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Media created violence: a social determinant of mental health

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Abstract

In today's high technological world, scientific discoveries contribute remarkable development to human life, but it could also have an adverse impact on mankind. Among all these advancements, media is one of the inventions which aims at capturing a countless group of viewers and transmit information via various mediums. Media violence is considered one of the hampering determinants which harms an individual psychologically. The primary goal of a health professional is to work for the maintenance of mental health. Therefore, it is imperative to create an understanding about the impact of media violence on mental health, particularly in the Pakistani context. Violence has become a major public health problem in Pakistan. The main cause of violence seems to be anger and frustration due to poverty, political conflicts, lack of education, and the overall governance approach in the country. Therefore, there is a prime need to think and work on this neglected area like conducting research and increasing public awareness, and to curb media violence.

Keywords: Health professional, Mental health, Media violence.

Preamble:

Today, scientific discoveries contribute to a remarkable development to human life, but it also has an adverse impact on mankind. Among all these advancements, media is one of the inventions which aims at capturing a countless group of viewers and transmitting information via various mediums. It affects on individual's physical, physiological and social spheres of life. Moreover, various empirical evidences have shown the impact of media on an individuals' mental health. The findings of a meta-analysis has shown that more exposure to media increases violence and aggression.¹ Nonetheless, media plays a significant role in an individual's mental health, but sadly it is an ignored phenomenon in most part of the world. According to World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is a:

A state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to

make a contribution to his or her community whereas poor mental health is associated with social disadvantage, human-rights abuses, and poor health and productivity, as well as increased risk of mental disorders.²

This definition clearly depicts the relationship between individuals and their surroundings that provide an avenue for enhancing their skills in relation to improve living standard in a society. In contrast, there are certain impeding factors which make human survival difficult and challenging. Violence is considered one of the hampering determinants which psychologically harms an individual. The poor social condition, physical and mental health outcomes are considered to be associated with conflicts. Whereas civil unrest³ and violence in today's society created by various mediums is further adding to the problem.

Furthermore, violence is the result of extreme anger or fear. It is often destructive.⁴ Violence costs a lot especially when witnessed by children as it interferes with their social and personality development. By witnessing violence, most children tend to mistrust others and feel insecure and fearful. Hence, they are unable to form conducive relationships throughout their lives. Due to extreme fear of violence some children even develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorders such as mistrust, regression and others.⁵ As the children learn from imitation, therefore, sometimes they become perpetrators of violence, in their later life. Youth is considered to be the building block of any nation. When the youth gets entangled with the web of violence, it hampers the road of peace, progress and prosperity of the country because the youth is considered to be the future administrators and governors of the country.

Being a health professional working for the maintenance of the mental health is their prime goal. Therefore, it is imperative to create an understanding about the impact of media violence on mental health, particularly in the Pakistani context.

Current Scenario:

It is assumed that violence has become a part of life specially in the mega cities of Pakistan,⁶ the rates of violent injuries (23 per 100, 000) and deaths (13 per 100,000) are

high when compared with other Muslim countries like Egypt where the rate of killing is quite low that is 1.6 per 100,000.⁷ The main cause of violence seems to be anger and frustration which has its roots in poverty, political conflicts, and lack of education, and, ignorant attitude at the hand of the government. Everyday, with the help of media, we hear and see about the target killings, bomb blasts, firing, suicide attacks, kidnapping episodes, and road traffic accidents. Consequently, hearing of such frightening and traumatic news have a negative impact on the individual's health.⁸ Moreover, the violent activities increase frustration among the masses. Such an environment⁹ has devastating effect on the individual capacity of a person but its results are adverse for a society as a whole. Hence, it decreases hope for health and life. The violence has become a major public health problem in Pakistan. Though, media violence creates injurious effects on people of all age groups and both genders, but youth is mostly targeted.

Whether it is electronic or print media, owing to their competition, they broadcast violence on TV in order to gain viewership. They contribute to create violence in a society. Thus, the constant exposure in terms of viewing, reading, and listening to such traumatic events and happenings can be disastrous for human societies in terms of the general state of wellbeing.

Relationship between Media and Violence:

The main functions of the media are to educate, to entertain and to inform. Does this mean showing cutting of heads and all other negative happenings? What are the goals of the media in showing unfortunate events mostly? Besides this, the talk shows, where affairs are mishandled, where the end results are nil and non-productive and lead to conflicts. It is an established association that media creates violence in societies by showing violent behaviours to the public through its various programmes. All these reflections are the daily experiences but on evidence basis, the nation like Pakistan lags behind in this critical area and hardly gets the truthfulness of these associations. Therefore, we are building the connection based on the empirical evidences from where these studies have been conducted. For example, it is estimated that in the US there are 25000 murder cases each year, 50% of these are due to strong media influence as the media shows violence as the solution for all problems and as a way of resolving interpersonal conflicts.⁹ This perpetuates actual violence in society especially among the youth.

Moreover, the most powerful support for the conclusion that media violence significantly contributes to, is violent and hostile behaviour which has been shown a meta-analysis by Paik and Comstock.⁷ The analysis has revealed that consistently viewing media violence is

associated with higher levels of antisocial behaviour, ranging from imitative violence directed against toys by children to serious criminal violence by youth and adults, with many harmful results in between. For example acceptance of violence as a solution to problems, increases feelings of hostility, and the seeming delivery of painful stimulation to another person are certainly unhealthy effects.⁵ Psychological theories of aggression also support that people generally lack the ability to select nonviolent coping mechanisms while dealing with life experiences.⁴

For adults, it is also theorized that constant exposure to hostile and violent movies activates violence based on cognitions even in the absence of anger provoking situations. This is supported by the cognitive theory of aggression which asserts that certain ways of interpreting situations produce an aggressive nature.⁴ Desensitization is another well documented effect of viewing violence which is observed in less sympathy for the victims of violence. It reduces arousal and emotional disturbance while witnessing violence and less likelihood of response in a worse case scenario.⁵

Recommended Strategies:

Above review with the ground realities clearly depict, the impact of media violence on an individuals mental capacity. The proposed strategies are based on logic, reason and written evidences.

Ingrid and Barbara suggested the practical strategies which could be very useful in reducing the harmful effect of media on mental health. These were the media usage, consequences, viewing and parental involvement in relation to violent media content such as children restrict themselves from media viewing by celebrating "media free weekends" and keeping a diary of media usage for violent media content.

◆ Lomonaco, et al, add that media violence could be reduced via: limit setting by parents/guardians, technological innovations such as the v-chip (which blocks inappropriate shows or content from being viewed by children), and media literacy training programmes for media personnel, teachers, parents and children themselves.⁹

◆ Khan and Heuvel recommend that to create awareness about health issues especially a healthy social environment and healthy lifestyles, the media needs to be involved. In this way journalism will also develop in terms of knowledge about health issues.¹⁰

◆ To control violence from grass root level anger management programmes could be introduced through the media as well as dealing with negatives human emotions, and these could also be a part of the school curriculum.

Conclusion

Today, media makes one of the remarkable

contributions, but regrettably it has a negative impact on human life as well. In Pakistan, people on a daily basis undergo continuous suffering due to civil turbulence and media adds up to all these miseries. Various researches have shown that media violence has negative impact on the individual's psychological well being such as fear, aggression, desensitization etc. Therefore, there is a prime need to think and work on this neglected area such as conducting research, increasing public awareness, and developing media literacy programmes. Moreover, be it an electronic or print media, it needs to revise its goals in relation to public service and needs to recruit well educated personnel, who owe a social responsibility to a society.

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