

From Uncle Tom To Aunt Jemima: Towards A Global Perspective on VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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L'auteur étudie la culture et la religion rasta-fariennes depuis 1970, quand elle se rendit pour la première fois en Jamaïque pour entreprendre des recherches pour son doctorat. Dans cet article, elle soutient que la violence contre les femmes ne peut pas être comprise et combattue dans son contexte global sans examiner le rôle du patriarcat, qui est à la base de toutes les manifestations de violence contre les femmes, quels que soit le contexte culturel. Elle se demande comment nous pouvons créer une démarche féministe qui opposerait des comportements sociaux et culturels oppressifs, tout en évitant l'ethnocentrisme.

The problem of developing a global framework for dealing with violence against women came sharply into focus for me when I recently participated in a panel discussion on the subject. I was asked to address "Family Violence" from a cross-cultural and feminist perspective at a seminar organized for one hundred or so Toronto Department of Public Health employees as part of a staff development programme. It's often been said that Toronto is a unique city because at least half its population have been born outside Canada. Recognizing this fact, many city healthcare agencies in the past few years have sponsored workshops dealing with

the relationship between health and culture.

Having participated in some of these sessions, I have been party to the process of helping people shift from a position of often unacknowledged ethnocentrism to an appreciation of the role that culture plays in shaping behaviour. Unfortunately, one of the dangers inherent in the cross-cultural perspective is that we might easily slip across an ambiguous boundary into a position of extreme cultural relativism. Here, out of a misguided sense of respect for Traditional Ways we can find ourselves unable to assess the extent of human suffering caused by any particular



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cultural behaviour. Such practices, more likely than not, are embedded in a complex of related beliefs and behaviours, all of which would be affected by the attempt to change any one of them. In the past anthropologists have wrestled with customs like foot binding and infanticide (more appropriately termed femicide). Currently feminists have to deal with issues like clitoridectomy and bride burnings – by turning a blind eye, or by accepting the culturally normative definition of things, or by challenging such practices as oppressive.

Having made an effort to encourage culturally sensitive attitudes, how do you integrate a feminist approach which opposes oppressive cultural behaviours? In fact, the two perspectives are mutually reinforcing. The cross-cultural evidence for crimes of violence against women leads one to search for a common framework to explain both the similar nature of such acts, as well as the high frequency with which they occur. To cast the pain, disfigurement, and death of women in individual cultural terms denies the validity of a single cultural universal: that men everywhere define and control the dominant culture for their own ends. Violence against women is a cross-cultural universal as is the patriarchal complex which legitimizes it.

From a global point of view women need to develop the same kind of powerful analytical framework to deal with their own oppression in the way that victims of race, class, and colonial exploitation have done. Often women who protest against racism and colonialism refuse to acknowledge the role of patriarchal ideology and practices in excluding them from decision making and full participation in society. We know from several examples that even in revolutionary situations sexism continues to be a problem long after the consolidation of political power.

Whether or not women are complicit in their own oppression is an extremely sensitive issue which can inhibit communication between women of different cultural backgrounds, as an example from my own research experience illustrates. Since 1970 when I first went to Jamaica to conduct fieldwork for my Ph.D., I have been involved in studying the Rastafarian faith and culture. Rastafari is a predominantly Black, African-oriented social movement which strongly opposes both racism and colonialism. It also looks to the Bible for guidance and inspiration, and can be characterized as patriarchal-theoc-

matic. It is a movement of liberation which has an explicit ideology about the subordination of women. As Rastafari has become more of an international phenomenon, both Rasta and non-Rasta women have started to ask questions about the role of Rastafarian sisters. Fully aware of my status as an outsider and trying to be sensitive to my own ethnocentric bias, I initially reported on the more progressive aspects of the movement. Gradually, though, I came to realize that the domination of women is built into Rastafarian culture in a way that legitimizes among other forms of oppression, violence against women. As first I simply addressed the more general problem of the social control of women within this patriarchal context, and I kept silent about actual instances of abuse.¹ But finally I concluded that the contradiction between the stated value of "peace and love" and non-violence as a political strategy on the one hand, and behaviours which were violent towards women on the other, needed to be examined. In doing this I exposed myself to the criticism that, as an outsider, I should not presume to interfere.

An alternative viewpoint is represented by a Rastafarian sister and scholar (whom I do not know) who has argued that: "The concept of male domination can have no validity where the female understands, accepts and operates within the parameters of a prescribed role. It is only when the female resists this role that the concept acquires significance."²

It is difficult for me to imagine any conscious Black person today saying this about Uncle Tom under conditions of slavery. But you can still buy Aunt Jemima pancake mix in the local supermarket. While as feminists and scholars foreign to cultures other than our own, we need to become aware of our ethnocentric biases, the possibility of patriarchally-generated false consciousness on the part of women in all societies needs to be examined. Like racism, colonialism, and class oppression, sexism is a phenomenon which transcends local cultures, and must be confronted in global terms.

