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Investigating the Invisible Sufferings: A Qualitative Investigation of Structural Violence in Karak District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstract: *Violence is a universal phenomenon and can be found in many societies across the globe. Based on nature and intensity, the factors may be cultural, psychological, and economic. Among all these, an important factor could be invisible sufferings that are rooted in the structure of a society. This study aims to explore the role of structural violence in boosting collective violence in District Karak, a region marked by a higher educational ratio but episodic communal unrest. The researchers conducted an in-depth analysis using a qualitative research design that employed an intrinsic case study approach. A diverse group of 25 participants selected through purposive and convenient sampling. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect primary data from five lawyers, five social activists, five heads of households, five Maliks, and five members of the dispute resolution council. A thematic analysis method was used to derive themes from the collected data, such as weak accusations, business deals, honor violations, rent killings, mistrust of the legal system, customary grievances, and attacks against police, which are found to be the basic elements of violence in the region. The study findings contribute to the broader discourse about the understanding of violence by exploring psychological, cultural, and structural factors that perpetuate collective aggression in District Karak.*

Introduction

Structural violence denotes those actions that are due to the weaknesses of social structures and institutions, which affect an individual or community by preventing them from getting their basic needs or achieving their desirable potential. Unlike direct or physical violence, structural violence is often invisible and is rooted in the political, economic, and cultural systems, and justified through inadequate access to resources, prospects, and justice. Johan Galtung (1969), who coined the term, emphasized that structural violence is deeply rooted in the historical and social setting of any society that fosters inequality and marginalization.

Galtung (1969) distinguished between visible (which covers direct violence, such as physical and psychological harm) and invisible forms of violence (including structural and cultural violence). Direct violence is the one that can be observed, such as physical assault or mental torture, whereas structural

and cultural violence are rooted in societal systems and norms, often remain unnoticed, but profoundly affect individuals' lives. Referring to these concepts, Galtung (2004) defines violence as the harm done to fundamental human needs, more broadly as any action that harms someone, or as any condition that limits an individual's ability to meet their basic needs compared to what would be achievable in an ideal situation.

Douglas and Skeem (2005) identified several foundational elements that can be considered as most significant dynamic risks of violence. These encompass impulsivity, maladaptive affectivity, neurosis, antisocial conduct, substance misuse and related issues, interpersonal associations, and mistreatment within associations. Significant risk features for violence also include an absence of comprehension, suspicions, and narcissism, as noted by Hildebrand and de Ruiter (2012).

For the same reason, numerous other individual risk factors associated with violent behaviour have also been investigated by a variety of academics. The most prevalent of these may be pro-criminal perspectives, which include the propensity to support criminals or criminal activity, the tendency to misunderstand laws or break laws, the least regard for authorities, being a victim of bullying, sexual frustration, and the desire to exact retribution (Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996; Helmus et al., 2013).

In addition, Douglas et al. (2009) observed that this type of psychosis is also significantly associated with an increase in the likelihood of imminent violent behaviour. This is because the individual's ideas are disrupted, and they are unable to recognize reality. This is the reason why the likelihood of violent behaviour has increased. Anger or angry arousal has been shown to relate to both destructive and violent behaviour, as stated by Novaco (2011). This is one of the many elements that have been shown to be associated with these behaviors.

A significant number of cultures face difficulties in exercising control over violence, particularly those societies that are plagued by severe structural, social, and cultural violence.

There are specific social, cultural, political, economic, and legal issues that make individuals and groups in such societies vulnerable to violence (Brewer, 2010; Taylor & McKeown, 2019). These issues make society prone to violence. According to Anand (2014), who used Galtung's framework, he conducted a series of research that demonstrated that direct violence is the product of disturbing the peace and structural violence, which is observed. Furthermore, the violence can be either physical or psychological, and examples of such violence include beatings, assaults, murders, and torture. While cultural violence includes tools, such as norms, values, and beliefs that justify violence, structural violence is anchored in the social structure and includes things like unemployment, discrimination, and injustice.

