

# **Patriarchy: Perpetuating the Practice of Female Genital Mutilation**

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## **Patriarchy and Female Genital Mutilation**

The most commonly accepted definition of patriarchy is the social structure of society based on the fathers having primary responsibility for the welfare of and authority over their families. However the true reach of patriarchy extends far beyond the privacy of the familial realm. Allan G. Johnson, Professor at Hartford College for Women and sociologist states in “The Gender Knot” that patriarchy does not mean that all men are powerful and all women are powerless. It does indicate that the most powerful roles are held by men, that men are in positions of authority because of their ability to exert control through violence or threat of violence, and that personal attributes and social activities closely tied to men are more highly regarded in society (Johnson, 2005).

It is difficult to discuss the practice of female genital mutilation without exciting passions from both challengers and supporters of the practice. However, the larger issues of dignity, value, and worth of life are greater than this one particular act. Although female genital mutilation is often carried out by female practitioners, the intent is to control the female body and sexuality for man’s benefit. The practice of female genital mutilation has been marginalized as a cultural issue. This assumption is discussed in isolation of patriarchy’s impact on the basic human rights of women. The objective of this work is to link patriarchal control and dominance to the practice of female genital mutilation. The attempt is to refute the notion of female genital mutilation as simply a cultural phenomenon citing the long history in which the dominance and control over the female body and feminine sexuality has crossed geographical boundaries.

## **Patriarchy**

Carole Pateman argues in the Sexual Contract that “Modern civil society is not structured by kinship and the power of fathers; in the modern world, women are subordinated to men as *men*, or to men as a fraternity” (Pateman, 1997). In patriarchal systems, as a collective group, women

are systemically unrepresented or underrepresented in the economic, political, military, criminal justice, legislative and educational arenas. Men serve in the highest levels in all areas of society. This is particularly important when examining women's rights of equality and freedom from violence. Men ultimately decide freedom and the extent to which it is afforded to others. Woman only has the freedom that man has willingly given to them.

In traditional patriarchal societies, the role of man is to provide financially. He is also responsible for the security and protection of women and children. Man participates in the public realm through education, business, politics and religious activities. Women's role has always been consigned to childrearing and sex. In "The Second Sex", Simone De Beauvoir maintains that man is the norm and standard as expressed in language by the designation "man" being used to refer to all human beings. She goes on to state that "For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less" (S. D. Beauvoir). Woman is defined in terms of her differences from man. Man's body is normal and woman's body is abnormal. Man's way of knowing is the standard and a woman's way of knowing is perceived as emotional and unsuitable for the public arena. In order for woman to gain footholds in the public realm she must set aside all that is particular to her and take up characteristics of the male norm.

Addressing issues of patriarchy produce strong emotions because it speaks to issues of identity and culturalism. Both men and women alike are so strongly attached to the gender roles assigned by society. Those gender roles define every aspect of life including dress, language and sexual expression. Socialization determines that men wear pants and women are better suited in dress. Even in modern times, women are severely punished in some societies for wearing pants. Female inferiority is expressed in her speech and language. In *Femininity and Domination*, Sandra Lee Bartky suggests that "women's language... is marked with hesitations and false starts; they tended to introduce their comments with self-denigrating expression...they often used a questioning intonation which in effect turned a simple declarative sentence into a request for help or affirmation from without... and excessive qualifiers" (Bartky). Sexually, men and women are on the extremes of the continuum. If women have multiple sexual partners they

are publicly branded as being promiscuous. However, if men go off with such unbridled regard they have no fear of stigmatization like women do and are often time revered for their conquest.

Patriarchy is even more difficult to contest when it is couched in terms of being religiously ordained or the natural biological order. Sandra Lipsitz Bem, Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies at Cornell University characterizes androcentrism (male-centeredness) as "the privileging of males, male experience, and the male perspective, which leads to defining woman as the other" (Bem, 1993). She goes on to state that woman is defined by her difference from and inferiority to man. She asserts that woman is primarily responsible for the household in which man is deemed as the head. Woman is also defined in terms of her reproductive capabilities. The female body is most venerated and generally accepted only during the childbearing years. However, women spend the majority of their lifetime outside of this range. Although the ability to sexually satisfy man is of utmost importance, a premium is placed on "virginal modesty and patriarchal innocence" (Mernissi) at the time of marriage. In the context of religious teaching, virginity and sexual modesty is central in defining a righteous and honorable woman. This is a responsibility solely placed on woman with man being the beneficiary by upholding his status in the community and increasing the disparity of equality between the sexes by depriving woman of her self-determination.

