, the definition expresses that society’s traditions, customs, moral values transpire into all individual’s way of life having comprehensive bearing on gender roles as well. Rigid gender roles are not only the underlying genesis for several gender-based inequalities but are also significant in asserting the inflexible gender division of labour. Conventional connotations of a woman’s reproductive roles of child bearing and family rearing often overlook her participation and contribution in various other productive and community roles. Reflections from the study [12] emphasized that women’s contribution in household chores and support to male members to achieve the desired income and subsistence level often goes unrecognized. The subordinate status of a woman to her male counterpart presumes men as bread earners of the family subsequently influencing a woman’s bargaining power not only in general household decision making but also on her reproductive autonomy. Faulty gender division of labour creates a precarious nexus of power and control wherein crucial decision making is perceived as a rational cognitive progression suitable for men for them being financially superior and head of the family.

The study [13] laid vital focus on the fact that a women’s vulnerability to domestic violence is chiefly shaped on the basis of allocation of household resources and gender division of labour. Masculine power and control over resources can be understood as the major defining factors leading to gender based violence by an intimate partner. The study [13] analyzed following key gendered assumptions manifesting cycle of violence as outlined by [14]:

- i. “*Gendered assumptions around shared access to household incomes and resources*”;
- ii. “*Situations of financial dependency which can put women at risk of poverty if they leave including whether benefits are received as a dependent or in one’s own right*”;

- iii. *“Gendered expectations regarding women’s caring responsibilities which limit employment prospects”;*
- iv. *“Gendered expectations that benefits received by women are for the benefit of other family members”;*
- v. *“Situations where male partners prevent women from working, claiming benefits, or leaving the house”;*

Several socio-cultural factors viz. a viz. lack of education, stringent social customs, gender biased socialization, lack of awareness about rights, early marriage, poor self determination directly adds up to situation of violence. However, economic strain and income instability post modernism called for a realization of a whole new dimension in understanding the complexities of interpersonal relations and conflicts. Rapid industrialization and migration alongside loss of traditional livelihood opportunities post globalization has been instrumental in creating economic pressures on a large section of people in developing nations which essentially meant more women participation in assumed productive workforce. As an outcome, global economies also witnessed dynamic changes in the existing traditional gender roles. Depletion of resources and the diminishing stereotypes of male being the bread winners essentially questioned the under-performing masculinity unable to suffice familial needs. Gender based violence has increased as a result of depletion of resources and the male members of the family are under a constant stress to be unable to provide adequately for the family[15]. Non conformation to patriarchal gender roles by female partners consequentially led to increased mental pressure and humiliation to their male partners that often get translated into situations of abusive and violent relationships. Quest to retain power and control over resources and to establish their supremacy over critical decision making often persuade males to resort to physical, sexual and economic abuse.

In an attempt to integrate poverty and gender into health programmes [16] highlighted the mechanism of power and control wheel wherein men restrict their wives participation in educational and employment endeavors, limit the access to financial assets such as cash, crops, livestock etc, encourage isolation by exercising constraints on her social interaction by curtailing her freedom of mobility, and channelizing their control as mediators even on the accessibility over common property resources. [14] also indicated the use of economic abuse as gendered aspects of poverty leading to intimate partner violence. Thus, men often resort to use gender-based violence as the ultimate tool to exercise their power and establish their control in all major life aspects. Reviewing further, nation's earlier legal provisions owing to women's entitlement rights and succession rights on familial resources and property had been far from being gender sensitive deepening her vulnerability to social evils of violence, rape, female infanticide, sexual harassment etc. Despite several amendments in several legal provisions towards more gender inclusive systems and structures, the undue impact of the

previous gender-bias cannot be overlooked which are still lurking around major societal institutions and systems.

It is pertinent here to understand that 99.2% [17-18] of violence against women goes unreported with only 3.5% [17-18] women approaching police because women fear separation, ostracism, shame and guilt with vital barriers being financial dependency on their male partner [19-22]. It is noteworthy to realize that gender-based violence may be understood as a two-edged sword both as a cause of income inequality and as a consequence of income-inequality.