Research Question

1. How does structural violence manifest in the daily lives of residents in Karak District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

Objectives

2. To investigate the prevalent structural violence that manifests in the daily lives of residents in Karak District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Literature Review

Sociological theorists assert that violent behaviour is acquired, with individuals learning to act violently by witnessing and emulating the aggression learned from their parents, family members, and even characters in films and television programs. Parental abuse or incentivizing their children to exhibit aggression, they instruct them to articulate themselves forcefully from an early age. This form of violence is particularly dangerous because it is less visible yet deeply rooted in the structures of society, making it harder to identify and challenge (Farmer, 2005; Berkowitz, 1996).

Children develop violent responses to frustrations or adverse experiences and correlate aggressive stimuli with aggressive conduct. Research indicates a direct correlation between childhood victimisation rates (encompassing both assaulted children and those who observed chronic abuse of family members) and the eventual inclination towards violent behaviour. Although mistreated children may not invariably perpetuate the trauma they experienced, adults were not victims of childhood abuse (Dahlberg, 1998).

Consequently, violence is perpetuated through engagement with aggressive individuals and environments, including family members, neighbours, educational institutions, public spaces, and

marketplaces. Similarly, age, population density, and propensity for violence are variables that affect brutality in many ways and can aid in predicting overarching patterns of aggression throughout society. The bulk of homicides in Latin America and other regions globally are perpetrated by individuals aged 18 to 24. Furthermore, the majority of victims of criminal violence are typically of the same age group. Factors that lead youth to violent occupations include elevated juvenile unemployment rates, legal system impunity, and easy availability of alcohol, drugs, and firearms. Moreover, the media's culture of violence incites youth to emulate such behaviors and undermines societal constraints against violence (Dahlberg, 1998).

Before reaching the age of two years, one of the basic traits that differentiates boys from girls is aggressive conduct. Boys exhibit a greater propensity for violence compared to girls (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Furthermore, in Latin America, the authoritarian familial cultural framework originated from the Napoleonic Code, which underscored and reinforced a rigid gender dichotomy. This legal system designates the Pater Familias (father) as the authority over his wife and children; hence, it subjects women and children to abuse, as indicated by Morrison & Orlando (1999).

The ineffective legal system exacerbates women's vulnerability and their susceptibility to violence. Legal regimes discriminate by offering disparate levels of protection to men and women. This attitude against women has considerably obstructed their safeguarding against abuse (Pitanguy & Germain, 1994).

Violence due to Arms Possession

As defined by Kendall (2007), social structure is a complex framework comprised of societal organisations (including family, economic, political, educational, and religious systems) and social practices that are responsible for organising and imposing restrictions on the behaviour of individuals. On the other hand, Radcliffe-Brown (1940) defines social structure as the collection of relations that are genuinely in existence at a certain time and that are responsible for connecting particular individuals. Similarly, functional theorists place a strong emphasis on the fact that social structure is a vital constituent of society because it maintains likelihood and order. Therefore, violent conflict contributes to the decline of a significant number of traditional informal institutions in any culture. Here is an illustration of how conflict can occasionally cause the existing pillars of a social organisation to become distorted.

Kerr (2010) discovered that the militants employed the tactic of weakening individuals and their social institutions to create an atmosphere that was more favourable to spreading their ideology to target local populations all over FATA. This was done to spread violence and disrupt the social structure. In FATA, traditional systems for dispute settlement, such as Jirga, as well as individuals who want to gain power, such as the traditional status of tribal elders and Maliks (tribe chiefs), have been degraded and revealed by Kerr (2010). Traditional conflict resolution procedures include Jirga. Because of this, the social system served as a breeding ground for violent behaviour.

