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Edited by  
Michelle K. Ryan and  
Nyla R. Branscombe

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# Psychological Cliterodectomy: Body Objectification as a Human Rights Violation

Shelly Grabe

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, large numbers of individuals experience violations of their human rights through various forms of bodily objectification, ranging from sexual objectification, to coerced sex work, to rape and violence – in large part simply because they are female (Bunch, 1990). Feminist scholars have suggested that the central debate on women's human rights concerns the body itself: a body that is coerced into obedience, raped as a trophy of war, mutilated and systematically violated, and disappeared from the public sphere unless it is sexualized and made available for male consumption (Agosin, 2001). Although these violations may vary in severity, they have in common the view that women's bodies are objects or property that can be controlled, sexualized, beaten, and otherwise violated. Despite the fact that scholars have suggested that across cultures sexism towards women is embodied, much that has been written has addressed women's rights violations almost solely

through non-US examples (e.g., genital cutting). Moreover, most scholarship in this area has come from a legal perspective within sociology, anthropology, or political science (Hodzic, 2011). These approaches, in part, invoke a hegemonic universalism that assumes Western women are liberated and have control over their own bodies, thereby limiting a structural analysis of how inequities between men and women contribute to objectification of and control over women's bodies everywhere (Mohanty, 1984).

This chapter will take a different approach to women's human rights by using social psychological theory to discuss the mechanisms or processes by which violations against women occur – namely through the objectification of the body. This radical departure from a legal framework and from examples that have been sensationalized throughout academia and advocacy (for example, genital cutting), has the potential to offer alternatives for intervention that extend beyond changing laws or monitoring international human rights treaties. This chapter

gets to the very heart of how violations are produced and sustained by examining the centrality of women's bodies as objects that exist for the benefit of others – thereby leading to objectification of, and control over, the female body across racial/ethnic, class, cultural, or national boundaries. The social psychological approach offered in this chapter draws on perspectives informed by feminist liberation psychology, women of color, and Third World feminisms<sup>1</sup> in an attempt to lend a new visibility to women's human rights through the perspective of psychology. The chapter confronts a major challenge to advancing social change and scholarship in the area of women's human rights by providing a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms by which objectifying women's bodies puts women at high risk for violations of their basic rights.

The chapter is divided into three sections, which elucidate the mechanisms that contribute to and perpetuate women's human rights violations by discussing: (1) power inequities and cultural marginalization of women; (2) sexual objectification of women's bodies; and (3) internalization of the societal messages surrounding women's bodies. The first section will start by providing a social context for understanding women's human rights by explicitly discussing how women are marginalized from power and thereby lack the necessary political clout to establish full control over their bodies in male-dominated societies. It also will show that cultural explanations for body practices are often used to justify the treatment of women's bodies. The role of culture will be addressed, in part, to provide a lens from which to understand the implications of using various culturally specific examples to generalize processes surrounding women's rights. In the second section, theories of power will be used to examine how the sexual objectification of women's bodies leads to subordination and oppression. Evidence will be reviewed that suggests a sexualized body offers very little opportunity for achieving power and, instead, can serve to deprive

women of their rights. The final section of the chapter uses empirical work from within psychology to demonstrate how the objectification of women's bodies leads to internalization of these processes and ultimately the receipt of dehumanizing treatment such as violence. The literature reviewed in the final section will demonstrate that internalization of objectification puts women at high risk for violations because they come to view their *own* bodies as objects. Empirical examples are used from Western psychology, not with the intent of generalizing Western norms, but rather to highlight that across cultures women are taught to internalize their institutionalized subordination and thereby participate in the violation of their own rights; the West is no exception.

## A SOCIAL CONTEXT FOR CONSIDERING WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS: POWER AND CULTURE

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). Although these are considered fundamental rights protected under international law, several obstacles have prohibited their implementation when guaranteeing women's right to be free of emotional, sexual, and physical harm.\* First, the Declaration of Human Rights was largely a response to the World Wars and was designed (by Western nations) to protect individuals from the excesses of the State, which perhaps explains why violations against women's bodies as a result of gender discrimination are often ignored. Future generations of rights evolved that were more applicable to women and included the right to self-determination – or the right to freely determine one's political status and freely pursue economic, social, and cultural development (e.g., the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; United Nations General Assembly, 1966). However, in many cases cultural obstacles prohibit these rights from applying to the

'private' and 'individualized' nature of what many societies consider women's abuses. The introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was meant to bring to light the areas where women are denied equality with men (United Nations General Assembly, 1979). The Convention, regarded widely as the international bill of women's rights, explicitly acknowledges that extensive discrimination against women continues to exist, and that such discrimination violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity. By affirming commitment to the equal rights of men and women and stating that fundamental human rights and worth should be afforded to *all* humans, CEDAW holds an important place in bringing women into the focus of human rights concerns. Yet, a recent report produced by UN Women details sobering evidence that many violations of women continue unabated, in part because justice systems reinforce unequal power relations between men and women and are therefore biased against women's interests and well-being (United Nations, 2011).

