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The Silence of Women, The Voices of Women

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Introduction

As I prepared to submit the final draft of this paper, I found an article in the *New York Times* titled "In Pakistan, Rape Victims are the Criminals." Here is the story of a young mother sentenced by a local court to death by stoning. Her crime? She was raped by her brother-in-law while her husband was serving time in a local jail. The infant in her arms is proof enough that she has violated *zina*, laws forbidding sexual contact outside marriage. In accusing her brother-in-law, she has confessed her crime. For him there is impunity. To find him guilty, a prosecutor must produce four adult male Muslims able to testify that they witnessed the rape. For the woman, Mrs. Zafran Bibi, there is a prison cell and a sentence of death.

The author of the story continues. "Human rights groups say abuse of women is endemic in Pakistan. Often, they are locked inside their homes where they are subjected to beatings, acid attacks, burning and rape. Every year there are hundreds of "honor killings," in which a woman is murdered for perceived breaches of modesty."¹

This paper is a report on the condition of women in the Third World. It is not a pleasant report. The work of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Amelia Jenks Bloomer, Susan B. Anthony, Margaret Sanger, Margaret Mead and Eleanor Roosevelt has had little effect in the societies of Asia and Africa. In other words, to a large extent the women of the Third World have survived without a voice with which to speak their complaint. Overwhelmingly they are the *second sex*. They have suffered in silence.

Yet in recent years we do find important female voices in the Third World, voices of individuals and of organizations committed to alleviating the misery into which many women have been born. I have tried to recognize some of the most important of those voices. I call this essay "The Silence of Women, the Voices of Women."

From a sociological perspective, this paper is written in the style of Symbolic Interaction Theory. The big idea here is that social situations are as "real" as they are said to be. William Isaac Thomas gave us this concept, which came to be known as the "Thomas Theorem." "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."² Here I discuss three ways in which men of the Third World "define" women. The consequences are very real. The definitions are very oppressive.

Part One: The Silence Of Women A Typology of Male Definitions

It seems to me that the many abuses to which women in the Third World have been subjected fall into a framework of male definitions of the other gender. That framework I call here a typology, a set of three "ideal types" of definitions by which men understand, or should I say, "misunderstand," women. Those three types of definitions are: women as a liability; women as a commodity; and women as a source of honor and morality. In the first case women are undervalued, under-appreciated and considered ("defined" as) a liability. I include son preference, bride burning, illiteracy, and domestic violence in this first category. In the second case women are defined as a resource for the pleasure of men or as objects to be sold to the highest bidder. I include in this category labor issues, trafficking and prostitution, and child brides. And in the third case women are defined as the locus of (sexual) morality and honor. In the third case women are overprotected, secluded, mutilated, and severely punished for even the slightest misdemeanor. I include here the practice of purdah, self-immolation in Central Asia, female genital mutilation (FGM), honor killing, and the rape of women in wartime or conflict situations.

In none of those three classes of definitions are women considered equal to men, nor are they seen as eligible for the whole set of human rights and protections we consider "inalienable." These definitions of women are nearly ubiquitous in the Third World. They are the definitions provided by the male gender.

So here I will bring forth the "bottom line" of this research paper. It is this: So long as men are allowed to define women and the roles of women, women will be abused, demeaned, oppressed and violated.

Type One: Women as a Liability

To illustrate the male definition of women as a liability, I refer the reader to four practices which we find widespread in the Third World: son preference, dowry violence or bride burning, the illiteracy of women, and domestic violence.

Son Preference. In 1992 China held a demographic seminar to discuss the 1990 census. Several scholars presented papers on what they called "the missing girl problem." It

had become clear, from demographic research, that in China and in other Asian countries more females should have been born. Many girls were missing. The explanation given is known as “son preference.”

In China, India, and many other Southeast Asian societies, women are considered a liability or, at best, as having less value than men. This takes the form of *son preference* during pregnancy and thereafter. Because the son is preferred, parents take better care of a son than a daughter, allow him more freedom, and allow him to play while the daughters work. The son will receive more and better food, better medical care and attention, and a better education. Lacking adequate material resources, son preference becomes a “rational choice” in male dominant societies.