To better understand patriarchy, the historical roots must be examined. The genesis of patriarchy is based on religion and science. Even the mere discussion of religion as the possible source of patriarchy is deemed to be treacherous for a person of faith. Many modern Christian families have households that are complementarian in their operation, meaning that men and women are created equal but have different yet equally important roles. Egalitarian households are operated in a manner that there is equality in the household and no gender assigned roles. However, most families still ascribe to the male hierarchical structure. To reject patriarchy in a religious household is to reject God's word. Denunciation is viewed as an attack against the biblical model of the family with that provides clear distinctions between

man, woman, and child. To be considered a person of faith, one must accept all tenants of their faith's cannon incontrovertibly.

Bem provides a biblical insight for the concept of patriarchy and androcentrism. The creation story of Adam and Eve is used as the establishment of man's God-ordained right as the standard and norm of humanity and superiority of all creation, including woman. Not only does man authority derived from God but a mandate to provide leadership and correction to his wife and children in order to progress toward redemption. The importance of man's dominion in the home is seen as a reflection of his ability to lead in public realm (The Tenets of Biblical Patriarchy).

Adam was said to be made in God's own image whereas Eve's creation was an inferior creation of God by way of man. Eve was not said to be made in the image of God but rather from Adam's rib. Simone De Beauvoir states that "He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it...This is symbolized in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from what Bosseut called 'a supernumerary bone' of Adam" (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*). Adam was given direct authority from God to name, therefore define, all living creatures in its relevant difference from man. Modern woman is still defined as someone's daughter, wife or mother, never as a separate human being. This directive from God to Adam destined Adam's dominance over all things. The creation story exemplifies woman as a lesser being, created for the sole purpose of helping man. She had no power or authority of her own. Her full identity was in every respect joined to Adam.

The story of mankind's fall from grace demonstrates that woman was not only seen as the weaker of the two sexes, as illustrated by the serpent's approach of Eve instead of Adam. It also confirms woman as a sexual being; having been seduced by the serpent and then seducing Adam into disobeying God. Thus a woman's sexuality presents the dichotomy of being enticing and yet so powerfully destructive that it needs to be controlled. Eve's punishment for eating the forbidden fruit defines woman in terms of her reproductive nature. God's punishment

for Eve's insubordination was painful childbirth and subjugation to her husband.

In contemporary society, women are still seen as being inferior and a departure from the male norm. A woman's sexuality is seen as perilous with the potential to devastate the lives of great men. This narrative is repeated time and time again when the story of the other woman seducing the powerful man and destroying his career and family; abdicating him of any responsibility for his own actions. Thus the control of woman and feminine sexuality is for her own good and for the protection and benefit of all mankind.

Modern man has struggled with the changing dynamics of the socialization roles with women now having more opportunities outside the home in the workplace and business world. In recent decades in the United States, neoconservative men's movements, such as the Promise Keepers, have attracted large numbers of members advocating responsible parenting. This is a call for fathers to be more nurturing, more involved and better listeners within their families. These changes would seem on the surface to benefit women as there should be a lessening of the hierarchical structure to reflect the increasing financial role women are taking and the more nurturing role of men. However, these movements pose a concern for feminist, in that men have relinquished their roles as sole financial provider yet they are assured that they are still the ordained head of the household. The study "Do Promise Keepers Dream of Feminist Sheep?" conducted by Louise Silverstein, Carl F. Auerbach, Loretta Grieco, and Faith Dunkel found the Promise Keepers members were taught that they should listen to their wives, share household tasks and participate in childcare. They are also taught "Christ is the head of the Church, but he was willing to sacrifice His life for eternity. In the same way, the husband is head of the family" (Louise B. Silverstein 1999).