In order to accelerate progress toward the kind of gender equality proposed in CEDAW, scholars have suggested embracing a culturally grounded and inclusive vision of rights and justice for women (Collins, Falcón, Lodhia, & Talcott, 2010; Fregoso & Bejarano, 2010). This involves the development of a critical consciousness and new vocabularies that include a discussion of power and dominance that challenges unequal power relations between men and women in order to improve strategies for women's rights. In order to more fully address how body violations against women occur, gender inequalities in power that contribute to subordination and discrimination need to be explicitly addressed.

### Power

Feminist authors from the Global South have articulated how patriarchy – in which society is organized such that males have a

disproportionate amount of power and control – limits and controls women's access to resources and hinders women's ability to employ laws that protect their rights or govern their bodies (Tamale, 2004). Disproportionate power therefore creates an environment that legitimizes and perpetuates women's subordinate status and adversely influences their psychological and physical health (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jenkins, 2000; Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). Critical social psychologists maintain that power differentials and inequalities are not simply a political issue, but that they are also always psychological and pivotal in attaining liberation from oppression (Griscom, 1992; Jenkins, 2000; Moane, 1999; Prilleltensky, 2008).

A quick glance at international data immediately demonstrates that almost without exception women *everywhere* in the world are, on average, disadvantaged by power differentials and are in more subordinate positions than are men (Acosta-Belén & Bose, 1990). For example, globally, women hold only 17% of seats in national parliaments (United Nations, 2010a). The percentage of women in parliaments ranges from a high of around 40% in some Nordic countries (i.e., Finland, Norway, and Sweden) to approximately 25% in some South American countries (i.e., Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador) to under 20% in countries such as the United States, France, and Israel (United Nations, 2010a). It has also been consistently demonstrated across the world that women's earnings are approximately 70% of men's earnings (United Nations, 2010a). Similar findings, which have been static since the 1970s, suggest that women perform 66% of the world's work, but earn around 10% of the income and own around 1% of the world's property (United Nations, 2010b).

Using the United States as an example, lack of women's participation in positions of power was exemplified in the media when the first Latina, and third woman ever, Sonia Sotomayor, was appointed to the Supreme Court of the United States in 2009. During a news interview with white male political commentator Pat Buchanan, white female

talk-show host Rachael Maddow (2009) asked Buchanan, 'Why do you think it is that of 110 Supreme Court Justices we've had in this country, 108 of them have been white?' His response was:

Well, I think that white men were 100 percent of the people who wrote the Constitution, 100 percent of the people who wrote the Declaration of Independence, 100 percent of the people who died at Gettysburg and Vicksburg. Probably close to 100 percent of the people who died at Normandy. This has been a country built basically by white folks in this country, who were 90 percent of the nation in 1960 when I was growing up, and the other 10 percent were African Americans who had been discriminated against. That's why.

Buchanan's statement, focused on race and gender, reflects not only who has written and defended the laws that govern the United States, but also who those laws are intended to protect. That these statements were generated out of a conversation surrounding the appointment of the United States' first Latina Supreme Court judge highlights that full civic capacity is not a basic political right that women, in particular women of color, can take for granted everywhere. We live in a *world*, not a country, with laws and customs that have been largely designed, and strongly upheld, by men. Importantly, it has been suggested that violations against women are situated in relationships marked by gender inequality as reflected by exclusion, subordination, and marginalization of women within societies (Fregoso & Bejarano, 2010).

Although psychologists tend to focus on individual level analyses, abstracted from multilayered, social and cultural contexts, this chapter shifts attention to the systemic or structural dimensions that determine women's subordinate status so that we may come to better understand the exploitation of women's bodies. This framework is rooted in the theoretical perspectives offered by women of color and Third World feminisms which argue that gender oppression operates not just solely through interpersonal, heterosexual relations, but also through unfavorable

social systems, such as race and class, as well as systems of global power (Crenshaw, 1989; Hurtado, 1996; Lugones, 2007; Sen & Grown, 1987).

