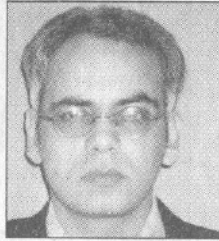


# Is violence inevitable?

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**VIEW**

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**SYED MOHAMMAD ALI**

*There are, for example, twice as many violent deaths in low- and middle-income countries as there are in high-income countries. Perhaps this is why there is a growing recognition of the linkages between poverty and violence*

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between violence a person inflicts upon himself or herself, violence inflicted by another individual or by a small group of individuals, and violence inflicted by large groups such as state institutions and organised political and militia groups. Different approaches are needed to tackle various types of violence.

Violence not only undermines the well-being of many millions of people around the world, it costs nations vast sums of money. Violence is expensive, even if we only consider the costs associated with interpersonal violence — defined as

violence within households and violence between acquaintances and strangers not intended to further the aims of any formally defined group or cause.

In United States, the cost of such violence is calculated as being 3.3 percent of the gross domestic product. Indirect costs such as the opportunity cost of time, lost productivity and reduced quality of life would raise this estimate.

Interpersonal violence also has a disproportionate effect on low- and middle-income countries. Economic effects of such violence are more severe in poorer countries. They not only face the burden of direct public expenditure but also the tarnishing of their international image, which cause a lack of investor confidence in their economies. There is a lesson to be learnt from these findings for countries like our own, where continuing violence due to lingering sectarian, socio-economic and political tensions undermines much of the efforts made by moderate elements to achieve social cohesion and progress.

Violence is also more pervasive in societies where the authorities endorse its use through their own actions. Complacency, too, encourages violence and is a formidable obstacle in responding to it. This is particularly true of the attitude that regards violence, including the closely related problem of gender and economic inequalities, as something inherent in human society. Violence cannot be stopped by simply ignoring it; tackling it requires a much more proactive stance. However, due to the complex ideological and political factors, which promote the culture of violence, priority is often assigned to dealing with its consequences rather than its causes. Providing support to victims and punishing offenders are important but much greater investment is needed for preventing violence.

Preventing violence requires a strong sense of

political commitment and steadfast involvement by many stakeholders. Social scientists need to do more probing research concerning the causes, consequences and costs of violence in specific locations to identify relevant means for policy makers to defuse escalating threats of violence. A simultaneous effort is needed by the media and civil rights groups to ensure adherence to international treaties, laws and other mechanisms that recognise the need for freedom from the threat of violence as being a fundamental human right. More enlightened social and educational policies, which address gender and social inequalities, can also help reduce violence. These approaches are not meant to replace the criminal justice system, but rather to provide it relief by offering alternative means to defuse violent tendencies.

The 20th century has burdened human history with a legacy of mass destruction, in which violence was inflicted on a scale never seen before. This haunting legacy was made possible by the cooption of technological advancements by myopic and destructive ideologies. While there has been no world war or use of nuclear weapons in the past half century, the threat of mass destruction remains tangible. Domestic repression and genocide are also realities, which keep resurfacing in different parts of the world.

Interpersonal violence in turn haunts individual lives. It is unfortunate that security concerns are interpreted more readily as requiring pre-emptive strikes and punitive actions and there is little focus on preventing violence through more comprehensive and benevolent approaches.

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AN HOUR OR SO SPENT WATCHING ANY news channel is enough to reveal that no part of the world remains untouched by violence. Because it is so pervasive, violence seems a part and parcel of the human condition, a fact of life that can only be dealt with after it has taken place. Yet, violence is not inevitable. It can be renounced. It can also be prevented, provided that efforts required in this regard are made.

Before considering what can be done to make the world less violent, it is necessary to realise the enormity of the problem. The World Health Organisation estimated that in the year 2000 alone, almost 1.6 million people lost their lives due to violence. Violence is currently among the leading causes of death for people between 15 and 44 years. However, such overarching statistics do not reveal the variations within countries, between urban and rural populations, between rich and poor communities, and between different racial and ethnic groups.

Rates of violent deaths also vary with country income levels. There are, for example, twice as many violent deaths in low- and middle-income countries as there are in high-income countries. Perhaps this is why there is a growing recognition of the linkages between poverty and violence.

Moreover, these statistics only account for deaths caused by violence. The physical, sexual and psychological abuse occurring on a daily basis around the world is an added problem.

It would be useful to categorise these many manifestations of violence. The *World Report on Violence and Health*, published in 2004, divided violence into three broad categories according to the perpetrator of the violent act — self-directed violence; interpersonal violence; and collective violence. This sort of a categorisation differentiates