Son preference also leads to female abortion, female infanticide and female abandonment. This practice can be found in societies where poverty and population pressures make family size an important issue. Add to that a male dominant sex role pattern which allows men and boys to help support the family while restricting the role of women in the workplace, and it becomes apparent that female children are considered a burden to the family.

In China, where the government allows only one child per family unit and places a severe economic penalty on those couples who produce more than their limit, it becomes important that the one child is a son.

The issue of birth control is one of great controversy in India. Indeed, some might argue that when the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi proposed birth control legislation, he was assassinated. Yet the effort to limit the size of the family in India is a matter of great concern, and male children are definitely preferred.

In years past the problem of female children was solved by infanticide or abandonment, often performed by the grandmother at the time of birth. Today, with modern technology, it is possible to determine the sex of the fetus long before birth, and the problem is more often solved by female abortion. Today all over India one finds X-ray and ultrasound clinics set up to determine the sex of the fetus. While the practice is ostensibly benign, in fact sex determination is used to select those unborn children who will survive and those who will not. Abortion clinics are ubiquitous in India.³

While infanticide is forbidden by law in most Asian countries, the practice is seldom punished. The extent of female abortion and infanticide can easily be determined by knowing the *birth sex ratio* in various countries. The sex ratio is a social science term referring to the number of males per 100 females in a given society. A sex ratio of 100 indicates that the sexes are equal in numbers, 100 boys per 100 girls. A high sex ratio indicates more boys, a low sex ratio indicates more girls. Here we analyze the sex ratio of live births in a given year.

Everywhere nature assures that more boys than girls are born. A normal birth sex ratio is about 106. A birth sex ratio any higher than 106 suggests human intervention in the birth process, possibly female abortion. In China the

sex ratio at birth in 1980 was about 107. By 1986 the birth sex ratio had risen to about 112, and by 1991 it had reached just more than 116. In the world’s most populous society, about 10% of the female fetuses were apparently aborted by 1991.⁴ In South Korea the birth sex ratio was about 107 in 1981, and just more than 116 in 1991. In Taiwan it was 107 in 1981 and 111 in 1991.⁵

Dowry, Dowry Violence and Bride Burning. In those parts of the world where women are considered a liability, the parents of female children must pay a dowry to the man who takes her off their hands, so to speak, and to his family—with whom she will live. Because she is seen as having little value in herself—indeed negative value, she is a new mouth to feed in the receiving family, the family of the new husband can be quite demanding. Their demands often become unrealistic or impossible for the bride’s parents to meet.

In India and Southeast Asia the practice of dowry is very old. Setting the dowry price has become a critical moment in the life of each family, and the bride-to-be is reduced to an object of negative commercial value.

The dowry price may be more than the bride’s parents are able to pay immediately, and they can get rid of their burdensome daughter only with the promise of future payments. Woe to the daughter whose parents cannot fulfill their obligations. Moreover, once the new bride is in her new home, the family of the husband can use extortion to make new demands. They may complain that she is not all she was claimed to be, that she is a poor worker, that she eats more than they expected, she can’t get pregnant, or she produces only daughters. They want more for her than was demanded in the initial deal.

The parents of the new bride find themselves expected to pay the receiving family with new televisions, Suzuki motorcycles, refrigerators, etc. In order to strengthen their demands, the husband and his family sometimes threaten violence—explicitly or implicitly, and that threat is sometimes carried out. The new bride is the victim of dowry violence, and her parents are held hostage to the threats and the demands.