Among all forms of violence, armed wars represent the most extreme manifestation. Armed conflict is a confrontation between two or more centrally organised armed parties over territory and government power. One party in an armed conflict is a state government that governs a defined territory. Armed confrontations can be classified as small, intermediate, or war, depending on how many people are killed in battle. In minor armed conflicts, there are at least 25 battle-related fatalities annually, but less than 1,000 over the entire conflict; at a moderate level, the number of deaths ranges from 25 to 1,000 every year yet remains below 1,000 for the duration of the conflict. Annually, a minimum of 1,000 individuals die in armed conflict (Davies et al., 2023).

Armed conflicts are categorised according to whether the parties involved are state or non-state actors. Interstate war transpires between two or more states, whereas extra-state armed conflict arises between a state and a non-state entity beyond its borders. The latter encompasses two categories: colonial conflict and imperial war. Internal armed conflict occurs between a government's authority and a domestic opponent; if an external state becomes involved, the conflict escalates to an internationalised internal war (Davies et al., 2023).

The study identifies three features of asymmetrical warfare: the significance of non-statutory actors, the emphasis on the weak and vulnerable rather than the opposing forces, and the use of guerrilla warfare

and terrorism. The study indicated that there is a lack of adherence to charitable regulations. The irregular forces not only attack civilians but also employ them as shields, obscuring the boundary between combatants and non-combatants, hence posing a substantial moral dilemma for formal institutions tasked with controlling violence (Gross, 2018).

Phases of Conflict

Allwood & Ahlsén (2015) delineate five basic stages of conflict. The initial phase is termed the pre-conflict stage, during which the parties' dispute remains concealed from the public; the subsequent phase is the confrontation stage, characterised by periodic fights and minimal violence; the third phase is the crisis stage, marked by extreme violence, wherein individuals commence attacking and killing one another. The fourth stage is the outcome phase, addressing the ramifications of conflict, while the fifth stage, post-conflict, signifies the cessation of hostilities.

Conflicts can be divided into two forms, such as violent and non-violent categories, based on their intensity. Latent and manifest behaviours of low intensity are classified as non-violent, while medium- and high-intensity violent conflicts encompass war, crises, and severe crises; confrontations escalate to a savage stage when assemblies exceed peaceful pursuits of their objectives.

The Council of Remote Area Nurses of Australia (CRANA) states that conflict typically escalates in severity. Addressing issues that emerge early is more manageable, and resolutions can be identified more swiftly. Initially, discrepancies may often be addressed with rather ease. Conversely, when a conflict has intensified to a severe and highly antagonistic degree, external intervention is necessary to facilitate a resolution between the parties.

The initial stage usually involves individuals recognising the presence of an issue. This period is referred to as the "Discomfort Stage." No explicit events may have transpired, except for a potential reduction in pressure or awareness regarding an individual's perception of something being "amiss." The absence of any issue at this juncture inhibits substantial discussion or action around it. This phase constitutes a component of ordinary, daily life. Nevertheless, positive connections are adversely affected by conflict. At this juncture, individuals collaborate to identify objective solutions. The disagreement escalates in the absence of a resolution, particularly if one party persists in asserting their perspective (Scheppa-Lahyani & Zapf, 2023).

According to Vannini et. al (2017), the incident stage is the next level of escalation. At this stage, a small incident or event occurs. Although these events may not seem significant on their own, they carry a negative connotation that prompts people to question them. The gatherings are evolving from a minor feeling of stress into a significant concern. At this juncture, statements or actions are often made that suggest the existence of an issue. The parties might be upset with one another. They oscillate between collaboration and competition. Although they may have common interests, their desires are paramount. When engaging with information, it can only be used to substantiate one's arguments. Logical reasoning and comprehension are employed to persuade or win over the opponent. At this point, both parties make every effort to avoid appearing weak. The inclination to abandon the dispute intensifies until one party engages in an activity that exacerbates the disagreement.

