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Feminism, Cultural Violence of

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FEMINISM, CULTURAL VIOLENCE OF. For most, if not all, self-defined feminists, feminism means support for equality between women and men. The difficulty with this definition, though, is determining what one means by "equality," by "women and men," and by "sex" and "gender." For some feminists, equality requires that differences between women and men be acknowledged and valued. For other feminists, equality means that the category "human" encompasses women and men and that the differences within a sex are greater than differences between the sexes. Feminists also differ on what they mean by "women" and "men"; these terms can be defined biologically, genetically, culturally, religiously, or psychologically. In academic feminism, convention has dictated that sex is defined by biology and that gender is defined by culture, but the debate continues as to how biology and gender influence each other and where one ends and the other begins. These debates about the nature of feminism have helped nurture an understanding of the complex interrelationship between biology and culture and have helped to broaden scholars' and activists' attention to different ways that oppression manifests itself.

Cultural violence is violence that is part of a larger social structure. Since cultural violence belongs to the inner workings of a society, it is usually invisible to those who are within that structure. In order to reveal the violence, feminists turn their attention to the ways in which these structures systematically disadvantage women. Once cultural violence is revealed, the violence can be challenged and corrected. For example, many would point to Condoleezza Rice as an example of a successful woman and as evidence that sexism and racism are no longer active in U.S. politics, but when we examine Rice's collusion with the administration of George W. Bush, it is evident that she is part of an institution that plays on gendered stereotypes to justify wars in both Iraq and

Afghanistan. This example is particularly illustrative because freeing women in Afghanistan was central to the United States' justification for invading Afghanistan, which plays on stereotypes of women as victims in need of rescue. In the war in Iraq, however, women were used as weapons to control prisoners, as evident in pictures from Abu Ghraib.

In her 1915 speech "What War Is Destroying," Jane Addams gave what might be the most compelling argument against the myth that war can promote peace. War destroys the conservation of human life by diverting time, talent, and money from social programs for children, the elderly, and the disabled. The ascent of human life is halted, because instead of advancing our sensitivity to human life between generations, war makes us less sensitive. Instead of building on the achievements of the last generation, those who have gone to war and suffered through war must begin again, because war produces a hardening toward human suffering. The costs of war that Addams enumerates serves as an important reminder that war takes its toll on some of the most fundamental relations of cooperation between people. She points out that wars, even justified wars, destroy far more than is apparent on the surface. Feminists have sought to combat cultural violence against women in three areas, language, imagery, and global conflict.

Cultural Violence: Language

A groundbreaking moment for discovering patriarchy's hold on language came in 1982 when Carol Gilligan published *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Through years of studying women and men as they made moral judgments, Gilligan's research revealed a significant gender difference. Further, she discovered that male decision-making models are used as the standard for judging moral development. According to this standard, women are less capable of making moral judgments, because they make them differently than men do. At the time, Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of development were the most widely used measure of moral development. According to his theory, the highest form of moral judgment (and also the form most commonly used by men) is to apply abstract rules uniformly—regardless of the circumstances or the individuals involved. Women typically make judgments based on relationships between people and the effects that actions would have on those relationships. Women's method of moral judgment, according to Kohlberg's measure, is inferior. Gilligan's work brought attention

to gender differences in moral development and has helped to undermine abstraction as the most advanced form of moral reasoning and to reveal the complexity of many kinds of moral thinking.

The French philosopher Luce Irigaray has also been instrumental in feminism's ability to deconstruct patriarchal language in psychoanalysis, philosophy, and society. Irigaray first gained recognition in 1974 with the publication of *Speculum, de l'autre femme* (Speculum of the Other Woman), in which she deconstructs psychoanalysis and philosophy from Freud to Plato in order to demonstrate that psychoanalysis and philosophy depend on covering over the role of women and the feminine in order to elevate men and the masculine to a privileged position in which everything masculine is the norm and everything feminine is nonmasculine and therefore deficient. Throughout her work, Irigaray demonstrates that the Western philosophical canon (Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and others) depends on a forgetfulness in which the feminine's only role is to support the masculine. In 1990 she released *Sexes et genres à travers les langues* (Sex and Gender through Language), which outlines the results of ongoing research by Irigaray and other linguists on how women and men, girls and boys use words in French, English, and Italian. The research revealed a hierarchy between the sexes in descriptions of the sexes, grammatical privilege, and the value of each sex. For example, masculine pronouns were used more frequently by both sexes for descriptions of admirable traits or activities; feminine pronouns were used more frequently by both sexes for undesirable traits or activities. For Irigaray, the results of the deconstruction of language can lead society to develop descriptions and values associated with women and men that recognize that humans have two distinct ways of being human. The distinction between women and men, then, would be recognized in religion, art, language, and law.

Although many feminists have contributed to deconstructing patriarchal language, the third woman whose work has been instrumental to other feminists is Nel Noddings. Her book *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* follows a similar trajectory to the work of Gilligan and Irigaray; she rejects objective ethical reasoning as the highest form of ethical reasoning. She argues that using objective ethics as the standard privileges masculine reasoning over feminine reason. She develops an ethical theory in which subjective relationships teach us how to care both for those with whom we

are immediately connected and those who are far away. According to Noddings, caring begins with “natural caring.” In these relationships, we care because “I want” to care. Caring becomes “ethical caring” when we respond to the feeling that “I must” care. While we may face situations in which care does not happen naturally, care can be cultivated through remembering other situations in which we cared for someone or someone cared for us. In care ethics, relationships are divided into “one caring” (the person who gives care) and “cared-for” (the person who receives care). This ethics relies on relationships between people to discern what is right and what is wrong, rather than on some abstract measure.