Dowry violence takes many forms, but perhaps the most insidious form is called “*bride burning*.” Today the emergency rooms of many hospitals in India find themselves facing a new and frightening phenomenon. Women have started “*falling into their cooking fire*,” either burning to death or receiving severe burns over much of their body. Of course, their “fall” was not really an accident. The cooking fire is used as the instrument of death because this leaves no mark of a murder weapon. Dowry murder usually goes unpunished if the girl “fell into the fire.” The International Society Against Dowry And Bride Burning in India (ISADABBI), a new NGO based in London, estimates that as many as 25,000 women are burned to death or severely injured every year in dowry disputes in India.⁶

Not only is violence or the threat of violence used to extort money from the bride’s parents. Sometimes the husband or his family kill the young bride—in the cooking fire—in order to begin the process once again. When they have

extorted all they can possibly gain from the first bride's family, they kill her and seek another wife.

Illiteracy of Women. Of course, illiteracy is a major problem in the Third World. Overall, a UN report estimates that about 900 million adults are illiterate in the world today. However, the problem is greater for women than for men. Approximately two-thirds of the illiterate adults are women. Figures from several Third World countries will illustrate the problem. In Sri Lanka 10% of all adult males but 17% of all adult females are illiterate. In China 13% of all adult males are illiterate, while 32% of adult women are illiterate. The rates in India for males and females respectively are 34% and 62%.⁷

Domestic Violence. For this I want only to quote an Amnesty International report:

Violence in the home is truly universal. According to World Bank figures at least 20% of women have been physically or sexually assaulted. Official reports in the US say a woman is battered every 15 seconds and 700,000 are raped each year. In India more than 40% of married women reported being kicked, slapped or sexually abused for reasons such as their husbands' dissatisfaction with their cooking or cleaning, jealousy or other motives. In Egypt, 35% of women reported being beaten by their husbands.⁸

Type Two: Women as a Commodity

The second "ideal type" is illustrated where women are sold, overworked, forced into prostitution, trafficked, and in other ways used and abused for the pleasure of men or for the purpose of economic gain.

Women as Laborers. Worldwide, women provide more than their share of the labor in the production, preparation, storing and processing of food. In Asia, for instance, women are responsible for more than 90% of the labor involved in the production of rice. "In many countries, however, women are the last family members to eat, and their nutritional needs are met only when and if the men and children have had enough."⁹

"The growth of forced labour worldwide is deeply disturbing," reports ILO Director-General Juan Somavia. "The emerging picture is one where slavery, oppression and exploitation of society's most vulnerable members—especially women and children—have by no means been consigned to the past."¹⁰

The Trafficking of Women. The term "trafficking" refers to the illegal commercial movement of drugs, humans, contraband of any sort, within a society or across international borders. Here we are concerned with the trafficking of women and girls, either for cheap labor or for prostitution. The International Labour Office reports that "forced labour, slavery and criminal trafficking in human beings—especially women and children—are on the rise worldwide

and taking new and insidious forms."¹¹

Trafficking takes two forms. It includes the physical capture of women and girls and forcibly placing them in a train, truck, boat, etc. to be moved for a commercial purpose. It also includes seducing them—or their parents—with false promises to travel to a destination where they will be forced into doing something they did not want or intend to do.¹²

Trafficking of women and girls has become a major and tragic problem in recent times. In Bulgaria alone, for instance, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that as many as 10,000 women and girls are trafficked out of the country and into prostitution in other parts of Europe each year. Women are also trafficked from Russia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Ukraine, Viet Nam, the Philippines, Cambodia and Nepal, Albanian, Moldavia and Ukraine, to name only a few.¹³

Anisha Schubert reports that "it is widely believed that per year 5000 to 7000 Nepali girls and women are brought to brothels, mainly in India. More than 20% of them are below 16 years old—with a rising percentage."¹⁴

A UN report estimates that as many as four million girls and women are trafficked across international borders each year, and that the international sex trade is a \$5–\$7 billion (US dollars) industry.¹⁵

The IOM has launched information campaigns in Central and Eastern Europe to warn potential victims of the dangers involved in being seduced to go to another country for "work." The IOM is supported in part by the European Commission and by the U.S. State Department.

Authorities say that while poverty is a major cause in trafficking of females, parents are often guilty of "turning a blind eye" when offered a "few bucks" for their daughters. The problem lies with poverty, but also with an attitude towards females which allows those in positions of power, fathers, local authorities, police, customs inspectors and border patrols, to sell their daughters or to take a bribe.