Triple role burden on women and their poor social status in the family hierarchy are contrary to each other hampering her self confidence and self determination thus questioning her individual identity. Vibrant precipitating socio-cultural and economic factors of violence cause a heavy brunt on a woman's reproductive and sexual autonomy [23]. Financial instability also meant poor health seeking behavior due to unavailability of affordable medical services. Women subjected to spousal violence demonstrate manifold risks of carrying unwanted pregnancies, repeated pregnancies, contracting HIV, RTIs/STDs, developing cervical cancer, greater risks of miscarriages, pre-mature delivery, obstructed delivery, poor fetal growth and other gynecological complications [23-27].

Men who are habitual of inflicting violence on their spouses also exhibit higher chances of having illicit extra marital affairs, heightened dowry demands and poor acceptance of family planning methods [28, 11, 15]. Women survivors of intimate partner violence enter into complex web of poverty and associated gender-based violence violating her right to have coercion free reproductive and sexual health.

With international commitment to promote gender equality it is central that gender sensitivity is embedded within the nation's socio-cultural, legal and economic structures and institutions. Let us now understand the crucial role of human development professionals towards building a gender sensitive conducive environment ensuring sustainable development.

Role of Human Development Professionals

Human development professionals may be considered as safeguards of society's undermining social fabric hampering global development. Human development professionals often deal with complex set of problems at primary, secondary and tertiary level. Human rights are inalienable to human existence and endorse social, economic and political equality irrespective of one's sex, class, caste, race, religion, social status etc. Before delineating interventions it is also vital to understand that gender roles are societal and not biological. Over the years, primary institutions such as family and marriage has encouraged culture of silence thereby presuming ways to socialize females as mere dependent, docile and passive receivers lacking confidence to participate in important economic decision making. Undoubtedly, the patriarchal mindset has facilitated male partners to establish

their masculine supremacy by way of violence and economic abuse.

Human development professionals such as economists, social workers, anthropologists, lawyers and health professionals must collaborate to develop inclusive mechanisms at individual, institutional and societal level. Some of the suggestive measures which may be instrumental in promoting inclusive development are as follows:

- i. Involvement of family members especially male members of the family to establish harmony within conjugal relations by establishing acceptance for changing gender roles;
- ii. Enhancing and encouraging educational opportunities for young girls and women to improve their skill set alongside ensuring better knowledge about their essential human rights;
- iii. Creating interface for women economic independence by promoting income-generating opportunities thus enhancing their self reliance and bargaining power;
- iv. It is imperative that legal provisions, policies and programmes are devised with utmost gender sensitivity to promote fair control and access over resources;
- v. Communities and society at large must be mobilized and sensitized against social evils such as female infanticide, dowry-system, early marriage, coercive sexual relations, gender-based violence and its dreadful influence on woman's reproductive and sexual health;
- vi. Creation of support system for victims of violence to ensure justice and eliminate the fear of ostracism;
- vii. Alike CSOs/NGOs and research organizations may collaborate to serve as think tanks for macro level policy change;
- viii. Multi-nationals and corporate sector may be encouraged to direct their CSR initiatives towards gender-sensitive development;
- ix. Strengthening public health system which is available, accessible and affordable;
- x. Ensuring better health facilities by strengthening primary referral centres to remove socio-cultural taboos surrounding reproductive and sexual health thereby promoting youngsters and traditional households to discuss their critical concerns

Conclusion

Income inequality and gender based violence violating women's reproductive and sexual health rights are mutually interlinked and cannot be considered in isolation to each other. Quoting Sen (1990), "to concentrate on family poverty irrespective of gender can be misleading in terms of both causation and consequences". Gendered aspects to income inequality and its implications on gender-based violence and

reproductive and sexual health-seeking behavior cannot be considered in isolation to each other. Violation of human rights represents the ugly facet of development discourses manifesting gender inequalities and social exclusion. Emancipation from patriarchal shackles insists creation of gender sensitive socio-cultural, political and economic fervor across several levels. Sophisticated assessment of gender biased roles, attitude, value systems and customs may be carried out throughout economic and social development sector to achieve vivacious sustainable development goals.

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