

# Economic Reforms and Increasing Violence against Women

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**ABSTRACT:** The brave and courageous Delhi gang rape victim breathed her last on December 30, 2012. This article is a tribute to her and other victims of violence against women.

Violence against women is as old as patriarchy. But it has intensified and become more pervasive in the recent past. It has taken on more brutal forms, like the death of the Delhi gang rape victim and the suicide of the 17-year-old rape victim in Chandigarh.

Rape cases and cases of violence against women have increased over the years. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported 10,068 rape cases in 1990 which increased to 16,496 in 2000. With 24,206 cases in 2011, rape cases jumped to incredible increase of 873 percent from 1971 when NCRB started to record cases of rape. And New Delhi has emerged as the rape capital of India, accounting for 25 percent cases.

The movement to stop this violence must be sustained till justice is done for every one of our daughters and sisters who has been violated.

And while we intensify our struggle for justice for women, we need to also ask why rape cases have increased 240 percent since 1990s when the new economic policies were introduced. We need to examine the roots of the growing violence against women.

Could there be a connection between the growth of violent, undemocratically imposed, unjust and unfair economic policies and the growth of crimes against women?

**KEYWORDS**-violence, women, economic, reforms, India, rape, domestic

## I. INTRODUCTION

I believe there is.

Contributions of women

Firstly, the economic model focusing myopically on “growth” begins with violence against women by discounting their contribution to the economy.

The more the government talks ad nauseam about “inclusive growth” and “financial inclusion”, the more it excludes the contributions of women to the economy and society. According to patriarchal economic models, production for sustenance is counted as “non-production”. The transformation of value into disvalue, labour into non-labour, knowledge into non-knowledge, is achieved by the most powerful number that rules our lives, the patriarchal construct of GDP, Gross Domestic Product, which commentators have started to call the Gross Domestic Problem. [1,2,3]

National accounting systems which are used for calculating growth as GDP are based on the assumption that if producers consume what they produce, they do not in fact produce at all, because they fall outside the production boundary.

The production boundary is a political creation that, in its workings, excludes regenerative and renewable production cycles from the area of production. Hence, all women who produce for their families, children, community and society are treated as “non-productive” and “economically” inactive. When economies are confined to the market place,

economic self-sufficiency is perceived as economic deficiency. The devaluation of women's work, and of work done in subsistence economies of the South, is the natural outcome of a production boundary constructed by capitalist patriarchy.

By restricting itself to the values of the market economy, as defined by capitalist patriarchy, the production boundary ignores economic value in the two vital economies which are necessary to ecological and human survival. They are the areas of nature's economy and sustenance economy. In nature's economy and sustenance economy, economic value is a measure of how the earth's life and human life are protected. Its currency is life giving processes, not cash or the market price.

Secondly, a model of capitalist patriarchy which excludes women's work and wealth creation in the mind deepens the violence by displacing women from their livelihoods and alienating them from the natural resources on which their livelihoods depend – their land, their forests, their water, their seeds and biodiversity. Economic reforms based on the idea of limitless growth in a limited world can only be maintained by the powerful grabbing the resources of the vulnerable. The resource grab that is essential for “growth” creates a culture of rape – the rape of the earth, of local self-reliant economies, the rape of women. The only way in which this “growth” is “inclusive” is by its inclusion of ever larger numbers in its circle of violence.[4,5,6]

I have repeatedly stressed that the rape of the Earth and rape of women are intimately linked, both metaphorically in shaping worldviews and materially in shaping women's everyday lives. The deepening economic vulnerability of women makes them more vulnerable to all forms of violence, including sexual assault, as we found out during a series of public hearings on the impact of economic reforms on women organised by the National Commission on Women and the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology.

## **II. DISCUSSION**

Thirdly, economic reforms lead to the subversion of democracy and privatisation of government. Economic systems influence political systems. The government talks of economic reforms as if they have nothing to do with politics and power. They talk of keeping politics out of economics, even while they impose an economic model shaped by the politics of a particular gender and class. Neoliberal reforms work against democracy. We have seen this recently in the government pushing through “reforms” to bring in Walmart through FDI in retail. Corporate-driven reforms create a convergence of economic and political power, deepening of inequalities and a growing separation of the political class from the will of the people they are supposed to represent. This is at the root of disconnect between politicians and the public which we experienced during the protests that have grown since the Delhi gang rape.