Marriage of Female Children. In many parts of Asia and some parts of Africa and the Near East, young female children have for many years been forced into early marriage. The practice is most common in conditions of extreme poverty, where a daughter is an extra mouth to feed.

Today the practice is exacerbated in those societies where "son preference" has led to female infanticide and female abortion because the sex ratio is unbalanced in favor of boys, and there are not enough girls to go around.

The practice is traumatic for the child bride, who is forced against her will to marry an older man who is likely to mistreat her. She usually moves into his home and lives with his family. Often she is not old enough to have intercourse or to bear children, and she must submit to what amounts to rape by her new and older husband. Thus her body suffers severely and she is likely to die in childbirth or to produce a stillborn child.

A child bride often suffers a condition known as fistula, where intercourse or childbirth has torn the tissue be-

tween the vagina and the bladder or bowel. Besides the pain and the medical complications, the girl becomes incontinent and is often rejected by her husband because she smells bad.

Add to this the fact that in many parts of India and South Asia there is virtually no significant role for widows, and girls married to older men are almost certain to outlive their husbands by many years. In earlier days this was one of the rationalizations and justifications for the practice of suttee, the fact that the child bride's husband died early, leaving a young widow to be cared for by an impoverished village.

The tragedy of child-brides is most common in India, Nepal, and other South Asian countries, but now with the change in the sex ratio it is on the increase in China. But the practice is also common in a number of African nations, most significantly in Ethiopia, where only recently the legal age of marriage was changed from nine to eighteen. That change in the law will take many years to affect life in the many rural villages of Ethiopia, however, for the tradition of early marriage for girls is very strong.

The largest hospital in the world for treating fistula is in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where thousands of child brides are treated every year for fistula.¹⁶

Type Three: Women as a Source of (Sexual) Honor and Morality

Here I want to speak of the purdah, of self-immolation practiced in Central Asia, female genital mutilation, honor killing, sati (suttee), and rape in wartime situations.

Purdah. "In the lands of India the actual translation of the word purdah is screen or veil. Purdah is the practice that includes the seclusion of women from public observation by wearing concealing clothing from head to toe and by the use of high walls, curtains, and screens erected within the home. Purdah is practiced by Muslims and by various Hindus, especially in India. The limits imposed by this practice vary according to different countries and class levels. Generally, those women in the upper and middle class are more likely to practice all aspects of purdah because they can afford not to work outside the home."¹⁷

I will mention here only that purdah is interpreted differently depending on one's religion and point of view. Some Hindu and Muslim men and women define purdah in a very positive light, while others, including some Hindu and Muslim men and women and also many Western feminists, consider purdah in a negative light. Purdah has been taken to extreme forms, particularly in Afghanistan under the recently governing power of the Taliban.

I include purdah in this section of the paper because the practice is claimed by some to be an act of honor and respect for women. I include purdah in this paper because it is considered by others to be a form of oppression.

The Self-Immolation of "Fallen Women. In Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan, a "fallen woman" may redeem herself and the honor of family and community only

through the practice of self-immolation. The practice is usually carried out as part of a nocturnal public ceremony with a hysterical crowd chanting and screaming as the woman douses herself with alcohol, kerosene or gasoline and lights the match herself.

In Uzbekistan the definition of "fallen woman" is usually determined by men. Because most marriages are arranged by the families and involve economic considerations, the young man might be forced to marry a woman not of his own choosing. One way out of the marriage is to claim that the new bride was not a virgin on her wedding night. His claim, whether true or false, is enough to condemn the young bride. Because she is defined as damaged merchandise, her birth family is dishonored and often refuses to take her back after being rejected by her husband. Sometimes her only option is self-immolation.

In a similar vein, because divorce is forbidden or frowned upon, an older man may tire of his wife and claim that she has violated her wedding vows. Again his claim is enough to ruin the woman and, of course, she is not welcome back in the home of her parents. Again, her only option may be to burn herself. This is done amidst great village excitement and exhilarating celebration. The crowd chants and screams as she prepares to burn herself, and as the fire is lighted.