The implications of this mindset are that women may be able to object to their husbands as the head but how does she make an argument against Christ as the head. Rejection of patriarchy then becomes an issue of her personal faith and disobedience to God not just an objection to her husband's authority. According to Promise Keepers members, their role is not patriarchal but one of a spiritual leader and that their position as

leader is both religiously and biologically sanctioned. “By redefining the father as spiritual leader, rather than patriarch, the father maintains power and status” (Louise B. Silverstein, 1999). One respondent to the Silverstein et al. study declared “My wife is meek, she’s very submissive. Now I allow her to take two steps forward, and I take two steps back.” This statement demonstrates the problem with patriarchy, being that freedom is *allowed* by men not *afforded* to all women as a basic human right.

If the first branch of patriarchy is religion, the second would be science, specifically biology. Biological essentialism focuses on sexual differences to justify inequality and the safeguarding of male supremacy. Science has been utilized in biological politics to justify everything from slavery to genocide. One such area of science was polygenesis, which gave credence to Black Africans as inherently inferior. They were said to have smaller brain sizes and larger, sturdier bodies suitable for slavery. Other sciences such as eugenics were employed to justify sterilization to create a pure race and regulate immigration by arguing that people of certain ethnicities were intellectually inferior. Using this form of science, the United States justified the use of sterilization of mental health patients from the early twentieth century until the mid 1970’s.

Many of these biological sciences closely coincided with the women’s movement of the late 1800’s. During this time there was an influx of women entering into higher education. These affluent and educated women were also having fewer babies. Scientist came up with the vital force theory to guard against the educational aspect of the women’s movement. Vital force theory asserts that energy cannot be created nor destroyed and that there are finite amounts of energy. Therefore the energy must be conserved and geared toward specific tasks. As such, women (especially menstruating women) should not waste or divert energy on education and away from her reproductive development (Bem).

The Social Darwinism theory declares biology dictates gender roles. Men are more aggressive and women are more nurturing. Men are more highly developed and evolved because they have undergone a more stringent selection process or survival of the fittest by protecting

and providing subsistence for the female and offspring of their species. To combat women's suffrage, this theory falsely puts forth that the nurturing temperament of women would make them more predisposed to voting for welfare and aid to those unable to sustain themselves thus jeopardizing societal progress (Bem, 1993).

Sociobiologists have attempted to assess sexual differences and inequality at the onset of the second women's movement of the 1960's. Some feminist have argued that the theory is used to rationalize the egregious male behaviors. This theory proffers that men are sexually promiscuous, inclined to rape, predisposed to abandonment, aggression, intolerant of infidelity, apt to sequester females, capable of killing step-children and prone to male dominance in an attempt maximize the number of offspring to reproduce their own genes. Whereas women have to be more selective in mating because of their limited reproductive resources, time finding the most suitable mate, and producing the best offspring. Women are mindful of the time and energy allocated to pregnancy and childcare. Unlike men, that can produce several children at once, women are limited to producing approximately twenty children in their lifetime. Women may engage in deceit if necessary to withhold paternity to ensure assistance with reproduction and parental care. Sociobiologists have argued that promiscuous males over time have created more of themselves and nurturing females have created more of themselves. For that reason, genetic differences between men and women continue to exist and produce more of the same survivalist behaviors (Bem, 1993).

Female genital mutilation, footbinding, breast ironing, corseting are different practices than span dissimilar periods in time and geography. The common link is that of patriarchy's invisible hand in the harm inflicted upon women and girls often times by other women. Women do not engage in these practices for their own benefit but rather for the benefit of man. Although these and many other harmful and violent acts committed against women and girls are illegal they continue to be socially accepted and maintain legitimacy in the male dominant sphere of the legal and political systems that should provide protection for all human beings.

