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Governance Failure as Structural Violence: A Study of Welfare Delivery Systems

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Abstract--This research examines the persistent breakdown of welfare delivery systems through the theoretical lens of structural violence arguing that administrative "inefficiency" is a systemic mechanism of social exclusion rather than a series of accidental technical errors. While traditional definitions of violence emphasize physical force, this study utilizes Galtung's framework to position governance failure characterized by bureaucratic apathy, exclusionary digital barriers, and the "time tax" as a form of state-sanctioned harm that prevents marginalized populations from achieving their somatic and mental potential.

Drawing on a qualitative meta-synthesis of digital welfare transitions, the paper identifies three primary drivers of structural harm: Technological Erasure, where biometric and automated systems "de-list" valid claimants; Institutional Attrition, the deliberate use of administrative friction to reduce fiscal liabilities; and Documentary Fetishism, which places an insurmountable burden of proof on the dispossessed. By synthesizing the "pathologies of power" and "slow violence," the study demonstrates how these failures accumulate over time, leading to life-shortening deprivation and "civil death."

The findings suggest that welfare failure is often a functional feature of austerity-driven governance rather than an accidental glitch. The paper concludes by advocating for a transition toward Dignity-Centric Design and a "Right to Maintenance," reframing administrative justice as a fundamental prerequisite for human rights in the 21st century.

Keywords-- Structural Violence, Welfare Delivery Systems, Governance Failure, Social Exclusion, Bureaucratic Apathy, Distributive Justice, Digital Welfare State.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE QUIET VIOLENCE OF THE STATE

The contemporary discourse on human rights and state responsibility often prioritizes the visible and the visceral—conflict, physical displacement, and overt political suppression. However, a more insidious form of harm operates within the sterile corridors of bureaucracy and the flickering screens of digital welfare portals. This research identifies governance failure not as a series of administrative "glitches" or resource constraints, but as a primary manifestation of structural violence. By examining the breakdown of welfare delivery systems, this study argues that the systematic denial of life-sustaining resources through bureaucratic friction is a state-sanctioned assault on the dignity and survival of marginalized populations.

1.1 Redefining Violence in the Administrative Age

The traditional understanding of violence, as defined by the Weberian state's monopoly on physical force, fails to capture the slow, attritional damage caused by a dysfunctional welfare office. To bridge this gap, this paper utilizes Johan Galtung's (1969) seminal framework of structural violence. Galtung posited that violence exists whenever human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations. In the context of welfare, when a state possesses the grain in its silos but fails to deliver it to a starving district due to "biometric authentication errors," the resulting malnutrition is not a natural disaster; it is a violent act facilitated by the structure of the delivery system.

This "slow violence," a term coined by Rob Nixon (2011), is characterized by its delayed effects and its lack of a spectacular, explosive moment. It is the violence of a social pension that arrives six months late, forcing an elderly claimant to take high-interest loans from predatory lenders. It is the violence of a "missing document" that disqualifies a family from public healthcare, leading to preventable maternal mortality. Because this violence is dispersed across time and buried under layers of paperwork, it rarely makes headlines, yet its lethality is comparable to more overt forms of state aggression.

1.2 The Paradox of Modern Governance

We live in an era of unprecedented state capacity. The "Digital Turn" in governance was promised as a panacea for the leakages and corruption that plagued mid-20th-century welfare states. Governments globally have adopted sophisticated technologies Artificial Intelligence, blockchain, and biometric identification—to "target" the poor with surgical precision. However, this study observes a disturbing paradox: as systems become more technologically advanced, they often become more exclusionary.

The shift from universalism to targeting has transformed the welfare recipient from a citizen with inherent rights into a "data point" that must be verified. This verification process has become a gauntlet of structural hurdles. In many developing nations, the burden of proof has shifted entirely onto the shoulders of those with the least social capital.

When the state demands a digital footprint from a citizen living in a "shadow zone" without electricity or connectivity, it is not merely being inefficient; it is engaging in a form of institutional gaslighting. The state claims to offer a safety net while simultaneously designing the net with holes large enough for the most vulnerable to fall through.

