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Behind the mechanisms of violence... Fundamentalists like IS thrive in typecasting women in sexual roles

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The Isis recently beheaded two women in Syria on charges of sorcery. They have stoned women to death, forced them into sexual slavery, forcefully veiled them, barred them from public spaces, executed thousands of people and committed grave and gendered crimes. The general reaction is to shudder and dismiss these acts as those of extremist religious fundamentalists who hate women and as something that will not touch us. This, however, is not so.

The Isis, like many fundamentalist extremist groups, refers to their own superiority by glorifying myths as history. They draw inspiration by controlling interpretations of religious texts. They use organised violence on religious grounds. Such violence is to capture power and has nothing to do with religion or nationalism. They promote a culture of violence to promote sectarian divisions and breed ignorant armies of youth. These ideas are structured into practices and institutions falsely categorised as traditions or societal norms.

Violent fundamentalists like to project a macho image of themselves. They do this by constructing a masculinity that contrasts with a purposely weak concept of the feminine. This kind of enhanced masculinity revels in the display of physical characteristics. It thrives in typecasting, homogenising and essentialising women to sexual roles. But this essentialising does not end with gender. Other communities, ethnicities and any group that does not conform to their ideas are also seen as inferior.

Fundamentalist extremists legitimise the use of force on those women and even on men who do not conform to their own conception of gender and order and are different because for fundamentalists 'difference' is unacceptable. Sexual violence is used to show power, enforce a gender hierarchy and as warning to anyone who dares to question this authority. Such violence is used to degrade women as a community and keep them under control. It is known that violence would be used on all kinds of 'others' who are categorised as different. These different groups are not just women but can be minorities of all kind from ethnic, caste, or sexual.

Behind the mechanisms of violence is the assertion of retaining power and controlling the victim. Such violence cannot be restricted to individual victimhood or individual aberration. The reality is that this violence is sanctioned and often collectively ignored. It is worse if the State and power structures use it, or ignore or justify it. Moreover individual violence reinforces the existing power differences in the social structure.

Fundamentalists do not hate all women. In fact, they love and 'honour' those women who conform to the specially constructed womanhood that sticks to biological roles and accept such roles in society. Fundamentalists assign for themselves the role of protectors of such women and culture. This protection includes disempowering women and becoming their agents. Women who question such roles are targets to be dishonoured. Extremists, like the Isis, also believe that women are the prize they should get for their jihad.

The Isis with its gendered violence is the extremist version of the fundamentalists. But there are other types of fundamentalisms that reinforce each other. The sophisticated gradations of fundamentalists, as sociologist Johan Galtung put it, do not use violence but use social structure. This social structure and its practices include hatred, exclusion, discrimination, humiliation and so on. This exclusion and hierarchy is used to distinguish between genders, race, social groups, and so on. It blames women as deserving to be punished and violated if they do not conform and sees sexual violence as natural or as deterrence for errant women or aberration and so they turn a blind eye to it.

Fundamentalists source their legitimacy from specific texts, especially ancient religious ones, and forcefully restrict multiple interpretations of these texts, outside the one that they wish to propagate. Fundamentalists impact our lives in different ways. It is critical to sharpen the discussion on the gender-violence-power relations, understand fundamentalisms and its gradations as an ideology and work collectively on policies and actions that can counter such violent power relations.

Women's groups, feminists, progressive social groups, many states and international organisations are waging a battle to counter sexual violence, which remains endemic in conflicts, civil wars, natural disasters, displacement and failed states.

Such violence also occurs sporadically when there is a lack of will in State institutions to investigate such acts of violence and enforce laws and justice mechanisms. In this context, the UN Security Council passed a series of resolutions (1325 and so on). Most countries signed and endorsed these. Yet many have failed to implement them.

India has accepted these UNSC resolutions but is yet to make a national plan of action to ensure its implementation. The Supreme Court has passed many laws, like those on sexual harassment and most recently forbidding the approach that rapists should be asked to marry their victim. These are positive steps but much more needs to be done as gendered violence goes on. Any law that gives impunity to violent acts committed by the State or non-State actors must be removed. All cases of violence against women must be dealt with quickly to give justice to the victim and punishment to the perpetrator.

Women should be part of all decision-making processes and participants in governance. Relief and rehabilitation should be given in a dignified manner. Simultaneously, the ideas of fundamentalisms that cannot tolerate dissent and want to destroy autonomy and difference must be understood and challenged in all institutions and public discourse.

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P.S.

* "Fundamentalists like IS thrive in typecasting women in sexual roles". Hindustan Times. Updated: Jul 20, 2015 02:26 IST:

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/fundamentalists-like-is-thrive-in-typecasting-women-in-sexual-roles/article1-1371036.aspx>

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