## **Female Genital Mutilation**

A joint statement on February 2008 by ten United Nations Agencies points out "... that female genital mutilation is a manifestation of unequal relations between women and men with roots in deeply entrenched social, economic and political conventions." The World Health Organization describes female genital mutilation as procedures that intentionally alter or injure female genital organs for non-medical reasons. Initially the procedure was termed female circumcision but there were outcries from advocates that argued this termed minimized the torture of the event. It is unlike male circumcision in which the male organ remains intact. The procedure was later termed female genital cutting, however, the World Health Organization wanted to heighten global awareness of the severity and brutality of this procedure by calling it mutilation (Female genital mutilation, 2008).

There are several forms of female genital mutilation. Type I is clitoridectomy, in which all or part of the clitoris is removed. Type II, excision is when all or part of the clitoris and labia are removed. Type I and II are the most common forms of female genital mutilation. These procedures are supposedly used to ensure virginity until marriage but primarily to take away all sexual desires and any sexual gratification including masturbation. Type III is called infibulation with excision. During this procedure the vagina is surgically closed leaving only a small opening for urination and menstruation. This is considered the most brutal of the three primary forms of female genital mutilation. The purpose is to ensure virginity until marriage. Older female relatives, midwives or tribal leaders normally perform these acts of mutilation; however for the Type III procedure trained medical professionals usually complete this task. After being cut with a blade and the vagina is stitched closed, the girls' legs are tied together for approximately two weeks until the wound has healed. There are sometimes marital ceremonies where the husband will cut the womb open or the wound is forcefully penetrated. Type IV female genital mutilation is any other harm done such as blood piercing, scarring or burning (Female genital mutilation, 2008).

Societies that are considered more inclined toward patriarchy are usually lacking in substantial women's rights. African and Asian



countries as well as parts of the Middle East have higher instances of FGM. For example, Egypt, Djibouti, and Guinea have over a 90% FGM rate (Female genital mutilation, 2008). These procedures are normally carried out by older female tribal leaders and midwives. How then do we come to terms with women inflicting harm upon other women and girls? Women, because of their nurturing role in society, are expected to protect their children from all harm and are ultimately responsible for their well-being. In many of these societies, men dictate what is considered the virtuous and acceptable female image. Control over every aspect of the woman is accepted and women gladly acquiesce in an attempt to gain higher societal status and to be deemed more acceptable for marriage.

As women are solely dependent on men; their fathers and husbands, for safety and economic support in these societies, compliance with this rite of passage from girl to womanhood is deemed necessary. As a father from the Ivory Coast told the *New York Times*, “If your daughter has not been excised. . . . No man in the village will marry her. It is an obligation. We have done it, we do it, and we will continue to do it. . . . She has no choice. I decide”. Her viewpoint is not important (Poggioli, French Activists Fight Female Genital Mutilation, 2009 ). Even if a girl’s parents object, the father’s family has the definitive authority and final decision.

Ayaan Jirsi Ali describes her experience as woman in a patriarchal society as “I was a Somali woman, and therefore my sexuality belonged to the owner of my family: my father or my uncles. It was obvious that I absolutely had to be a virgin at marriage; because to do otherwise would damage the honor of my father and his whole clan-uncles, brothers, male cousins-forever and irretrievably. The place between my legs was sewn up to prevent it. It would be broken only by my husband” (Ali, 2007). Unfortunately her story is not uncommon. The World Health Organization estimates that 100 to 140 million girls and women worldwide have been the victim of FGM. In recent decades Type III female genital mutilation has been performed more often by trained medical professionals. They have used sterile, surgical instruments instead of shards of glass or single use blades being used on multiple women. Proponents argue that with the new medical

procedures in place, the practice is now safer than ever and should not be outlawed. The concern by the United Nations is that the procedure is becoming medicalized in that a less “intrusive” procedure is being conducted by medical professions. This does not detract from the fact that it has no medical purpose and causes short term and long term physical and psychological harm to women (UN agencies unite against female genital mutilation, 2008 ).

The World Health Organizations list cultural, religious, and social factors as causes for female genital mutilation. They state that pressure to conform to the social order and being prepared for marriage is a strong factor in perpetuating this practice. This aligns with Bem's statement that “...during enculturation, the individual gradually internalizes the cultural lenses and thereby becomes motivated to construct an identity that is consistent with them” (Bem, 1993). This idea also supports the fact the female genital mutilation is often times performed by females that have been enculturated to believe this is the right thing to do morally for the sake of their future husbands and also to chasten young girls.