### Culture

In support of the idea that violations against women should not be addressed on a case-by-case basis, many feminists argue that universal norms surrounding women's human rights can provide the theoretical rationale for criticizing unjust social realities and advancing women's rights (e.g., Nussbaum, 2000). Indeed, discussions of human rights often imply a universal language of rights and equality, suggesting that norms of justice can be applied across societies. However, such simple notions of universalism can raise concern.

First, a central idea behind human rights is based on Western beliefs that the locus of rights are in autonomous *individuals*, who are free of historical and social conditions (such as gender oppression; Lykes, 2001). Thus, when discussed by scholars and practitioners, 'universal' human rights are often taken to mean rights defined by the West. Holding and/or imposing standards based on Western definitions may be seen as another example of colonial domination and an imposition on people who are capable of determining their own definitions of rights and justice (Phillips, 2002). Another consequence of conflating human rights with Western values is that even when universal categories are introduced by women who live and work within the country in question, the women are commonly accused of pandering to a Western political agenda (Narayan, 1997; Nussbaum, 2000; Tripp, 2002). However, this reaction fails to recognize that women are capable of mobilizing around their own rights without Western influence and discredits numerous movements organized around gendered justice across the globe. Similarly, through much that is written about violations to women's bodies, we have come to understand human rights as an

'international' phenomenon (i.e., 'non-US' based; Powell, 2005). This is reflected in the examples widely written about to represent violations of women's rights (e.g., veiling; female genital cutting; trafficked women for involuntary prostitution). Moreover, these examples reflect how various countries or cultures are positioned in terms of having human rights monitored by international bodies such as the United Nations. Specifically, Western/Northern countries (e.g., North American), whose status as harbingers of rights is seldom questioned, are comfortably positioned to discuss human rights violations of countries from the Global South (e.g., Southeast Asian) that are often dependent on development aid and intervention coming from the West/North. Invoking women's human rights in this context creates a powerful dichotomy whereby the West evaluates the treatment of women's bodies in the rest of the world (Powell, 2005). It is inappropriate to hold the West as a harbinger or purveyor of women's rights when the United States has not passed the Equal Rights Amendment proposed in 1923, nor ratified the UN's CEDAW that was opened for signature in 1980. Moreover, the West/Rest dichotomy shields from scrutiny the cultural roots of gender inequality that get played out with women's bodies in Western countries, and thereby limits a comprehensive structural analysis of what contributes to violations against women.

In contrast to universalism, a culturally relativistic approach to understanding women's human rights argues that norms of justice are always relative to the society in which they are formed and thus values and practices regarding bodies may vary enormously from one society to another. From this perspective it is inappropriate to take the norms that emerge within one society as the standard against which to assess the norms of another (Phillips, 2002). The value of this position is that it captures the situated nature of any principles of justice. Certainly, attention to historical and cultural specificity is imperative to creating any substantive change

and without local demand for recognition of rights, no universal principles, however broad, could ever be implemented.

Although cultural relativism addresses the contextual nature of justice and treatment of women's bodies, it carries its own set of concerns. For example, cultural relativism does not take into consideration that norms of justice are often constructed under principles of gender inequity. Similarly, those who defend practices that are harmful to women, in the name of preserving 'culture', are often the same individuals who will otherwise create cultural change that serves to enhance their own political or economic interests (Phillips, 2002; Tripp, 2002). Indeed, cultural claims surrounding women's bodies are sometimes manipulated to advance other political interests, often those of male elites, and are frequently contested by the very women in whose names these claims are made. Although cultural claims may be genuine expressions of shared ways of life, claims defending violations of women's bodies that are based on culture cannot always be taken at face value. It therefore seems that when evaluating women's rights, both universal principles that fail to adequately address differences, as well as those ignoring women's rights for fear of cultural imperialism, should be suspect.

An illustrative example that demonstrates this tension is when the United States used women's rights as an important backdrop in the US invasion of Afghanistan. The invasion was, in part, justified as a means to save 'women of cover' (President Bush's terms for burka-clad Afghan women). However, less than a year after using concerns regarding cultural restrictions on women's human rights in the Muslim world to advance the 'War on Terrorism,' the United States failed to ratify the UN's CEDAW because it was a form of 'cultural colonialism' that would force American women into work and their children into day care. In a Senate Foreign Relations committee meeting to discuss US support for CEDAW, attorney Kathryn Balmforth testified that ... CEDAW, in

requiring equality for women in the workplace, will threaten US culture and values. These matters go to the core of culture, family, and religious belief and would undermine the traditional role of women as mothers who pass on cultural values (Bayefsky, Reid, & Balmforth, 2000).

