

According to Paul Farmer, extreme suffering includes premature and painful illnesses, torture, and rape, as well as institutionalized racism and gender inequality. Understanding social suffering begins with the observation that the probability of suffering tragic events and circumstances (collectively suffering) almost always correlates with socioeconomic status in inegalitarian societies. Those at the top enjoy a life often devoid of suffering, while those at the bottom struggle to survive in some places. The suffering Farmer describes occurs on the “bottom rung of the social ladder...” and is representative of that class of people (not being limited to a subset of those people). Social suffering (or structural violence) is the disproportionate distribution of social hardship (including disease, poverty, unemployment, lack of medical care, etc) on the lower economic and social classes.

Paul Farmer finds three difficulties poets, filmmakers, and other artists encounter in their attempts to describe social suffering. He notes that the “exoticization” (or even glamorization) of suffering makes it difficult for those in developed countries to understand and empathize. Farmer explains that, in general, people struggle to empathize with those whose experiences may be dissimilar from theirs. When an artist depicts suffering vividly, it is probable that it will be “less affecting” because of the audience’s unfamiliarity with or cultural/geographic distance from the subject. Second, the proposition of relating the stark suffering of myriads of people in a respectful and yet arresting way is challenging. Suffering of any kind is a serious matter, and to reduce human suffering to mere statistics does effectively convey the plight of sufferers. Despite their exigence, forthright accounts of suffering are challenging to deliver. Third, the way systemic suffering is propagated and functions in societies is still imperfectly understood, even by scholars. Explaining *why* a certain person suffers when others, perhaps even in their vicinity, do not requires a holistic understanding of the minutely interconnected network of social standing, culture, history, politics, and economics. Analyzing the multiplicity of forces at work in a single story of suffering provides a context in which to try to explain it.