Advocates of female genital mutilation, or as they refer to it as female circumcision, is a rite of passage from girl to womanhood. Many believe this is deeply rooted in religious obligations and ethnic or cultural identity. Some proponents also argue that it will reduce the rate of HIV and AIDS in nations that have been greatly ravaged by these diseases. They state that by having this procedure done, it reduces sexual desire; therefore women will have fewer sexual partners and less likelihood to contract these diseases. Grace Kemunto, a traditional circumciser said, "When you are cut as a woman, you do not become promiscuous and it means you cannot get infected by HIV (Global Challenges: Proponents of Female Genital Cutting in Kenya Promoting It as HIV Prevention Method). Supporters put forth that similar to male circumcision, female genital mutilation maintains cleanliness. Portions of the female genitalia that secrete fluids are removed or stitched almost closed. They state that hygiene for both males and females is the predominant justification for “circumcision.” The notion that the best means of combating HIV/AIDS by means of female genital mutilation is unreasonable. The eradication of these deadly diseases will not happen

by merely mutilating the genitalia of girls and women. HIV/AIDS cannot be contested without early education, prevention, and proper treatment. The elimination of these diseases cannot be placed solely between the legs of mutilated women as an alternative to personal responsibility of both sexes.

Despite the serious health risk of female genital mutilation including death during the procedure from hemorrhaging or unsterilized instruments, painful sexual experiences, menstrual problems, urination problems, risks during pregnancy for the mother and during labor for the mother and baby, little has been done legally to stop this harmful and unnecessary practice. Notwithstanding the widespread nature of this problem, there has been little research performed on the psychological trauma associated with this practice. Many have associated the emotional torment of female genital mutilation with that of post traumatic stress disorder. There has also been very little in the way of awareness, education and training for Western physicians to deal with the immigrant populations that have been subjected to this practice.

In the Bartly article *Femininity and Domination*, she discusses the issue of shame. She states that men and women both experience shame but shame for women is a state of inferiority and recognition of otherness. She states that “Shame, then, involves the distressed apprehension of oneself as a lesser creature” (Bartly). Shame of a patriarchal family is placed solely on women through their fathers and husbands inability to control woman’s sexuality. Feminine sexuality can bring shame and dishonor unto a family unlike anything a son or other male relative could do. Fathers that refuse to allow their daughters to undergo female genital mutilation are outcast in their societies, their daughters bring dishonor on the entire household.

### **Other Forms of Physical Repression of the Female Body**

Imperial China brought about the custom of footbinding which was practiced from the tenth century until the mid 1940’s. Foot binding is practice in which girls ages 2 to 10 years old would have their feet broken and then tightly bound as to look smaller and more feminine in which the bound feet were referred to as three-inch lilies. This practice left many women permanently deformed and disabled even after the feet

were unbound. Many died because of the excruciating pain suffered and infections from the rioting flesh unable to heal.

The women of this time were subordinate to their fathers, husbands and even their sons. These women were never fully integrated into their husband's family but they were subservient to them. Women were considered dishonorable if they were barren or did not produce a male child. They were to remain unmarried even after their husband's death to honor his family. Women had no economic independence thus totally reliant upon the support of a man.

The small, bound feet and hobbling movements by the women was an erotic sexual fetish to the men of the country. Women that did not engage in this practice risked social scorn and limited martial prospects. This practice not only limited the movement and freedom of women physical and kept them out of the public realm it also impeded them mentally and spiritually. Brent Whitefield quoting Fan Hong states "the intense physical sufferings brought about by the process of breaking and binding the feet in early childhood produced a passivity, stoicism and fatalism that effectively 'bound' not only the feet but also the mind and the emotions." (Whitefield, 2008)

Much like the circumstances of women subjected to female genital mutilation, footbinding was a necessity in a society that devalued the life of women from the outset. A women's only hope for survival in a society where she had no economic resources of her own was to be married. Mothers often time performed the painful and sometime deadly procedure on their own daughters as a sign of love and care for their daughter's future well-being and also to maintain her own status within the family and society. Women that did not bind their daughter's feet were subjected to social opprobrium and out casting. Footbinding came to represent self-discipline, cultural conformity, and absolute obedience (Candib).