This practice is still widely observed, and reports suggest that as many as 2,500 women in Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan, burn themselves every year. Many die from the burns, while others suffer irreparable physical and psychological damage.¹⁸

FGM (Female Genital Mutilation). This term was used first by feminists in the late 1980s who opposed the term "female circumcision." It has subsequently been adopted by the World Health Organization, the United Nations, and many other organizations opposed to the practice.

The World Health Organization defined FGM as "all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural or other non-therapeutic reasons."¹⁹ WHO also classified FGM into four types:

- Type I. Excision of the prepuce (*Note: less common*), with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris (*Note: More common*).
- Type II. Excision of the clitoris with partial or total excision of the labia minora.
- Type III. Excision of part or all of the external genitalia and stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening (infibulation).
- Type IV. Unclassified: this includes pricking, piercing or incising of the clitoris and/or labia; stretching of the clitoris and/or labia cauterization by burning of the clitoris and surrounding tissue.

The practice of female circumcision or FGM is very old. Archeologists have found evidence of the practice on female mummies in ancient Egypt.

The World Health Organization estimates that at least 130 million women have suffered FGM, and at least two million more are at risk every year. The practice is most common in thirty countries in Africa, where it may be found among Muslim, Christian, Jewish and animist culture groups. The practice cannot be supported by any scriptural reference to female circumcision among the major religions of humankind. Because of immigration the practice has been transferred to Asian countries, to Europe and to North America. Only recently have surveys been taken, but the results show that in those countries where FGM is common, it may be practiced on as few as 5% and as many as 98% of the women of the respective societies.

The procedure is usually carried out by older females of the tribe or community, and where practiced it has widespread community support. The purpose of the procedure is said to inhibit or deny sexual pleasure to the female, and it is done to insure and preserve family honor. Where it is practiced it is generally required of all females, and no respectable male would marry a woman who had not been "circumcised."

Whereas those who defend the practice claim that it is comparable to male circumcision, in fact the comparable male mutilation would be "penisectomy," partial or complete removal of the penis. Those who equate FGM with male circumcision are simply denying reality. The practice is brutal and torturous to female members of the community, and in addition to the immediate physical and psychological trauma, it often leads to infections, improper urination and menstruation drainage, extreme pain and difficulty in intercourse and childbirth, numerous medical problems and often to painful death.

In 1997 the WHO, meeting in Khartoum, Sudan, "unanimously condemned the mutilations as disastrous to women's health and as indefensible on medical as well as humane grounds."²⁰ But the practice is defended by important African leaders, and many complain that the criticism is an attack on a legitimate cultural practice.

In his book, *Facing Mt. Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta makes a strong defense of the practice of clitoridectomy, or female circumcision. For the Gikuyu tribe in central Kenya, the practice of "trimming" the genitals of both boys and girls is the centerpiece of tribal custom. To abandon this most sacred and important ceremony, Kenyatta argues, would lead to a breakdown of the whole of tradition and ultimately of the tribe itself.

The initiation of both sexes is the most important custom among the Gikuyu. It is looked upon as a deciding factor in giving a boy or girl the status of manhood or womanhood in the Gikuyu community. This custom is adhered to by the vast majority of African peoples and is found in almost every part of the continent.²¹

Be that as it may, the practice is a terrifying physical and mental torture of infant or adolescent girls, not to be

equated with the circumcision of males, and has been condemned by most of the outside world.

What can be done? The World Health Organization has recommended that a starting place is to bring it into the open, particularly within the villages and among the women who have suffered from the practice. In the WHO report, the section on FGM is titled "Breaking the Silence."²²

Honor Killing. I begin this section with a report published by CNN. A woman's death has raised disturbing questions about "honor killings" in certain Arab villages of Israel. According to the tribal custom, a father, husband, brother or son is duty-bound to kill a female family member who allegedly has brought shame on the family. A cultural conspiracy of silence often hides the brutality.