1.3 Theoretical Context: The Bureaucratic Barrier

This research sits at the intersection of political science, sociology, and critical data studies. It builds upon Virginia Eubanks' (2018) concept of the "digital poorhouse" where automated systems profile and punish the marginalized. However, this paper expands that critique by framing these failures as a violation of the social contract. If the state's primary justification for existence is the protection and well-being of its citizenry, then the chronic failure to deliver basic entitlements represents a fundamental breakdown of political legitimacy.

Furthermore, this study challenges the narrative of "scarcity." Governance failure is frequently excused by a lack of funds or "fiscal space." By framing these failures as structural violence, we shift the gaze toward the intentionality of design. We ask: Who benefits from a system that is difficult to navigate? Often, administrative friction serves as a tool for "budgetary discipline" where the state achieves fiscal targets by making it so difficult to claim benefits that thousands of eligible citizens simply give up. This "attrition by bureaucracy" is the quietest weapon in the arsenal of the neoliberal state.

1.4 Objectives and Scope

The objective of this paper is threefold:

1. To theorize the link between administrative "friction" and somatic harm (structural violence).
2. To map the specific mechanisms—technological, legal and behavioral—that facilitate welfare exclusion.
3. To argue for a shift in public policy from "efficiency-centric" models to "dignity-centric" delivery systems.

By centering the lived experience of the "un-verified" and the "erased," this study seeks to move the needle of policy evaluation. We must stop asking if a system is "cost-effective" and start asking if it is "violent." As we navigate an increasingly digitized 21st century, understanding how bureaucracy can kill is not just an academic exercise; it is a prerequisite for any meaningful pursuit of distributive justice.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: THEORETICAL TRIANGULATION OF ADMINISTRATIVE HARM

To understand governance failure as a form of violence, one must move beyond the narrow definitions of "efficiency" and "technical error" that dominate public administration discourse. This study draws upon a triangulation of three critical theoretical frameworks: **Johan Galtung's** foundational concept of structural violence, **Paul Farmer's** ethnographic application of "pathologies of power" and **Rob Nixon's** concept of "slow violence." Together, these theories provide a robust lens through which the mundane frustrations of a welfare office are revealed as life-shortening systemic assaults.

2.1 Galtung and the Anatomy of Social Injustice

Johan Galtung (1969) revolutionized peace and conflict studies by arguing that violence is not merely the presence of an actor committing a physical strike, but rather any social structure that prevents a human being from reaching their "potential somatic and mental realizations." Galtung's genius lay in identifying that the "avoidable" nature of a condition is what transforms it into violence.

In the context of welfare delivery, if a country has a surplus of food grains but children in remote districts die of malnutrition because they lack a digital identity card, the "potential realization" (survival) is blocked by a "social structure" (the digital ID mandate). This is structural violence because the harm is built into the system it is silent, does not require a specific "villain" to pull a trigger, and is often perceived as a natural or inevitable administrative necessity. Galtung reminds us that the "quiet" nature of this violence makes it more dangerous, as it lacks the visibility required to spark immediate social outcry.

2.2 Paul Farmer: Pathologies of Power and the "Erasure" of the Individual

While Galtung provided the macro-structure, Paul Farmer (2004) brought an ethnographic and medical urgency to the concept. Farmer, a physician and anthropologist, observed that structural violence is often justified by the "pathologies of power" the tendency of those in authority to create narratives that blame the poor for their own suffering.

In welfare systems, this manifests as the "culture of suspicion." Governments often design welfare systems around the "fraudulent beneficiary" rather than the "eligible citizen."

Farmer argues that this focus on policing the poor creates a bureaucratic environment where the individual's humanity is erased and replaced by a "risk profile." When a welfare system requires a 70-year-old laborer to prove their age with a birth certificate they never received, the state is performing a "pathology of power." It is demanding a level of legibility that the marginalized cannot provide, effectively "erasing" them from the state's protection. For Farmer, this is not a mistake; it is a mechanism by which the state manages its "disposable" populations.