Gilligan, Irigaray, and Noddings are instrumental to feminists’ work to deconstruct the hierarchy of the masculine over the feminine in language and ethics. Each provides a critique of the dominant masculine model in society, but they also reveal contributions that feminine models provide. Critics of these feminists argue that they contribute to stereotypes about women and further women’s subordination. Each points out in her work that although the models are feminine and masculine, women and men can and should use both models.

Cultural Violence: Imagery

In addition to the language that pervades society and contributes to a hierarchy between men and women, images of women have also been used to solidify patriarchal dominance. Feminists have focused their attention primarily on images of women in pornography and popular culture to reveal the ways in which these images contribute to violence against women and perpetuate damaging stereotypes. As with the history of feminism itself, these critiques began with the experience of white women in the West but have expanded to consider the ways in which other forms of cultural violence (racism, homophobia, and class) exacerbate women’s oppression.

During a long career of activism, research, and writing, Andrea Dworkin focused on the harms of pornography and the ways in which men control women through pornography’s influence within society. In “Why Pornography Matters to Feminists,” Dworkin gives a concise two-page summary of her (and other feminists’) opposition to pornography. Her position is summarized in the remainder of this paragraph. According to Dworkin, pornography is harmful because it exploits women and children for men’s pleasure. The harm that pornography perpetuates happens at many levels. First, it harms those women and children used in pornographic material by treating them as

objects for sexual gratification and profit. Second, it harms all women and children by promoting a view that they are available to men for violence, humiliation, and sexual gratification. Third, pornography perpetuates racism and anti-Semitism by portraying people of color and Jews as more animal-like and deviant than whites and Christians. Finally, pornography undermines society as a whole, because “pornography numbs the consciences, makes one increasingly callous to cruelty, to the infliction of pain, to violence against persons, to the humiliation or degradation of persons, to the abuse of women and children” (Dworkin, 1994, pp. 152–153).

While Dworkin focuses explicitly on pornography and its permeation of society, Naomi Wolf opens another lens of analysis in her 1991 book, *The Beauty Myth*, in which she traces the history of Western beauty standards and the harm that these standards inflict on women. Women strive to achieve beauty standards that require them to be abnormally thin, perpetually youthful, and various other standards that require constant vigilance at the expense of other pursuits. She argues that women have become obsessed with becoming beautiful, which exhausts women psychologically and physically. Further, women compete against each other, and so they remain divided and under patriarchal control. By tracing the origin of these standards as well as how they manifest in society, Wolf hopes to free women from their devotion to the beauty myth so that they will be able to pursue individual standards of beauty that allow all women to thrive.

The standards of beauty uncovered in Wolf’s analysis reveal the ways in which cultural violence against women is exacerbated by race. A narrow range of features are celebrated as beautiful; because these features are determined by Western standards, black women are only seen as beautiful if their skin is sufficiently light, their noses sufficiently narrow, their hair sufficiently straight, and their bodies sufficiently thin. Although the image of beauty changes between cultures, the standards predominantly require that women modify their bodies to meet men’s desires.

Cultural Violence: Global Conflict

Another area where feminists have increasingly focused their attention is on global cultural violence against women. Persistent lobbying by feminists at international organizations such as the United Nations and Amnesty International has succeeded in focusing attention on the

ways in which women are targeted during conflict because of their gender and their social status. As a result, the United Nations and Amnesty International have released influential reports that pay particular attention to women's agency as reflected in their participation in war and their participation in building and securing peace. Feminists are using these analyses both to lobby for increased protection of women and children and to secure women's place in formal peace processes.

Both the UN report and the Amnesty International report document the ways in which current military conflict deliberately targets women and children as part of military strategy. Women and children who suffer from a low social status before conflict face exacerbated suffering when conflicts happen. Much of the suffering that women endure specifically targets their gender. "Rape, forced impregnation, forced abortion, trafficking, sexual slavery and the intentional spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), are elements of contemporary conflict" (United Nations, p. 2).

The report by the United Nations also recognizes the roles that women play in supporting a conflict. Although women endure a tremendous amount of suffering in contemporary conflict, they also play an active role in perpetuating the conflict. Women have direct roles in violence when they commit acts of violence or train as soldiers. They also have indirect roles in violence by ministering to the needs of men in the conflict, encouraging their children to go to war, electing governments that perpetuate conflict, and spreading hatred against other groups.

The most encouraging aspect of the UN report and the Amnesty International report is the extended analysis of women's involvement in informal and formal peace processes. Both groups view women's involvement as necessary to produce lasting peace and what the UN calls "gender mainstreaming." Gender mainstreaming recognizes that women and girls, men and boys will have different experiences of a conflict and that all of these perceptions must be heard, acknowledged, and incorporated into the peace process.

The increase in attention to the gender-specific effects of war and prospects for peace is possible only because of feminists' work to deconstruct patriarchal dominance and to establish the significance of women's work, experiences, and potential.

[See also *Evolving Views of Peace; Feminism and Peace; Feminist Peace Theory; Gender, Socialization, and*

Militarism; Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp; Nonviolence, Feminist Views of; Sexuality and Peace; Women and Social Change: The MSS in India; Women and War; Women in Black; Women, Peace, and War; Women's International League for Peace and Freedom; Women's Peace Camps; Women's Peace Movements, History of; Women's Peace Organizations; Women's Role in Peacemaking; and Women Strike for Peace.]

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