"Rudayena Jemael, 37, was shot in the head while she slept in her home. There was no forced entry, no robbery. Police say her 20-year-old son is the prime suspect. They think he killed her because she wanted to remarry, 19 years after her divorce."²³

The story refers to a son, Salim, who allegedly murdered his mother. Her plan to remarry brought "dishonor" on the family, and the son murdered her—essentially with impunity.

Women are accused of shaming the family if they date without a brother's permission, if they are raped or the victims of incest. A widow or female divorcee may dishonor her family if she chooses to remarry. The tradition of honor killing is older than the Islamic faith, and in the Koran Muhammed speaks against the practice. Nevertheless honor killing is "endemic" in Arab societies, particularly in the Middle East. And while none admit guilt, many Arab men uphold the practice of honor killing, and (all-male) juries usually take the men's side when such cases come to court. Here is another case, cited by the UN Commission on Human Rights. On Tuesday, 6 April 1999, a 29-year-old woman was killed by a gunman hired by her family, in the chamber of her attorneys, Asma Jahangir and Hina Jilani, in Lahore, Pakistan. Ms. Jilani, a human rights advocate, was representing her as she sought a divorce from her husband from whom she had been separated for four years. The act of filing a divorce on her own was considered by the woman's family as dishonoring their name, and therefore justifying the murder.

The murder was another in the series of so-called "honor killings" as described by the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Arbitrary and Summary Executions. In many of these cases, instead of protecting the woman, the police and the judiciary side with the family. For example, the lenient treatment meted out to convicted killers by the courts has spurred on "honor killings." In some cases, the state machinery creates obstacles when a woman seeks to take legal action on her own, against the wishes of her family. In other cases, women are even denied the legal capacity to act on their own behalf.

In this particular case, the woman had reluctantly agreed to a meeting with her mother on condition that the meeting take place in her attorney's office with no one else from the

family present. Her mother, however, brought the killer with her, saying that he was there to help her, as she had difficulty walking. After a few moments, the mother's escort pulled out a pistol and fired two shots at the woman and a third at the attorney. The woman died instantly. The shot at Ms. Jilani missed her by inches.²⁴

In January 2000 the Parliament in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan considered a motion to abolish "Article 340 of the Penal Code, which provides for lenient sentences when men kill their female relatives in the name of 'honor.'" ²⁵

The motion passed the upper house but failed in the lower house. Every year some 25 to 30 women are murdered in Jordan in the name of "honor." The issue has been a special concern of the former Queen Noor, wife of the late King Hussein.

Sati. According to tradition in ancient India the practice of *suttee*, or *sati*, not only protects the honor of women, but presumably magnifies it. Here the widow mounts her deceased husband's funeral pyre to be consumed by the flames of death. The practice was glorified by the death of the mythological Hindu deity Sati, who climbed the funeral pyre of her beloved husband Vishnu.

While the practice has been outlawed (British law) in India since 1829, it apparently still exists in a few isolated rural villages. One such incident is described by Manohar Singh, who tells the story of Thakurani Sujan Kanwar, his own mother's self immolation in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, in October 1954.²⁶

Another widely reported ceremony occurred in September 1987, in the Rajput village of Deorala. One version of the incident claims that the young widow, Roop Kanwar, proudly and honorably chose to die in the funeral pyre flames of her deceased husband, Mall Singh. An alternative version, put forward after an investigation by the Bombay Union of Journalists, claims that Roop, a bride of only six months, was dragged from a barn in which she was hiding and forced—very much against her will—by crowd hysteria and with knives and swords, to climb the pyre and suffer an unimaginably horrifying and humiliating death.

As in the past, local culture magnifies and glorifies the Sati Mata (the woman who committed Sati). "Since her death, Roop has been elevated in the eyes of many to the status of goddess, and within a fortnight of her suicide, 750,000 people had made the pilgrimage to the pyre on which she perished."²⁷

The significance of Roop Kanwar's death lies not only in the murder itself, but in the role self-immolation plays in the cultural mind-set still present in rural India. This mind-set legitimizes bride burning and minimizes the chance of criminal prosecution for such acts.