Breast ironing is a modern practice carried out in parts of Cameroon, Guinea-Bissau, West and Central Africa, including Chad, Togo, Benin, Guinea-Conakry. The breasts of pubescent girls are pressed flat with a heated object repeatedly to stunt their development. One in four girls has been the victim of this practice and approximately four million women have undergone breast ironing. Roughly four

million teenage girls are at risk of breast ironing. The purpose is stated to discourage young girls from pursuing and seducing men and dampen premarital sex which would reduce teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (Breast ironing in Cameroon: breaking the silence). This like many other forms of female body mutilation and sexual control is carried out by mothers and other female relatives. Many mothers believe that the flatten breast will be unappealing to men thus protecting their daughters from rape. They also believe that by supposedly dampening their daughter's sexual interest, they will focus more on their education. However well intentioned these mothers may be the consequences of this painful and psychologically traumatizing practice do not outweigh the benefits. It is a painful and debilitating experience. It robs young girls of their physical integrity and self-determination. It has numerous adverse health implications including: abscesses, itching, discharge of milk, infection, dissymmetry of the breasts, cysts, breast infections, severe fever, tissue damage, cancer and even the complete disappearance of one or both breasts. There is also no evidence that it deterring sexual activities (PL - Break Ironing Fact Sheet).

Corsetry was practiced in parts of Europe, specifically France and North America. The corset of the Victorian period was constricting and presented an unrealistic image of the female body with the waist severely cinched in and the breast exaggeratedly high. The corset was restrictive and kept women in their place in that it physically restricted woman's movement. Katherine Marie Klingerman quoting David Kunzle states "The corset represented both the sensual female body, and the chaste virgin; the female control over male desires, and the male's control over the female body" (Klingerman, 2006)

Much in the same vain as footbinding, breast ironing and female genital mutilation the practice of corsetry not only physical left women incapacitated and mental bound it is the cause of adverse medical conditions. Corseting has been held responsible for causing uterine and breast cancer, tuberculosis, fainting, anemia, and some deaths.

Female genital mutilation, along with the examples provide, show how extreme physical repression of the feminine body and sexuality can be and the lengths that women will go to in order to conform to patriarchal standards of femininity. To argue that women are

responsible and active participants in inflicting these harms upon girls and other women is to overlook the importance of their very survival in societies where they have no or very little access to finances and education which would provide the equality necessary to have real decision making power. Acceptance of these practices comes with societal acceptance, economic support, and physical security. The importance of marriageability should not be overlooked particularly in cultures where it is virtually impossible for women existence outside of this union. Man does not have a direct role in these practices being carried out; however, they set the standard and define exactly how a woman is suitable for marriage. Therefore man's power and privileging in the world is the causation for the perpetration of these practices.

### **Legal Response**

In 1993 the United Nations created the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. According to Dr. Marcia Sweedler, Professor of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University, this was a declaration and not a binding treaty because it proposed the end of all forms of violence against women (Sweedler, 2005). The UN was not sure that they would receive enough backing from the male dominant heads of state to make it a treaty. Eventually they went for having it be a non-binding, unenforceable declaration, which is little more than a strong suggestion.

"Almost nowhere is her legal status the same as man's, and frequently it is much to her disadvantage. Even when her rights are legally recognized in the abstract, long standing custom prevents their full expression in the mores" (Beauvoir, 1997). Although there are international legal status as well as national laws that protects women and girls from female genital mutilation, it continues to exist, with over three million girls annually at risk of having this procedure forced on them. Laws have been on record for decades but without enforcement and changes in cultural beliefs these laws are meaningless. With all of the national and international laws banning female genital mutilation there are very few charges worldwide in comparison to the millions of women impacted annually.