Worse, an alienated political class is afraid of its own citizens. This is what explains the increasing use of police to crush non-violent citizen protests as we have witnessed in New Delhi. Or in the torture of Soni Sori in Bastar. Or in the arrest of Dayamani Barla in Jharkhand. Or the thousands of cases against the communities struggling against the nuclear power plant in Kudankulam. A privatised corporate state must rapidly become a police state.

This is why politicians must surround themselves with ever increasing VIP security, diverting the police from their important duties to protect women and ordinary citizens.

Fourthly, the economic model shaped by capitalist patriarchy is based on the commodification of everything, including women. When we stopped the WTO Ministerial in Seattle, our slogan was “Our world is not for Sale”.[7,8,9]

An economics of deregulation of commerce, of privatisation and commodification of seeds and food, land and water, women and children unleashed by economic liberalisation, degrades social values, deepens patriarchy and intensifies violence against women.

Economic systems influence culture and social values. An economics of commodification creates a culture of commodification, where everything has a price and nothing has value.

The growing culture of rape is a social externality of economic reforms. We need to institutionalise social audits of the neo-liberal policies which are a central instrument of patriarchy in our times. If there was a social audit of corporatising our seed sector, 270,000 farmers would not have been pushed to suicide in India since the new economic policies were

introduced. If there was a social audit of the corporatisation of our food and agriculture, we would not have every fourth Indian going hungry, every third woman malnourished and every second child wasted and stunted due to severe malnutrition. India today would not be Republic of Hunger that Dr Utsa Patnaik has written about.

The victim of the Delhi gang rape has triggered a social revolution. We must sustain it, deepen it, expand it. We must demand and get speedy and effective justice for women. We must call for fast track courts to convict those responsible for crimes against women. We must make sure laws are changed so justice is not elusive for victims of sexual violence. We must continue the demand for blacklisting of politicians with criminal records.

It is of course well-known that violence against women has deeply systemic roots, and that there is a "normalisation" of such violence where the economic and social status of women is already low. It is also increasingly recognised that such violence takes many forms. In addition to the overt physical violence (on which more below) there are what could be called "structural" forms of violence through economic, social and cultural processes.

Economic violence ranges from the denial of property to women, the use of their unpaid labour as a norm in households, the denial of equal access to education and discrimination in labour markets, unequal access to credit and other markets to practices such as dowry payments. Social violence include not only various forms of discrimination and curbs on women's mobility and freedom, but also practices such as early marriage, pressure to bear male children, disparities in access to nutrition and health, as well as to education. Cultural norms that oppress women and girls often have a strong psychological element to them, as patterns of objectification and subjugation can lead to self-oppression and low self-esteem.

In addition, of course, the many forms of direct physical violence against women also tend to have strong links with economic, social and material processes. This operates throughout the life-cycle of women. Thus, pre-natal sex selection and female infanticide are much more common where female progeny are seen as an economic or social burden. Sexual abuse, including in its worst form of rape, can reflect not only patriarchal desires for control and punishment but also the lack of economic protection of the victims.[10,11,12]

### **III. RESULTS**

Violence associated with practices such as dowry, as in dowry deaths, has a very obvious material link. But even domestic and marital abuse is made more possible when women have fewer options for escape out of such oppressive relationships because of lack of assets or economic security in the form of gainful occupations. So lack of economic security becomes a deterrent to complaint or resistance by women victims. Even apparently non-economic atrocities such as "honour killings" have often been found to have underlying economic motivations, such as the desire to ensure control of land and other assets within particular communities, and prevent inheritance by children of "mixed" marriages.

Trafficking of women and girl children in turn has strong material underpinnings. The association of trafficking with poverty is obvious and well-known. But there needs to be more appreciation of the fact that in many cases, as Radhika Coomaraswamy has pointed out, "trafficking is really abuse of the desire to migrate", which essentially reflects poor material conditions and oppressive social constraints in the place of origin.

Even violence against older women, and particularly widows, often has a strong economic basis – either in the need of the perpetrators to control the family property or to avoid expenditure on the consumption of someone who is less able to provide unpaid labour for the household.[13,14,15]

So there is a strong though complex relationship between violence against women and economic processes. This means that the evidence of increasing violence against women in India in the past decade must have something to do with the very rapid economic changes that have also been so apparent over this period.