2.3 Rob Nixon: The Slow Violence of Bureaucratic Attrition

The challenge in naming governance failure as violence is its lack of "spectacle." This is where Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of "slow violence" becomes essential. Nixon describes slow violence as a "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space." Originally applied to environmental degradation, this concept is strikingly applicable to the "attrition" seen in social safety nets.

Bureaucratic failure is rarely an explosion; it is a leak. It is the cumulative effect of three months without a pension, leading to a missed dose of medication, leading to a fall, leading to permanent disability. Nixon argues that our media-saturated culture struggles to recognize this type of harm because it has no "starting gun." By framing welfare delivery through the lens of slow violence, we can account for the temporal dimension of poverty. The "time tax" the hours spent in queues, the months waiting for an appeal, the years living in uncertainty is a slow-acting toxin that erodes the agency and health of the poor.

III. METHODOLOGY: A QUALITATIVE META-SYNTHESIS OF ADMINISTRATIVE FRICTION

To investigate the hypothesis that governance failure constitutes structural violence, this study employs a **Qualitative Meta-Synthesis (QMS)**. Rather than relying on a single field site, this methodology integrates findings from disparate ethnographic accounts, human rights reports and judicial reviews to identify recurring "mechanisms of exclusion" across different welfare delivery systems.

3.1 Data Selection and Scoping

The research focuses on three primary "sites of friction" where the state interacts with the marginalized:

1. *Food Security*: Public Distribution Systems (PDS) and ration card management.
2. *Social Security*: Old-age pensions and disability grants.
3. *Digital Identity*: Mandatory biometric authentication systems (e.g., Aadhaar in India, e-SITR in Mexico).

The primary data sources include Special Rapporteur reports from the United Nations, longitudinal studies from NGOs like the Right to Food Campaign and "administrative ethnographies" that document the lived experience of claimants navigating the "bureaucratic maze."

3.2 Analytical Framework: Thematic Coding

The data was analyzed using Thematic Coding to categorize "failures" not by their technical cause (e.g., "server down") but by their human impact. Three primary themes emerged:

- *Technological Erasure*: When a system fails to "see" a valid human being.
- *The Time Tax*: The deliberate use of wait times to discourage service utilization.
- *Documentary Fetishism*: The requirement for impossible-to-obtain paperwork as a gatekeeping mechanism.

IV. CASE ANALYSIS: THE MECHANICS OF EXCLUSION

The transition to the "Digital Welfare State" has been framed as a move toward transparency. However, the qualitative data suggests that digitization often acts as a force multiplier for structural violence.

4.1 Biometric Violence and the "Death of the Digital Twin"

One of the most potent examples of structural violence in modern governance is the use of biometric authentication. For a manual laborer, fingerprints are not static data points; they are worn down by decades of physical toil. When a biometric scanner fails to recognize a laborer's thumbprint, the system records a "mismatch." In the logic of the machine, the person does not exist. This leads to what scholars call "Civil Death". In several documented cases in South Asia and East Africa, the inability to authenticate biometrically led to the cancellation of ration cards. Because the system "deleted" these individuals to "cleanse" the database of ghosts, they were cut off from life-saving grain.

Finding: The "efficiency" gained by removing 10% of "ghosts" is often built on the "structural murder" of 1% of genuine, vulnerable claimants who lack the physical or social capital to rectify a digital error.

4.2 The "Time Tax" as a Regressive Levy

Time is the only asset the poor possess in equal measure to the rich, yet the state treats the time of the poor as valueless. The "Time Tax" refers to the hundreds of hours a claimant must spend traveling to government offices, standing in queues, and returning for "one more signature."

In a study of social grants, it was found that the cost of *accessing* a \$30 monthly grant including transport, lost wages for the day and "speed money" (petty bribes) often amounted to 40% of the grant's value. This is not a failure of the system; it is a **structural deterrent**. By making the process "high-friction" the state effectively reduces its fiscal burden by exhausting the claimant until they drop out of the system.

4.3 Documentary Fetishism and the Burden of Proof

Structural violence is often codified in the "Required Documents" list. In post-conflict or high-migration zones, requiring a 1950s-era land deed or a formal birth certificate to access a health card is a form of exclusionary gatekeeping.