If unresolved or evaded, the conflict may advance to the subsequent stage, which is already identified. During the misunderstanding phase, the miscommunications between the parties are likely to escalate, exacerbating the issue. Such a misunderstanding can take many forms, including misinterpretations of past events and inaccurate interpretations of those situations by the parties. The facts may remain obscured and concealed. As the situation worsens and the parties regard one another with profound distrust, the degree of tension escalates rapidly (Glasl, 1999). At this point, there is little to no trust in relationships because everyone's behaviours are filtered through a mistrustful lens. The parties might have firmly held beliefs and long-standing animosities towards one another.

Currently, all sides are apprehensive that the groundwork for a negotiated settlement may be forfeited. In other words, people lose confidence in an equitable resolution. The relationship becomes antagonistic. Instead of futile and anxiety-inducing discussions, all reasoning is focused on implementing action. The parties to the contradiction think they can sway the other side. Concurrently, none of the factions are prepared to capitulate (Vannini et al., 2017; Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Fisher et al., 2000).

Finally, the situation escalates to the "crisis level" when the parties involved openly express their hostility towards each other. Given the current situation, it is quite evident that the situation is grave. In this level, we discuss encounters that are not very good and gestures that are severe. Within the context of this level, stereotyping is utilised as a negative method of identifying the opponent. There is a very low probability that the parties will be able to resolve the problem on their own without the intervention of a third party who is unbiased. It is going to be seen that certain individuals, at every level, make an effort to amass support from companions or friends by "favouring one side". As each side tries to persuade others, outsiders will inevitably be drawn into the dispute. This process is referred to as triangulation, which is a term that describes it. Todorova et al. (2022) found that the concept originated from research on dysfunctional family systems; nevertheless, it is equally applicable to the description of behaviours in other structures, such as employment, education, provision of justice, and health facilities.

Methodology

This section reveals an overview of all the methods and techniques that the researchers have employed to carry out this study. Details of the research method, population of the study, sampling technique, data collection method, and data analysis are given below.

The study population was District Karak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The district of Karak is in the Kohat Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It is further subdivided into three tehsils, namely Banda Daud Shah, Tehsil Karak, and Tehsil Takht-e-Nusrati (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The predominant segment of the population is comprised of the Khattak community. The literacy rate stands at 63.75% of the total population, with a breakdown of 84.37% for males and 44.41% for females. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2017), 99.16% of the residents are Pashto speakers.

The aim of the study is exploratory; therefore, the researchers employed a qualitative research technique as suggested by Creswell (2014). A qualitative research technique is considered to be more suitable for academic study in sociology, philosophy, economics, psychology, and related fields. Some of the major qualitative methodologies included a case study, grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography, and narrative methods, as identified by Creswell (2014). The researcher employed the case study methodology; the specifics are as follows.

A case study, according to Yin (2009), is an empirical or scientific investigation that examines a phenomenon in its actual context. Consequently, in line with this study, the researchers opted for an intrinsic case study, based on an approach that investigates a certain phenomenon (Yin, 2009), such as violence in the current study.

The researchers used purposive sampling to identify interview participants who could share their knowledge and experiences about structural violence, following the analogy of Berinsky (2008). According to (Cresswell, 2014), when choosing a sample size, evaluate its applicability, the subject matter, its significance, and the value of the data. The study's sample size comprised 25 participants, including 5 Maliks actively serving as conciliators, 5 lawyers from the District and Session Court of Karak specialising in criminal cases, 5 members of the Dispute Resolution Council (DRC) capable of sharing insights on violence factors, 5 social activists dedicated to peace initiatives, and 5 community leaders collaborating with government entities such as the District Administration for peace efforts.