Despite what might be commonly assumed about women's rights in these respective countries, Afghanistan has ratified CEDAW, whereas the United States has not. By illustrating the juxtaposition in universal and relative applications of human rights, these examples demonstrate that women can be marginalized *within* cultures and that it is important to ask 'whose culture?', when culture is being invoked in the discussion surrounding women's human rights in *any* given context or country.

The next section will use theories of power to discuss the relation between power inequalities and body objectification, and discuss the mechanisms by which objectification leads to oppression. In particular, what follows will provide the context for examining cross-cultural similarities in the sexual objectification of women and for understanding how such objectification is one of the primary processes threatening women's right to life, liberty, and security of person.

### SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION: EMBODIED OPPRESSION

Having a sexualized, objectified body offers few opportunities for achieving real social or political power. In *Discipline & Punish*, Foucault (1977) argues that the body is a focal point for struggles over power because it is invested with relationships that reflect domination. He argues that power, rather than residing in individuals, is institutionalized and that bodies existing within a system or institution become aware that they always have the potential to be observed. This awareness leads to self-discipline whereby individuals engage in perpetual self-surveillance in an attempt to discipline their body within a

given system. This self-surveillance is the hallmark of having internalized the body as an object.

Several well-known theorists have written about how processes of domination and objectification within inequitable systems (e.g., racism, colonization, sexism) become internalized and create debilitating psychological patterns, often referred to as 'internalized' or 'psychological oppression' (Bartky, 1990; Fanon, 1961; Foucault, 1977; Freire, 1970; Moane, 1999). As critical scholars such as Du Bois (1994 [1903]) and Freire (1970) suggest, individuals in positions of subordination have access to both their own consciousness and also the consciousness of the dominator (or observer), resulting in a split, or dual consciousness. Foucault (1977) argues that the state of consciousness that results from body objectification is a sign that the tight, disciplinary control of the body has taken a hold of the mind as well. Feminist theorists have expanded on Foucault's theory by highlighting that the bodily experiences of women and men differ notably – precisely because they are differentially positioned in relation to power (e.g., Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993). As such, the internalized objectification reflected in the bodies Foucault referenced (e.g., an inmate in a jailhouse; a student in a classroom) can be taken several steps further when considering gender because girls' and women's bodies may be objectified as sexual objects or property *within* each of those contexts. Feminist scholars suggest that the identification of a woman with her body and sexuality becomes oppressive when such identification becomes habitually extended into every area of her experience, resulting in a duality of consciousness that contributes to her subordinate status (Bartky, 1990). Having a fragmented or dual consciousness contributes to women's subordination because women's full capabilities are limited by the need to attend to the perspective of the dominator. However voluntary self-surveillance may appear, like economic oppression, the psychological oppression that ensues is institutionalized and systematic; it serves to make

the work of domination easier by rendering the dominated incapable of recognizing the processes responsible for their subjugation (Bartky, 1990).

In Foucault's analysis he explicitly argues that the body, based on its relative status, is caught in a system of constraints and obligations that 'deprive the individual of a *liberty* that is regarded both *as a right* and as property' (1977, p. 11). However, the extent to which these constraints are acknowledged in the West as violations against women's rights is, to date, only recognized for so-called 'international' examples. For instance, France recently banned women's head coverings by making it a punishable criminal offense for women to wear a face veil, with Italian law following in similar fashion (BBC News, 2010; *New York Times*, 2011). This example of course invokes the West/Rest dichotomy, suggesting that culturally specific body practices such as veiling violate women's rights, whereas other self-surveying bodily practices performed in the West do not.

As early as 1979 Nawal El Saadawi wrote that the exploitation and social practices that lead to oppression among Arab women were not characteristic of Middle Eastern societies, or countries of the 'Third World,' alone. Rather, such practices constitute an integral part of the political, economic, and cultural systems that are dominant in most of the world. In particular, El Saadawi highlighted that the presumed sexual 'liberation' practiced in many Western societies does not lead to the emancipation of women, but instead to an accentuated oppression whereby women are transformed into commercialized bodies and are a source of increasing capitalist profit. To make a striking comparison, El Saadawi suggested that although most women from Western societies may not be exposed to surgical removal of the clitoris (genital cutting), they are nevertheless victims of cultural and psychological cliterodectomy.<sup>2</sup>

