The field of peace education has derived multiple ways to define the concept of violence. Initially, most people think of violence as action intended to cause physical harm. This definition of physical violence is certainly self-explanatory. Many times we forget, however, that violence can be solely of a psychological nature.

Psychological violence is present when a person is experiencing emotional hostility, threats, intimidation, name-calling, verbal abuse, or forms of passive aggression. This type of violence is the easiest to participate in and the most difficult to restrict because intimidation, name-calling and verbal abuse are usually protected as free speech. Bullying, which is a serious in schools, can take the form of psychological violence. In addition, domestic violence within a family may not always be physically abusive, yet it can be as traumatic and psychologically debilitating to its victims. Psychological violence can have a more lasting impact than physical violence. As it says in the Indian Epic, The Mahabharata, “The wounds inflicted by weapons may close with time; scalds may heal gradually; but wounds inflicted by words remain painful as long as one lives.”

Another type of violence is known as structural violence. This occurs when a political, social, or economic structure disenfranchises a certain group of people by depriving them of their basic needs or denying them equal opportunity. A political system that does not have laws against child labor, for example, tolerates structural violence when businesses and corporations employ underage children. Child laborers suffer impaired physical, emotional, and social growth. Children caught in systems that use underage labor are often denied access to education and, subsequently, access to a better life in adulthood. Structural violence also occurs in societies and organizations that restrict the rights of women. Historically, this has
been the case in countries and religious institutions where women cannot attain the same economic, educational, and leadership opportunities available to men.

Recently, we have seen incidences of structural violence in the attempt by the Texas legislature to redraw congregational districts to prevent Latino voters from holding a majority. In addition, many recipients of food stamps in the United States actually have low-paying jobs and are part of the working poor.

In the discipline of peace studies, we further broaden the definition of structural violence to include hunger, the lack of health care, inadequate housing and the denial of fundamental human rights.

Some theorists argue that psychological and structural violence are ultimately the root causes of all conflict. For this reason, many peace and justice organizations sponsor programs that fight poverty, hunger, hate speech, and various forms of human and environmental exploitation. Regardless of the country or the politico-economic system, and it is the obligation of us all to publicly expose violence in all its forms and with the goal of initiating reforms.

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