The researcher collected primary data through in-depth interviews. The interview design of this study consisted of demographic data and questions regarding primary elements of intolerance and aggression. The researcher signed a consent form before each interview. The researcher asked all interviewees fair and simple questions. Each participant had enough time to share their thoughts on each research study aspect. In their residences, Pashto or Urdu was used for interviews, and all other research protocols were followed as per the recommendations given by Cresswell (2017). Moreover, the primary data was analysed through the application of thematic analysis given by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Translation & Transcription→ Initial Coding→ Selective Coding→ Categories→ Theme

Discussion

The researchers conducted interviews with a diverse range of participant's belonging to various segments of society. The primary objective was to contact those individuals who are able to express in-

depth knowledge and expertise regarding violence in the region. The demographic information of the respondents is presented below

Demographic Information of the Participants

Demographic Information	Number of participants in each stratum				Total
Age in Years	**30-35**	**36-40**	**41-50**	**50 & above**	25
	4	7	8	6	
Educational Qualification	**SSC**	**FSc**	**LLB**	**Any other**	25
	2	15	5	3	
Professional Experience in Years	**1-3**	**4-7**	**8-10**	**11 & above**	25
	5	11	4	5	
Nature of Residence	**Rural**	**Urban**	**-**	**-**	25
	10	15	-	-	
Role-playing and Number of Cases dealt with	**5-10**	**11-15**	**16-20**	**21 & more**	25
	7	6	4	8	

Theme: Invisible Sufferings

The study findings reveal that violence in the study area is rooted in the structure of society in various forms, which contributes to intolerance and inter-personal violence between individuals and groups. The term interpersonal violence refers to actions intended to harm another person physically or economically. In certain cases, individuals (though not all) are willing to strike against opposing groups if they perceive a threat of being harmed. The situation escalates further when it involves physical injuries, killings, or matters related to honor.

Yamasaki and Nishida (2009) noted that though aggression and violence are closely related, violence does not always stem from aggression. Sometimes, interpersonal aggression is often driven by anger and can manifest in physical altercations or verbal bullying, eventually resulting in social disgrace or threats. Aggression can be categorized into three types: reactive-expressive, which includes physical attacks and verbal abuse; reactive-inexpressive, such as intimidation or a hostile demeanor; and proactive-relational aggression, which harms relationships—for instance, through rumor-spreading. Therefore, intolerance and interpersonal aggression emerge as key contributors to violence in the study area.

A participant, Shah, opined that.

"Our legal system is deeply flawed. It is often claimed that the rule of law exists, but in practice, it is not properly enforced. Even someone accused of committing multiple murders may end up being acquitted. Typically, the accused is sent to jail, and the punishment is supposed to begin once they show remorse. However, once released, they tend to forget everything, as imprisonment is not seen as a particularly harsh punishment."

A participant, Imran, opined that.

"Many individuals regard weapons as a symbol of masculinity or a "man's ornament," even when they are not needed for any practical purpose like work. There is also a widespread belief that owning a weapon is an essential part of Pakhtun culture, and therefore, every Pakhtun household should possess one. As a result, firearms, particularly pistols are commonly found in many homes. In some cases, these weapons are stored carelessly, often in places accessible to children, who may treat them like toys."

A participant named Sajjad expressed that.

There is widespread intolerance among the population. Many educated individuals remain unemployed, leading to frustration and mental stress, which in turn contributes to a growing number of disputes related to honor and land. Additionally, the justice system in our society is weak and ineffective. When someone commits a crime and the courts fail to deliver appropriate punishment, the accused are often released on bail with ease. As a result, the victim's family, losing faith in the judicial process, takes justice

into their own hands and seeks revenge. This cycle of retaliation fuels ongoing violence between the parties involved.

Similarly, another participant, Azam, also responded to that.

"In cases of injury, the victim's family often exaggerates the cost of treatment due to their grief and anger. Their emotional distress can be intense, and some individuals may respond by attacking the home of the accused. Others, when given the chance, may choose to pursue the matter through legal channels."

A participant, Ahmad, further added that.

"When a person is injured, the victim's family often reacts with distress, hostility, and retaliatory behavior. It is commonly observed that they begin to plan and contemplate revenge. Families with limited resources may resort to directly attacking the offender or their relatives, while wealthier families are more likely to hire hitmen to carry out acts of revenge."

Another participant, Shakeel, added that.