No doubt, the physical ablation of the clitoris appears a much more savage and cruel procedure than its psychological removal. Nevertheless, the consequences can be exactly the same, since the

end result is the abolition of its functions so that its presence or absence amount to the same thing. Psychological surgery might even be more malicious and harmful because it tends to produce the illusion of being complete ... It can create the illusion of being free, whereas in actual fact freedom has been lost. (1979, p. xv)

It is particularly striking that this was written in 1979, before the surge of widely practiced Western surgeries intended to physically augment women's desirability (e.g., breast enlargement, vaginal rejuvenation and tightening; labia reduction and beautification). These examples illustrate that regardless of the cultural prescription (e.g., cut, covered, or scantily clad), women's bodies are subject to cultural requirements that are largely outside of their control, despite the fact that many girls and women perceive their choices to be freely chosen behaviors. In either case, self-disciplining the body to conform to requirements can put women's psychological and physical liberty and safety at risk.

Important in this analysis is that notions of desirability based on an objectified body are not particular to cultures where female genital cutting occurs. It has been widely documented that beauty and physical attractiveness are socially constructed and vary, sometimes dramatically, across cultures (Bordo, 1993; see also Kurtiş and Adams, Chapter 16 this volume). Moreover, women across the globe (and men for that matter) internalize cultural notions of attractiveness and desirability and strive to meet ideal standards. In the West, a dangerously thin 'ideal' has led to the proliferation of procedures dictating the proper management of the female body (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993). The bodily maintenance and alterations that accompany the management of the ideal Western body – many of which range from everyday acts of personal grooming that are highly commercialized (shaving, anti-wrinkle creams, hair gels, make-up) to the more extraordinary use of surgery – reflect bodies that have internalized cultural notions of desirability and objectification. Take, for example, Andrea

Dworkin's description of an objectified body in the West:

Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her motility, spontaneity, posture, gait, and the uses to which she can put her body. They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom. And of course, the relationship between physical freedom and psychological development, intellectual possibility, and creative potential is an umbilical one.

In our culture, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered. No feature or extremity is spared the art, or pain, of improvement ... From head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification, alteration. This alteration is an ongoing, repetitive process. It is vital to the economy, the major substance of male-female differentiation, the most immediate physical and psychological reality of being a woman. From the age of 11 or 12 until she dies, a woman will spend a large part of her time, money, and energy on binding, plucking, painting, and deodorizing herself. (1974, pp. 113–114)

This example supports the theoretical positions taken by Foucault and Bartky, which suggest that disciplinary control over the body can get a hold of the mind as well. The disciplinary practices that Dworkin references also illustrate El Saadawi's 'psychological cliterodectomy' by demonstrating how women's bodies become politically inscribed and reflect bodies invested with relations of domination.

Yet, it is in the case of genital cutting that a woman is often assumed to be without agency; her body a metaphor for all women's subjugation. In contrast, in Western examples, women are typically granted the assumption of 'free will' and their altered bodies are seen as a metaphor for women's choice and empowerment. Moreover, in both contexts the practices are based on objectification surrounding the social constructions of women's sexuality that become internalized by women such that the social consequences for *not* complying outweigh the perceived costs of participating in one's own objectification. For example, practices across

cultures involve procedures that alter women's physical appearance and sexual desirability, enhance their femininity, and increase their social mobility (e.g., likelihood of marriage). These examples suggest that objectification of women's bodies traverses cultures and limits women's liberty.<sup>3</sup>

Identifying structural patterns of domination and objectification has long been the task of political and social theorists; however, the discipline of psychology can and should reframe standard methods to consider how the root causes of oppression lie in the structures – political and cultural – and ideologies that underlie oppressive conditions. Influenced by Sandra Bartky's work, social psychologists introduced objectification theory, a feminist social constructionist framework for investigating how girl's and women's routine experience of sexual objectification leads them to treat and experience themselves as sexual objects – that is to *self-objectify* (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996; see also Goldenberg, Roberts, Morris, & Cooper, Chapter 24 this volume). The final section of this chapter will shift toward an empirical review of investigations conducted within psychology that support the argument put forth thus far, that a self-disciplining body is a form of internalized or psychological oppression – one that threatens women's life, liberty, and security of person. Since the introduction of objectification theory, psychology has made great strides towards conducting theory-driven empirical work demonstrating the consequences of sexual objectification, largely within the United States. Therefore the examples will focus on sexual objectification as it occurs in the West – namely, when a girl's or woman's body is made into a thing for others' sexual use or when her sexual functions are treated as representative of her (Bartky, 1990). Using investigations conducted within the United States as a platform for understanding processes surrounding objectification can make a novel contribution to understanding women's rights violations in two primary ways: (1) by using examples

from Western psychology we can break out of a West/Rest approach by recognizing that the objectification of women's bodies is not unique to isolated examples such as cutting or veiling; and (2) broadening our *empirical* base of the consequences of viewing women as sexual objects has the potential to advance our understanding of processes surrounding objectification and thereby expand our understanding of how and why women's human rights violations are maintained and perpetuated.