- *The "Catch-22" of Bureaucracy:* To get a ration card, you need an address proof; to get an address proof (like a utility bill), you need a formal residence; to have a formal residence, you need an income; to have an income, you often need the very welfare support you are being denied.

This cycle ensures that the "poorest of the poor"—the homeless, the migrant, the refugee—are structurally barred from the very systems designed for their survival.

V. DISCUSSION: FROM ADMINISTRATIVE "ERROR" TO SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE

The preceding analysis shifts the focus from the technical mechanics of welfare delivery to their human consequences. When a "system error" results in a family skipping meals for a month, the language of public administration efficiency, optimization and fiscal prudence becomes a form of erasure. To engage with these failures as structural violence, we must deconstruct the narrative of "unintended consequences" and recognize the intentionality of exclusion.

5.1 The Weaponization of "Sludge"

In behavioral economics, "sludge" refers to excessive friction that makes it difficult for people to achieve their goals. In the context of the welfare state, this friction is rarely accidental. As this study has shown, the "Time Tax" and "Documentary Fetishism" serve a specific political purpose: budgetary discipline through attrition. By creating a gauntlet of administrative hurdles, the state effectively lowers its "take-up rate."

If a welfare program is designed such that only 60% of eligible citizens can successfully navigate the application process, the state "saves" 40% of its potential expenditure. In a neoliberal framework, this is often celebrated as "targeting efficiency." However, through the lens of Galtung and Farmer, this is distributive injustice.

The 40% who are excluded are not the "least needy"; they are the "least resourced"—those without the literacy, the digital access, or the physical health to endure the "sludge."

5.2 The "Digital Poorhouse" and Somatic Harm

The move toward biometric and automated systems has created what Virginia Eubanks (2018) terms the "Digital Poorhouse." This research finds that the violence of the digital state is uniquely potent because of its binary nature. In an analog system, a sympathetic clerk might exercise "street-level" discretion to help a grandmother whose documents were lost in a fire. In a digital system, the "mismatch" is absolute. There is no appeal to a server.

This lack of human intermediation transforms a technical glitch into a permanent state of Somatic Erasure. When a laborer's worn fingerprints fail to scan, the system does not just deny them grain; it denies their very existence as a citizen. The physical body—aged and scarred by the very labor the state relies upon—becomes the reason for the body's starvation. This is the ultimate paradox of structural violence: the state uses the physical markers of poverty as a justification for withholding the means to alleviate it.

5.3 Toward a "Dignity-Centric" Framework

To dismantle this violence, the discourse must shift from "improving efficiency" to "restoring agency." This requires a radical re-imagining of the social contract. We propose three pillars for a non-violent welfare architecture:

1. *The Right to Maintenance:* If a state-mandated digital system fails, the "burden of failure" must fall on the state, not the citizen. This means "fail-safe" mechanisms where benefits are paid out by default if the technology malfunctions.
2. *Radical Transparency and Social Audits:* Moving beyond internal government audits to community-led monitoring where the "beneficiaries" have the legal power to penalize officials for administrative delays.
3. *The "Analogue Guarantee":* Recognizing that digital-only pathways are inherently exclusionary. A non-violent state must guarantee a "human-in-the-loop" for every essential service.

VI. CONCLUSION: THE ETHICS OF THE INTERFACE

This study has argued that the breakdown of welfare delivery systems is not a peripheral issue of "bad governance" but a central site of structural violence. By applying the frameworks of Galtung, Farmer, and Nixon, we see that the "slow violence" of bureaucratic apathy and the "somatic erasure" of digital systems are life-shortening forces that disproportionately target the most vulnerable.



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Governance failure is a choice. It is a choice to prioritize fiscal austerity over human rights, and technological "modernity" over lived reality. When the state designs a system that it knows will exclude a percentage of the eligible population, it is committing a silent act of aggression.

To achieve true Distributive Justice, we must stop treating the poor as "users" of a system and start treating them as "claimants" of a right. The measure of a successful welfare system should not be how many "ghosts" it deleted, but how many human beings it kept alive and dignified. Until we recognize the violence inherent in a "missing document" or a "failed thumbprint," our pursuit of peace and development will remain structurally incomplete.

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