In our society, people differ in their attitudes and behavior; not everyone reacts the same way. Well-educated individuals often avoid harsh behavior and refrain from engaging in violence. Therefore, responses to conflict vary from person to person—some may react aggressively, while others remain composed. In many instances, the local community tends to support the victim's family and shows some level of opposition toward the offender. Accusations against the perpetrator often involve acts of direct or physical violence, typically carried out with weapons such as pistols, axes, or knives.

Similarly, Ahmed further added that.

"Many people reside in rural regions where law enforcement agencies have limited control. In these areas, there is widespread hostility toward the police due to drugs dealing and criminal's hideout. Recently, a police team was attacked, resulting in the death of the Station House Officer (SHO). Such regions are often dominated by criminals and drug dealers. Offenders from nearby locations frequently seek refuge there and launch attacks on their rivals to instill fear among the local population."

A participant, Hassan, opined that.

The situation in our area has been steadily worsening, with violence escalating each day. A significant number of people have become aggressive, largely due to cultural notions of pride and honor, such as Gherat. Even minor offenses are intolerable to many. I have observed numerous incidents of varying nature and severity. In many cases, victims choose to take matters into their own hands, seeking revenge by killing members of the offender's family. However, in some instances, the conflict is resolved through traditional means, such as intervention by the Jirga or council of elders.

The study further highlighted that the country's poor legal and justice system has failed to identify the actual offenders. Due to this, people respond to heinous crimes such as murders and honor killings. This has led to a decline in confidence in the judicial system, as there have been instances when people who have committed several murders can easily escape punishment. These doubts are due to the systematic slowdowns, graft, and political undermining that all contribute to undermining legal responsibility. Similar findings are also given by Naeem et al. (2023), who found that the existence of deep-seated weaknesses in this legal sector, which include archaic legal systems, poor judicial independence, and rampant inefficiencies that hamper access to justice and erode citizen confidence in the state (Naeem et al., 2023). Thus, the inability to apply the rule of law fuels crimes and undermines the legitimacy of the legal system (Cheema, 2015).

The study also explored that gun-keeping is normal and justified, that it is "Sunnah" to keep a gun or pistol in the home. Hence, guns are easily accessible in the area, and their possession is conceived as traditional, is a palpable danger to the security and safety of the communities. These risks are further increased due to the lack of organized control and monitoring, especially when firearms are easily accessible to children. This cultural trend intersects with institutional permissiveness, where the light punishment of gun laws propagates the trend of violence. Theorists like Shar et al. (2025) also believe that rampant armament, which is enhanced by bad governance, leads to the deterioration of peace within society, leading to gun violence such as murder and assaults, and if uncontrolled, will lead to physical violence.

Similar to the above findings, other researchers such as Dodge (2024) and Shahinfar et al. (2001) also revealed that individuals with aggressive nature are more inclined to perpetuate aggressive behavior compared to non-aggressive people. Thus, extreme aggression can be interpreted as a defensive response to actions perceived as either harmless or as maltreatment. Moreover, violence contributes to a range of both internalizing and externalizing affairs. It has been reported that factors such as internalized tension, misconduct, school dropout, domestic conflicts, and hostility are also likely to boost violence (Bridewell & Chang, 1997; Brummett et al., 1998; Khatri et al., 2000). Furthermore, Jackson et al. (2019) highlighted that revenge is also a significant driver of violence, noting that some individuals favor retaliating in response to violent acts rather than seeking help from law enforcement.

Conclusion

This paper aims to outline invisible sufferings that provide a fundamental basis for collective violence in District Karak. Based on a case study, it is evident that a combination of several factors, including social grievances, distrust in the criminal justice system, access to guns, and means that are embedded in the structure. The narratives explored in this study reveal that structural violence erodes dignity, reinforces powerlessness, and normalizes inequality, often without visible perpetrators or immediate physical harm.

Addressing such discrepancies requires more than humanitarian responses; such a radical rethinking of development priorities, policy inclusion, and equitable resource distribution, which enhances their values and supports all segments of society.

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