### OBJECTIFICATION THEORY: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM WITHIN PSYCHOLOGY

Where does sexual objectification in the United States start? In 2002 an international clothing company, Abercrombie & Fitch, refused to stop selling thong underwear in children's sizes with 'wink wink' and 'eye candy' printed across the front (CNN Money, 2002). Despite a consumer advocacy response criticizing the sexually objectifying nature of their clothing, they later launched a t-shirt line for women with sayings such as 'Who needs brains when you have these?' and 'I had a nightmare I was a brunette' (Aschoff, 2005). Moreover, evidence reviewed by the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) suggests that examples such as these are not exceptions. Rather, they reported that girls within the United States are increasingly confronted with a sexualized culture and are encouraged to sexualize themselves at younger and younger ages. Empirical evidence from communication studies supports this trend with findings suggesting that the sexualization of women in advertisements increased significantly between 1983 and 2003 (Reichert & Carpenter, 2004). Similarly, it has been found that about one-half of advertisements in print magazines depict women as sex objects, with women in many of these images becoming increasingly 'pornified' (Paul, 2005; Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008).

This increasing trend has raised widespread response among journalists and consumer advocacy groups that the sexualization of girls is an increasing problem and is harmful to girls and women's well-being (e.g., NPR's *On Point*; Ashbrook, 2010). An abundance of scientific research has accumulated that supports this concern by demonstrating a link between sexually objectifying media and a variety of harmful body-related consequences among girls and women (see Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008 for a review).

Several influential theorists (e.g., Bartky, 1990) have contextualized the treatment of women as sexual objects as being historically rooted in male-dominated cultures and have suggested that objectification has been motivated by sociopolitical worldviews that promote and protect gender hierarchies. In order to test the hypothesis that women experience their bodies within a 'culture of objectification', Grabe, Routledge, Cook, Andersen, and Arndt (2005) assessed the extent to which the view of women as objects constitutes a widely endorsed cultural worldview. Consistent with the tenets of Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986), which suggests that people cling to or strongly endorse their cultural worldviews when death-related thoughts are accessible, the authors found that women were more likely to objectify their own and other women's bodies in response to death-related thoughts compared to a control condition in which their own mortality was not salient. The same was not true for men (see also Goldenberg et al., Chapter 24 this volume). These findings suggest that the objectification of women's bodies is not an idiosyncratic phenomenon, but rather an endorsed cultural worldview within the United States.

How early does this cultural worldview begin to impact girls? It has been argued that adolescents, especially girls, experience increasing amounts of sexual objectification by others as their bodies develop and that the experience of being chronically objectified leads girls to internalize an observer's

perspective of themselves. Thus, it is suggested that self-objectification is provoked by the physical changes of puberty and the social consequences that come with sexual maturation (e.g., sexual objectification; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In a study testing whether self-objectification emerges during sexual maturation, researchers examined the relationship between peer sexual harassment (a salient form of sexual objectification) and self-objectification among a sample of young adolescents (Lindberg, Grabe, & Hyde, 2007). As predicted, girls' pubertal development was linked to receipt of greater sexual objectification, self-objectification, and body shame. Girls also reported significantly higher levels of self-objectification than boys. Boys' pubertal development was not associated with self-objectification or body shame.

These trends appear to remain constant throughout adulthood. For example, diary studies support the routine occurrence of sexual objectification as a dimension of daily experiences of sexism and have found that women report more sexual objectification experiences than do men (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Because women are more often the targets of sexual objectification, it is not surprising that most research suggests that girls and women self-objectify more than boys and men (Aubrey, 2006; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Hebl et al., 2004; McKinley, 1998; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004). These findings highlight that, starting in youth, girls' and boys' bodies are differently positioned in relation to power. Sexual harassment at an early age informs girls that their bodies exist within this system and further evidence suggests that the internalization of this experience continues unabated into adulthood.