Over the past two decades, the Indian economy has been thrown more open to market processes than ever before, and these market processes have been regional, national and international. This period has been associated with a tendency towards privatisation of state assets, reduction in crucial government investment, especially in infrastructure areas, reduced per capita public spending on health, reduced public expenditure in the rural areas generally, deregulation of and a number of tax benefits and other sops provided to large domestic and multinational capital, trade liberalisation

which has affected the viability of small scale manufacturing units and agriculturalists, even as it has created more export possibilities for textiles and IT-enabled services.

All this in turn has created both very rapid growth in some sectors, and stagnation or worse in other sectors and regions. Economic inequalities have increased quite substantially, both spatially and within regions, and material insecurities have increased, not only for the poor but even for more prosperous groups.

The most significant feature that affects the lives of people is employment and the conditions of livelihood. This is where the past decade has created growing insecurity. The difficulty of finding remunerative work opportunities has become the single most important problem for large sections of the population. Wage employment of all kinds has fallen as a share of total employment, and self-employment has emerged as the fastest growing form even in non-agriculture, now accounting for around half of the workforce. But self-employed, especially those engaged in relatively less skilled and less productive occupations, face daily problems of survival, creating additional tensions.

Agriculturalists continue to face huge problems of viability as cultivators because of the combination of threats from highly subsidised imports which are keeping prices down, and rising costs because of withdrawal of subsidies. It is striking to note that the crisis in agriculture, which is especially marked in some pockets of rain-fed cultivation, has continued even as international prices of crops have increased in the past few years, suggesting that domestic policy and institutional failures have been significant in this.

In the urban areas, the rate of overall employment generation has been slightly better, but not in the formal sector, where employment has barely grown at all. There has been some growth in services employment, and especially in IT-enabled services that has reduced the rate of educated unemployment. But even in the urban areas, the problem of lack of sufficient employment for all those who need to work, remains significant. For less skilled workers, and especially women, the problem of access to productive work is especially acute.[16,17,18]

Women are being drawn into the paid labour force in some more regressive ways, in the form of home-based work as part of large chains of production organised by large capitalists, or as low-paid and exploited service sector workers. The largest increase in regular employment of urban women (amounting to around 3 million new workers) between 1999-2000 and 2004-05 was as domestic servants.

In addition, there is the problem of reduced security of work and of incomes generally. Of course this is most marked for wage workers in less skilled and more unstable occupations. That is why the National Sample Survey of 2004-05 could find that 80 per cent of workers in India earn less than Rs. 20 per day. But it is ironically true that even in the higher ends of the job spectrum, employment has become more volatile and fragile, and the earlier security that was implicit in formal sector employment has all but disappeared in the new contracts.[37,38,39]

In addition, even non-wage incomes are now less secure and more volatile, simply because many markets, and the income accruing from them, fluctuate much more wildly than they did in the past.

Material insecurity has been increasingly expressed in other negative features, most notably food consumption. Food insecurity has once again become an important national issue, not only for traditionally deprived groups, but in the aggregate. Foodgrain availability per head of population for the economy as a whole has been lower on average in the past few years, than even thirty years ago. Per capita calorie consumption, even for the poorest forty per cent of the population, has also declined.

There have also been evident declines in the availability of basic public services in the areas of health and sanitation. The decline in public expenditure investment has not only meant that the rate of expansion of much-needed health facilities has declined. The cuts in public expenditure have also meant that maintenance and repair of such facilities, as well as basic running expenditures, are not provided, so that the actual quality of and access to public health and sanitation facilities has declined.[19,20,21]

This has affected both prevented preventive and curative health care in the public sector, which in turn means that even poor households are forced to undertake much more expenditure on private health care, even when this cuts into the incomes necessary for sheer physical survival. Naturally, this tends to affect women and girl children more adversely, and compounds the effects of gender discrimination in nutrition as well. There are even some states where the rates of

child immunisation have actually worsened in recent years, and this includes apparently "fast-growing" states like Gujarat.