We need to agree on a *trans-cultural* definition of violence. Do we include only acts which are intended to punish and to harm, such as wife battering and sexual assault? Or do we examine behaviours which may have harmful effects although their ostensible purpose is ritualistic and symbolic, such as the observing of food taboos by women, especially during preg-

nancy and lactation, which may contribute to the systematic malnourishment of women? The International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women has already surveyed the extent of the problem, although women from underdeveloped countries were not well represented because of a lack of funds. Every issue of *Women's International Network News* has examples of violence against women in various societies. Dobash and Dobash have given us an excellent account of the historical and contemporary relationship between patriarchy and violence against women in Western societies.³

We need a model of patriarchy which has universal application. What in fact constitutes the patriarchal ideal? Firstly, women are generally considered subordinate to men, although in some societies one finds a self-serving egalitarian or "separate but equal" ideology which disguises the fact that men are in control. Secondly, there is ample cross-cultural data to show that in most societies women are regarded as property with economic and reproductive potential which needs to be managed. Thirdly, this is often accomplished by encouraging women to fulfil their "natural" role through marriage, motherhood, and domestic labour. There are of course other social roles available for women which spin off from this "natural" one, to which the data on international prostitution and sexual slavery attests.

In Western societies the study of the family has served as a point of departure because so much of the violence against women is learned and occurs within this social context. However, the ways in which scholars and members of the "helping" professions present the problem often pose obstacles to dealing effectively with it. The following criticisms have been made and discussed in detail by both Louise Armstrong⁴ and the Dobashes, among others. Terms like 'family', 'conjugal', 'spousal' and/or 'domestic' violence serve to mystify the real nature of the problem: it consists mainly of violence by men against women. It is also misleading to assume that such violence is the result of "dysfunctional family dynamics" and to advise family therapy. What does work is separating the subject of such violence from its perpetrator, not trying to keep them together. Furthermore, medicalizing the problem obscures the fact that wife batterers and rapists are criminals, not sick persons needing therapy. Nor does it help

to speak of such actions as "deviant," as if they were exceptions. Violence against women is so commonplace as to be "normal" in the sense of its being a logical consequence of patriarchal dynamics. We can't have much faith in displacement theory either, i.e. that all we need to do is find another outlet for violent tendencies⁵. Several studies have shown that exposure to violence leads to more violence. And while it is useful to learn from victimology studies how women as a class perceive their ability to change stressful situations, we must avoid the tendency to blame the victim. In short, all these approaches limit our understanding of the problem.

Violence against women can not be understood in a global context without examining the role of patriarchal ideology and patriarchal practices. As we have already noted, changing even one belief or one behaviour calls into question related ones. Rastafarian culture, for example, would be something quite different if sisters had an equal voice. In the meantime, however, short term solutions must be found - if only to guarantee the survival of countless numbers of women. In addition to treating violent acts against women as the crimes they in fact are, we must make provisions to remove women

and their children from dangerous situations and help them develop independent means of support. More important, as women from different cultural backgrounds we need to overcome our guilt and our own insecurities in order to facilitate dialogue among ourselves. We need to understand the manifestations of patriarchy cross-culturally in order to develop a trans-cultural strategy for confronting it.

¹Carole Yawney, "To Grow a Daughter: Cultural Liberation and the Dynamics of Oppression in Jamaica," in *Feminism in Canada*, ed. A. Miles and G. Finn (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1983), pp. 119-44.

²Maureen Rowe, "The Woman in Rastafari," *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 26, no. 4 (1980), 13-21.

³R. Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash, *Violence Against Wives: A Case Against the Patriarchy* (New York: Free Press, 1979). The following discussion is based on this work.

⁴Louise Armstrong, *The Home Front: Notes from the Family War Zone* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984).

⁵See M. A. Straus, "Societal Morphogenesis and Intrafamily Violence in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *International*

Perspectives on Family Violence, ed. R. Gelles and C. P. Cornell (Lexington, Mass. and Toronto: D. C. Heath, 1983), pp. 27-43.

Further Reading:

Del Martin. *Battered Wives*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983.

Diana Russell. *Sexual Exploitation: Rape, Child Sexual Abuse, and Workplace Harassment*. London: Sage Library of Social Research 55, 1984.

S. Schechter. *Women and Male Violence*. Boston: South End Press, 1982.

Makeda Silvera. "An Open Letter to Rastafarian Sisters". In *Fireweed*, 16 (Spring 1983), 114-20.

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