There is also evidence to suggest that the process of being treated like a sexual object at this early age may lead to the development of debilitating psychological patterns or internalized oppression characteristic of domination. Using a longitudinal design,

with the early adolescent sample reported above, researchers tested the effect of self-objectification, shame, and self-hindering thought patterns on girls' depression (Grabe, Hyde, & Lindberg, 2007). The study examined the effects of self-objectification at age 11 on subsequent levels of body shame, rumination (i.e., repetitive and intrusive thoughts that focus on distress), and depression at age 13. The authors found that by age 11, girls already reported higher levels of self-objectification and body shame than did boys. By age 13, girls reported significantly more self-objectification, body shame, rumination, and depression than their male counterparts. Findings also revealed that initial levels of self-objectification (at age 11) predicted subsequent depression (at age 13) among girls, but not boys. Follow-up analyses suggested that the link between objectification and depression for girls was mediated by rumination and body shame. Specifically, higher levels of self-objectification at age 11 contributed to increased rumination and body shame at age 13, which directly predicted girls' experience with depression. Importantly, the gender difference in self-objectification preceded the gender differences in rumination and depression, which did not appear until age 13. These findings underscore the gendered nature of these processes and how early they begin. But perhaps more importantly, they support the theoretical assumptions that internalization of the observer's perspective comes first, and that internalized or psychological oppression follows.

In addition to studies examining the development and subsequent consequences of self-objectification among girls, a burgeoning scientific interest in objectification theory has led to a proliferation of empirical support demonstrating that self-objectification is related to a wide range of negative outcomes that threaten the life, liberty, and self-determination of adult women (for a comprehensive review see Moradi & Huang, 2008). Chief among these consequences are poor body esteem and eating-disorder symptoms (Fredrickson et al., 1998; McKinley, 1999;

McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglana, 2002; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998; Slater & Tiggemann, 2002; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001). Research also has demonstrated that self-objectification is related to depression and anxiety in college samples (Choma, Shove, Busseri, Sadava, & Hosker, 2009; Miner-Rubino, Fredrickson, & Twenge, 2002; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglana, 2002). There are also demonstrated links between self-objectification and risky sexual behavior and lower sexual assertiveness (Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2005), negative attitudes about menstruation (Johnston-Robledo, Sheffield, Voigt, & Wilcox-Constantine, 2007; Roberts, 2004), sexual dysfunction (Wiederman, 2000), and impaired cognitive performance (Fredrickson et al., 1998; Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003). It should be clear from these findings that processes surrounding the treatment of women's bodies as sexual objects severely limit women's self-determination and thereby violate principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity. This host of consequences provides empirical evidence of the psychological cliterodectomy that Nawal El Saadawi referenced in her 1979 treatise.

Although few studies have actually explored the effects of sexual and self-objectification on women's bodily integrity, a small literature is emerging that empirically examines links between women's experience of sexual objectification and invasive body modifications aimed at desirability. For example, researchers found that women's experiences of sexual objectification were significantly related to *social* motives for cosmetic surgery (e.g., deciding to have it if partner thought it was a good idea) in a sample of undergraduate women. Findings from the same study also suggested that *self*-objectification predicted *intrapersonal* motives to have cosmetic surgery (e.g., self-oriented reasons to have surgery; Calogero, Pina, Park, & Rahemtulla, 2010). These findings underscore the notion that social pressures for women require that they alter their natural appearance to conform

to cultural expectations of sexual objectification. Using such examples from the United States highlights that it is not just women from 'other' cultures that are willing to undergo extreme measures to conform to social expectations surrounding women's bodies. Women in the United States appear also at risk to internalize an objectified perspective of their bodies as a result of existing within an inequitable power system.

Recent investigations are also emerging that examine the potentially grave consequences of sexually objectifying women. Based on prior research on empathy and dehumanization, Zurbriggen (2011) hypothesized that, among male college students, sexual objectification of one's female partner might negatively impact an intimate relationship and create greater risk of sexual aggression. As predicted, she found significant negative correlations between levels of objectification and men's report of relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and beliefs that sexuality was intimacy-based. In support of the notion that objectification is a common denominator in violations surrounding the body, Zurbriggen also found that objectifying one's partner was positively related to measures of sexual aggression perpetration, rape myth acceptance, and beliefs that sexuality is power-based. That sexual objectification of an intimate partner could lead to violent attitudes and behaviors is particularly alarming given the cultural worldview that suggests that the *average* woman's body exists as an object for male viewing pleasure. Although empirical investigations are just beginning to test these relations, the findings suggest that if we view women's bodies as objects or property that exist for the benefit of others, their risk for violation exists on a continuum from being sexualized, controlled, or potentially beaten.

