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Patriarchy, Power and Tradition

**Third World Women, Human Rights and Gender Violence
in the Context of Global Economic Imperialism**

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

Whether sanctioned by society, made into law, or simply tolerated, gender-based abuse and discrimination against women occurs in virtually every country throughout the world. Under democracy and dictatorship, in times of war and times of peace, the human rights of women and girls are violated daily, and often systematically. Although the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* proclaims: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights", women's freedom, dignity and equality are persistently compromised by law and custom in ways that men's are not.

Through the articulation of Third World women's writing and first person dialogue, this study seeks to explore the relationship between cross cultural violence against women, and the cultural or religious practices that are often used to legitimate its existence. Through the use of four specific case studies - women in Islam, the Taliban as an example of religious fundamentalism, female genital mutilation and the international trafficking of women for sex tourism - I attempt to position the international phenomenon of violence against women within today's globalised world economic structure. Through exploring and revealing the cross cultural nature of gender violence, this study attempts to illustrate how patriarchal values are reinforced through religious, cultural and political structures in both western and Third World society.

Through the utilisation of human-centered anthropological methodology, this study aims to present a wide ranging discussion of these complex issues in such a way that the world view of the women who the study is about is presented as paramount. Through recognising and naming my location as a western woman writing about the lives of women in the Third World, I hope to make it clear from the outset of this study that I do not intend to speak for, or on behalf of, women whose experiences I have not shared, but aim instead to address and discuss a range of complex issues that are of vital importance not only to the discipline of anthropology, but to the wider world in which we live.

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Preface

The impetus for this study first almost two years ago during a conversation with my uncle regarding the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). Like most liberal westerners, he was horrified to learn that millions of women and girls world-wide were still being subjected to such a 'primitive' custom. However, much to my uncle's horror, I began to defend the practice. I argued that perhaps he just didn't understand the issues behind female circumcision. Had he thought about the reasons why mothers continued to do this to their daughters? Or did he believe they were just cruel or too stupid to realise that this was an 'uncivilised' act?

As a consequence of my background in the discipline of anthropology and resulting predisposition towards cultural relativism, this response was an instant reaction for me. Sometime after the conversation, however, I realised that in defending those who allow FGM to continue, I was, in fact, effectively defending the practice itself. The more I thought about this, the more it disturbed me, as I realised that I too was deeply morally opposed to the unnecessary sexual mutilation of young girls, who in many cases do not even realise what is happening to them. As a result of this encounter, I began to wonder what cultural relativism really meant. If I was happy to defend FGM because of my belief in cultural relativism, where could I draw the line? If I wanted to continue to purport the view that we as westerners should not judge the practices of those in cultures we do not understand, would I ever be able to make a moral stand on any issue? As a thinking capable person, is it not important for me to be able to have strong opinions about what I believe to be right and wrong?

It was around about this same time that my interest in feminism also began to take off. I started to wade through all the negative connotations associated with the idea of interpreting life from a 'women's perspective' only to realise that because I am a woman, everything about this seemed to make perfect sense! Before long I

began making connections between all kinds of seemingly unrelated things. I soon realised that, as a woman, it was these connections that had been missing from my approach to anthropological thinking all along. I began to realise that seeing issues of racism and colonialism as separate from gender and class was like trying to figure out a puzzle with only half the pieces. Without the factoring of a gender perspective, the anthropological method I had been introduced to began to seem more and more limiting.

As a result of this process, a huge can of worms opened up before me, not just in relation to how I could balance my opposition to FGM with my beliefs in cultural relativism, but in regards to how I thought about life in general. To cut a long story short, what you are about to read can be seen as part of this ideological journey. In choosing this kind of methodological approach to the question of women's human rights, it has been necessary for me to explore a whole range of diverse issues that contribute to the unique nature of women's life worlds in the context of Third World society. In light of this, the following thesis is considerably longer than may be considered ideal for a study of this kind. However this reference is included not as an apology, but rather as an explanation for the length of the text that follows.

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