The significance of Sati also lies in the fact that in traditional India, there is no legitimate role for a widow. She was (and is) a liability, another mouth to feed in a community where food is scarce, and she is a potential violator of sexual taboos.

Rape in Wartime or Conflict Situations. The reader might be surprised that I would include "rape in wartime or

conflict situations" under the section "women as a source of honor and morality." But rape is sometimes used as a powerful tool to *demoralize* an enemy, for here the very source of honor and morality is attacked. It was exactly for this purpose that in the mid-1990s Serb soldiers raped Bosnian women, and in Rwanda Hutu soldiers raped Tutsi women. On 2 October 1998 Jean-Paul Akayesu, Hutu mayor of a Rwanda village, was convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda of presiding over the mass rape and murder of thousands of Tutsi women in 1994. Akayesu was a member of the Interahamwe, a Hutu terrorist organization. Witnesses at the trial testified that as Hutu soldiers raped and killed, Akayesu stood by and said, "don't complain to me now that you don't know what a Tutsi woman tastes like."²⁸

Part Two: The Voices of Women

At the beginning of this paper I presented the "bottom line": So long as men are allowed to define women and the roles of women, women will be abused, oppressed and violated. Now I want to present a few of the voices of women, female voices which seek to define women in their own terms.

Individual and Group Voices

RAWA. The women of Afghanistan organized as early as 1977 to oppose the Soviet influence and then invasion, and have continued to struggle for democracy and justice in the wake of the civil wars which followed the Soviet exodus, and more recently they have struggled with those same ends in mind to oppose the radical Islamic fundamentalist and militant Taliban which only recently controlled more than 90% of Afghanistan. They call their organization the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan, or RAWA.

RAWA was founded by a woman who goes only by the name of Meena, founded when Meena was but twenty years old, and she was martyred at the age of thirty. RAWA has used her martyrdom to organize the troops of women to oppose Taliban, but they had to flee to neighboring countries to make their militant opposition known.

Most visible was the protest march in Islamabad, Pakistan, in April of 1999. Hundreds of Afghani women marched in the streets of Islamabad, carrying placards and voicing their protest against the Taliban. The women have voiced their deep concern in the streets of Pakistan and before audiences of men in power in that neighboring country. But until very recently they dared not return to their home country—on pain of death.

RAWA supports a home page on the world wide web at <http://www.rawa.org>. Included on that page are several "galleries" of photos showing Taliban executions, amputations, hangings, Taliban men stoning a woman to death for some violation, and the mutilated victims after their amputations. The photos include scenes of children picking through rags to support their families, refugees fleeing the civil war, the

war-torn streets of Kabul and other cities which lie now in complete ruin.

SEWA. The Self-Employed Women's Association was organized in the basement of the Textile Labour Association in Ahmedabad, India 1972. From an initial membership of 320 women, it has grown into India's largest women's trade union with more than two million members. SEWA has continually taken up for the street vendors, women who provide valuable goods and services but who are looked down upon by most members of urban society. SEWA has lobbied in the legislatures and in municipal councils for the licensing and legalization of street vending, for spaces set aside for the women selling everything from vegetables and handiwork to underpants and umbrellas. And although the street vendors are often seen as an eyesore by local officials, SEWA has achieved some progress in protecting street vendors and finding space for their trade.²⁹

The Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency.

This agency "has been a keystone in the process of peace negotiations and reconstruction in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea since the mid-1990s. Winner of The Millennium Peace Prize for Women. An award to recognize women's contributions to preventing war and building peace."³⁰

The Coalition on Women's Human Rights in Conflict Situations. This organization is coordinated by the Montreal-based International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (ICHRDD).

Stephanie Welsh. Stephanie Welsh was the recipient of the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for photojournalism with her photo essay on female genital mutilation. Welsh was able to gain entrance into a female "circumcision" ritual in Kenya, and to photograph the entire ceremony—including the preparation ceremony, the razor blade and the hand that held it, the blood, the faces of agony.