Along with this, the growing emphasis on markets has implied the commoditisation of many aspects of life that were earlier seen as either naturally provided by states and communities, or simply not subject to market transaction and property relations. Thus, the inability or refusal of the government to provide safe drinking water has led to the explosive growth of a bottled water industry. A whole range of previously services and utilities like power distribution and telecommunications have been privatised. Even the growing recognition accorded to intellectual property rights marks the entry of markets into ever newer spheres.[34,35,36]

Of course, markets imply marketing and drawing more and more consumers into the web of purchase through advertising and attempts to manipulate peoples' tastes and choices. In this effort, advertising companies have notoriously used women as objects to purvey their products. The dual relationship with women, as objects to be used in selling goods, and as a huge potential market for goods, creates a peculiar process whereby women are encouraged and persuaded to participate actively in their own objectification. The huge media attention given to beauty contests, "successful" models, and the like, all feed into the rapidly expanding beauty industry, which includes not only cosmetics and beauty aids, but slimming agents, beauty parlours, weight loss clinics, and so on. Many of these contribute to the most undesirable and backward attitudes to both women and their appearance, such as the advertisements for fairness cream that emphasise that it is necessary to be fair to make a "good" marriage, which is in turn seen as the basic goal of a woman.

All this seems plausible enough, but many would argue that the link between all this and violence against women is not all that obvious. But there are identifiable mechanisms for this.[31,32,33]

The most basic mechanism comes from the sheer fact of greater material insecurity. As ordinary life becomes more volatile, insecure and unpredictable in various ways, people search for security in whatever ways they can muster. Precisely because some degree of certainty is seen as a comfort, often the more rigid a system is (whether it is a set of intellectual and spiritual beliefs, or a religious order, or a relatively close grouping claiming a particular special social identity) the more attractive it perversely becomes. (This may explain why some of the more rigidly structured and sectarian religious and social groups that strongly emphasise patriarchy have attracted growing following in recent times.)

And there is a strong undercurrent of violence in all this. The tendency towards violence of various sorts – towards other "communities" or caste groups, and especially towards women – can be seen as another reflection and result of the economic and social processes outlined earlier. The greater insecurity and sheer difficulty of ordinary life, the complications and worries involved in providing for basic needs, all make for much greater levels of everyday irritation in people. This can only rarely find an outlet in places of work, and requires other means of expression.[22,23,24]

In addition, the massive increase in inequality, the growth of rampant consumerism, and the explosion of new media that brings all the lavish new lifestyles into open public view, all serve to add to the resentment and frustration of have-nots. The gap between aspiration and reality becomes ever wider, and this creates a strong urge to somehow get at those who are seen as "responsible".[46,47,48] Of course, the real agents of these processes – the unresponsive government, the large companies and multinationals, the foreign investors – are all too large, too distant and too powerful to be touched. How much easier, then, to direct one's ire against those who are seen as more easily attacked – minority communities or lower caste groups, women within and outside the household, and so on. The substantial increase in violence against women is not just because of higher reporting of incidents, but because of this process which results in an actual increase in the number of such crimes.

The other philosophy that is invoked and sought to be spread is that which lies at the heart of the reliance on markets – individualism. The "competitive spirit" is unleashed and used to make people feel that it is each man or woman for himself or herself, and that individuals can succeed in making gains at the expense of others in their own social group. This has two significant effects that further aggravate problems of violence: it makes each act that of an individual, and it reduces the possibility of solidarity among victims and possibilities of collective action.[25,26,27]



That is why it is so important to recognise and trace the economic roots of violence against women. It is essential not only to mobilise for policies that shape the state and societal response to individual acts of violence, but also to change the processes of liberalisation and corporate globalisation that have indirectly aided such violence in general.[43,44,45]

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Violence against women is a major problem in all countries, affecting women in every socio-economic group and at every life stage. Nowhere in the world do women share equal social and economic rights with men or the same access as men to productive resources. Economic globalization and development are creating new challenges for women's rights as well as some new opportunities for advancing women's economic independence and gender equality.[28,29,30] Yet, when women have access to productive resources and they enjoy social and economic rights they are less vulnerable to violence across all societies. The Political Economy of Violence against Women develops a feminist political economy approach to identify the linkages between different forms of violence against women and macro structural processes in strategic local and global sites - from the household to the transnational level. In doing so, it seeks to account for the globally increasing scale and brutality of violence against women. [40,41,42] These sites include economic restructuring and men's reaction to the loss of secure employment, the abusive exploitation associated with the transnational migration of women workers, the growth of a sex trade around the creation of free trade zones, the spike in violence against women in financial liberalization and crises, the scourge of sexual violence in armed conflict and post-crisis peacebuilding or reconstruction efforts and the deleterious gendered impacts of natural disasters. Examples are drawn from South Africa, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, China, Ciudad Juarez in Mexico, the Pacific Islands, Argentina, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Haiti, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, New Zealand, Ireland, the United Kingdom, the United States and Iceland.[49,50]

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