The reason why there are “soft laws” regarding female genital mutilation is because of the discrepancy between the public and private realm. Women have found their place historically to be in the private realm. Most laws, whether local, national or international that have been strictly enforced have been those pertaining to the male dominated public realm, which acts to exclude and constrain women. Protecting the privacy of the family realm is important but it leaves women vulnerable and defenseless from harm and violence. Elizabeth M. Schneider, law professor at Brooklyn Law School, states (Schneider, 1994):

Tort law, which is generally concerned with injuries inflicted on individuals, has traditionally been held inapplicable to injuries inflicted by one family member on another. Under the doctrines of interspousal and parent-child immunity, courts have consistently refused to allow recoveries for injuries that would be compensable but for the fact that they occurred in the private realm. In the same way, criminal law fails to punish intentional injuries to family members. Common law and statutory definitions of rape in most states continue to carve out a special exception for a husband’s forced intercourse with his wife. Wife beating was initially omitted from the definition of criminal assault on the ground that a husband had the right to chastise his wife. Even today, after courts have explicitly rejected the definitional exception and its rationale, judges, prosecutors, and police officers decline to enforce assault laws in the family context.

Besides the human rights violation that female genital mutilation presents within the countries that it is practiced, it is an international problem in that migrating families are continuing the practice in their new homelands. Linda Weil Curiel is an attorney and human rights activist in France. She states “The aim of the mutilation is to deprive the woman of her own sexuality. She is only left to be a baby-maker” (Simons). France is in the forefront internationally in tracking and prosecuting practitioners as well as consenting parents of female genital mutilation victims. Although this practice has been eradicated in France, the difficulty has been in protecting young girls that are sent away to their native lands by their parents to have the procedure done. France has stricter laws that require doctors to report such incidents. Now

parents are held accountable and prosecuted even if the procedure was done outside of the country or even if the girl is not a citizen of France. Not only does female genital mutilation harm those women that are directly impacted, it negatively impacts women everywhere as it reinforces male dominance. Lisa Wade (Wade, 2009) argues that by emphasizing the horrors of female genital mutilation, critics of the feminist movement are able to trivialize the oppression faced by Western women (Defining gender oppression in US newspapers: the strategic value of female genital mutilation). Female genital mutilation should not be addressed in terms of being a single act isolated to certain parts of the world but as a global issue of human rights, freedom from violence, and economic equality.

## **Conclusion**

The practices discussed transcend geography and culture. Female genital mutilation, footbinding, breast ironing, and corsetry are patriarchal sanctioned practices. All of these customs are cruel, inhumane, and contrary to nature. It is unbelievable that the God of any religion would desire harm and violence to be inflicted upon their creation. All of these practices physically and emotionally impair woman's mobility and full participation in society.

Practices such as female genital mutilation, footbinding, breast ironing and corseting "appears to be a women's matter, yet it is a process *required* by the patriarchy (Candib)." In all of these instances women are inflicting these harms upon their daughters or other young girls in order to ensure their future survival within their respective societies. These practices were not and are not optional. These gratuitous customs survived for generations because of woman's own acceptance of her inferiority and unworthiness outside of her sexuality and childbearing capabilities as reinforced by the patriarchy. Woman, over time, has internalized her "otherness" and accepted the devaluation of woman as her lot in life. Woman lacks the power and economic independence of her own to reject patriarchal practices that inflict harm upon her or her daughters.

Simone De Beauvoir maintains that woman is not able to free herself from the patriarchy because woman has no past, history or



religion separate and distinct from man as other oppressed groups do from their oppressor. She argues that there is no historical event that subjugated women to men and required woman's absolute dependence upon man. She puts forth that since there was no condition that brought about the present circumstances but rather a natural state, that change is impossible (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*).

Change is possible if all human beings react with moral outrage against issues of inequality, violence, and harm being executed against any group. There must first be an acknowledgement that patriarchy and male dominance does exist. Acceptance that the devaluation of the life of "others" is not the essence of humanity but rather cruelty that stems from a desire to provide meaning in our lives by subjugating others (Keen). Patriarchy is a self defeating model and operates to its own detriment in that it handicaps and severely limits the participation of an integral part of that society, that being woman. It stands to reason that in order for any society to reach its full potential it has to facilitate full participation, autonomy, and freedom from violence and harm of all its people.

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