Sima Samar. Sima Samar is the first "minister of women's affairs" in Kabul, Afghanistan. This is a new position established after the fall of Taliban in the autumn of 2001. Samar is the highest ranking official in the new transition government, the only woman to date placed at a cabinet level. For starters, Samar plans to organize literacy classes, get homeless women into shelters, and bring women with skills into the workforce.³¹

GAATW. The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) was formed at the International Workshop on Migration and Traffic in Women held in Chiang Mai, Thailand in October 1994. Since that time, GAATW has grown into "a movement of members consisting of both organisations and individuals worldwide, and has coordinated, organised and facilitated work on issues related to trafficking in persons and women's labour migration in virtually every region of the world. Our aim is to ensure that the human rights of trafficked persons are respected and protected by authorities and agencies."³²

United Nations: Conferences and Declarations

- ILO Declaration on the Fundamental Principles on Rights at Work. May, 2001
- Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against

Women. 1993

- Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. 1979
- Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergencies and Armed Conflict. 1974
- Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. 1967
- Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages. 1962
- Convention against Discrimination in Education. 1960
- Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention. 1958
- Convention on Political Rights of Women. 1952
- ILO Equal Remuneration Convention. 1951
- Convention on the Suppression of the Traffic of Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others. 1949

United Nations Conferences on Women:

- New York City, June 2000 (Five-Year Review session, known as Beijing+5)
- Beijing, 1995
- Nairobi, 1985
- Copenhagen, 1980
- Mexico City, 1975

The Voices of Women on WWW:

1. www.unifem.undp.org (United Nations Development Fund for Women)
2. www.womenink.org (Women, Inc)
3. www.un.org/womenwatch (Women Watch)
4. www.un-instraw.org (UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women)
5. www.igc.org/igc/gateway/windex.html (Womens Net)
6. www.now.org (National Organization of Women)
7. www.unicef.org/gender (UN Children's Fund)
8. www.womensenews.org (Women's eNews)
9. www.oneworld.org/guides/gender (One World)
10. www.globalfundforwomen.org (Global Fund for Women)
11. www.iwhc.org (International Women's Health Coalition)
12. www.sigi.org (Sisterhood is Global)
13. www.awid.org (Assoc for Women in Development)
14. www.equalitynow.org (Equality Now)
15. www.crlp.org (Center for Reproductive Law and Policy)
16. www.mnadvocates.org/women/program.htm (Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights)
17. www.rawa.org (Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan)
18. www.stoptorture.org (Amnesty International)
19. www.women3rdworld.about.com (Women's Issues)
20. www.catwinternational.org (Coalition Against Trafficking of Women)
21. www.hrw.org (Human Rights Watch)
22. www.womenscommission.org (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children)

23. www.freeway.org.hk (Asian Women Workers' Newsletter)

Conclusion and Final Remarks

In 1999 I presented a paper before the Third World Studies Conference under the title "Global Minorities: A World View." A revised edition of that paper, titled "Global Minorities: A Curriculum Innovation," was published in the *Third World Studies Journal and Review*.³³ Following the recognized literature in the field, I discussed racial, ethnic and religious minorities. The word "gender" does not appear in my paper, nor did I believe that I had overlooked any major minority group. Nor did any member of my audience complain, nor did any reader suggest, that I should include women as a "global minority." We were wrong.

Today I realize that women comprise the largest and perhaps most persecuted minority group in the world. This paper is an attempt to correct that mistake.

Endnotes

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3. *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 April 2001.
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6. Himendr Thakur, *Six Point Program to Eradicate Dowry and Bride-Burning in India* (London: International Society Against Dowry and Bride-Burning in India, Inc., 1999).
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14. Anisha Schubert, *Girl Trafficking for Prostitution in Nepal* (Frankfurt: Shaker-Verlag, 2001).
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32. [<http://www.inet.co.th/org/gaatw/about.html>]
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