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## CHAPTER 8

# A Cultural Perspective on Violence Against Women

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### Introduction

Violence against women is undeniably a cross-cultural phenomenon. Violence against women appears in a remarkable variety of forms internationally, from sordid to sanitized; from secretive to sacred; in bedrooms and battlegrounds; censured as well as supported by courts, clergy, and communities throughout the world (Watts & Zimmerman, 2002). At the same time, certain forms of violence against women are deeply embedded in specific cultural contexts; that is, harm is inflicted in certain ways and supported by structures and ideologies that permit a specific form of violence to continue in its own precise context (Heise, 1998; Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottermoeller, 1999; Sokoloff, 2005). While we might say, then, that the phenomenon of violence against women is global and general, we must add that its manifestations are also shaped by the values and circumstances of particular cultures. Violence against women does not look the same across cultures.

Due to this variability, prevention and recovery programs must attend to cultural issues if

they are to be relevant to the real lives of women across the globe (Heise, 1998; University of Melbourne, 2000). If we avoid considering culture, we commit the grave error of assuming that everyone is "the same," which usually means applying unquestioningly to all women certain ideas that have been generated by and for those from the dominant cultural groups in industrialized nations. Nevertheless, discussing a stigmatized topic like violence against women from a cultural perspective feels risky. When we discuss any particular kind of violence against women within a particular culture, we risk contributing to overgeneralization and stereotypes. If we offer suggestions for preventing violence against women or ameliorating its effects in varying cultural contexts, we risk advocating models for contexts where they won't fit. As we embark on this chapter, we are held back by our desire to avoid stereotyping and exoticizing violence against women, yet simultaneously propelled forward by our commitment to end violence against women and girls everywhere.

Surveying violence against women worldwide feels like standing at the edge of a terrible abyss

where millions of women and girls, near and far away, both resist and submit to torture. As people who are academically trained, we think that if we could just make sense of the disordered chaos before us, perhaps we could help. But as we contemplate such a task, it proves hard to know how to group such a survey of anguish and horror into categories that help us—as we say colloquially—wrap our minds around the problem. As a potentially helpful way to do this, this chapter concentrates mostly on cultural issues in the manifestations of violence against women and then briefly discusses prevention and research.

### Culturally Based Violence Against Women: Manifestations

First, we must avoid stereotyping. Only rare forms of violence are inflicted against every woman in a culture, and there are few forms of violence against women that belong exclusively to any particular culture. Instead, most forms of violence against women are familiar and hardly raise an eyebrow; that is, the everyday slapping, beating, and sexual assault of females of all ages around the world that have largely become commonplace and unremarkable (Watts & Zimmerman, 2002).

Furthermore, when we discuss a form of violence against women that appears in a given culture, we risk “essentializing” that culture. In other words, we risk underestimating differences among people in that culture and supporting racist discourses that construct members of minority cultural groups, or non-Western nations, as a homogenous “other.” In this chapter, we try mightily to avoid this perspective, recognizing that appalling levels of violence against women are present in the dominant culture

in the United States and other Western industrialized nations. We also know that there are people from all cultures who work diligently to end violence against women throughout the world. We see violence against women in all societies—including our own—as both cultural and criminal; that is, although violence against women has different cultural explanations and takes different forms based on location and time, all violence against women still merits legal and criminal justice responses. Violence against women is never “just cultural” and therefore acceptable, any more than assaults on any other particular group of people would be considered tolerable because they are “cultural.”<sup>1</sup>

When separating various types of violence against women, reports from the United Nations (UN, 2006) show that physical abuse alone (without other forms of abuse) is reported at high rates across the globe. In their most recent multi-country study, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2005) also found that women reported high rates of physical violence at the hands of a partner, ranging from 13% in Japan to 61% in rural Peru. Even so, most women reported that the violence was part of an ongoing pattern of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, and all three types are most likely to occur together. As noted in the WHO report, “Only in the urban settings in Brazil and Thailand, and in Japan and Serbia and Montenegro, was the overlap between physical and sexual abuse less than 30%” (p. 7). The physical abuse of women and girls, therefore, cannot be understood without also taking into consideration the sexualized context of that violence. Because sexual and physical violence against females so commonly occur together, or at least within the same gendered cultural scripts, the discussion below incorporates and integrates both types of violence across the lifespan.

<sup>1</sup>The desire to preserve cultural autonomy has been used as an excuse for failing to eliminate certain harmful practices that curtail women’s right to live without violence—perhaps the most basic human right. We reject these cultural arguments. The United Nations Secretary General’s *Report on Violence Against Women* (2006) wryly notes that the same (male) leaders who advocate the use of modern technologies to advance the interests of their people often resist measures to assure the physical safety or advancement of women in the name of “tradition.” This almost seems to imply that women alone do and should serve as the repositories of traditional cultural identity and therefore must be sacrificed in the name of culture.