In sum, empirical findings from a large body of work investigating objectification theory within psychology demonstrate that viewing women's bodies as objects within the United States is not only culturally normative,

but violates girls' and women's liberty from a young age. Although mainstream Western discourse may view women's efforts toward beautification as voluntary vanity, the empirical findings in this review support El Saadawi's claim that the consequences of physical and psychological alteration of women's sexuality may be similar. Moreover, as El Saadawi suggested, the effects of self-objectification may be even more harmful because the assumed agency creates the illusion of being free, whereas in actual fact freedom has been lost.

## CONCLUSION

Approaching the discussion of women's human rights from an empirical base within social psychology allowed us to examine the processes that get at the very core of how violations against women exist. Although there has been considerable academic discussion surrounding women's human rights elsewhere, the evidence reviewed in this chapter causes us to confront the objectification of women as a rights violation, rather than an inevitable part of being female, or at its extreme, a public health issue. The theoretical and empirical evidence reviewed demonstrated that objectification is embedded in inequitable power dynamics that begin early in youth and serve to threaten the fundamental worth and rights of women. In particular, findings from within psychology established that receipt of sexually objectifying treatment starts young, is internalized at an early age, and is accompanied by a host of consequences that reflect oppression.

Despite the demonstrated consequences of this process, the forms of objectification in mainstream US culture are limitless and exist with seemingly little attention paid to their prevalence. For example, staggering amounts of violence are unleashed against women and girls every day. Conservative estimates suggest that 22% of women in the United States are physically assaulted by an intimate partner in their lifetime, 1.3 million women are

assaulted by an intimate partner annually, 18% of women have been raped, intimate partner homicides make up 40–50% of murders of women in the United States, and in 70–80% of partner homicides the man physically abused the woman before the murder (Campbell et al., 2003; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). Despite the obvious gravity and illegality of these violations, there is no widespread societal objection to them or the cultural worldview that supports them. In fact, fashionable ads in mainstream publications or by designer companies (e.g., Dolce & Gabbana, Vogue) exploit that violence, marketing themes of death, dismemberment, and female submissiveness; and a steady stream of sensationalized mass media, in which men terrorize, torment, rape and murder women, is widely accepted as 'entertainment'. The socio-psychological perspective offered in this chapter challenges us to view this treatment of women's bodies through a new lens that recognizes objectification as a violation of women's human rights.

This chapter makes a contribution to progress in the area of women's human rights concerns in two novel ways. First, it was demonstrated that the sexual objectification of women's bodies involves a patriarchal system that normalizes and promotes objectification and thereby undermines women's health, cognitive capacities, and emotional, physical, and sexual well-being and may support sexual violence as a pattern of behavior. Because the objectification of women is embedded in systems of power that foster the practices that allow continual attacks on women's integrity, health, and freedom, systemic solutions that address these inequalities are imperative. Although current laws in most parts of the world have done little to dissuade the cultural worldview of women's bodies that puts them at risk to experience violations of their rights, cutting-edge law in some parts of the world suggests that it is possible to promote equality through legislation. For example, several Latin American countries are promoting legislation surrounding gender-based violence through feminist-informed



terms such as femicide. The term *femicide*, as opposed to femicide, is being strategically used throughout Latin America because it highlights that extreme expressions of gender-based violence are fundamentally the result of inequitable power relations between women and men (Fregoso & Bejarano, 2010). Supporters of bills criminalizing femicide in Latin American countries argue that such bills will help eliminate social silence and inaction surrounding the violation of women because the bills explicitly articulate that exploitation of social systems of power threatens women's life and liberty and is punishable by law. For example, Chapter V in the Mexican law on femicidal violence reads in Article 21:

Femicidal violence is the extreme form of gender violence against women, the result of the violation of their human rights in the public and private spheres; it is made up of the whole set of misogynistic forms of conduct – mistreatment and physical, psychological, sexual, educational, economic, property-related, family, community, institutional violence – that entail social impunity and impunity by the state, and, on placing women at risk and in a defenseless position, may culminate in homicide or attempted homicide – that is, in femicide and in other forms of violent death of girls and women, specifically death due to accidents and suicide, preventable deaths stemming from lack of security, neglect, and exclusion from development and democracy.

The second major contribution of this chapter is that it uses empirical data to call into question the hegemonic Western perspective on human rights. Despite that we have viewed rights violations surrounding women's bodies as unacceptable in other parts of the world, this review suggests we need to abolish the West/Rest dichotomy. Specifically, it is imperative that the West not cloak the treatment of women's bodies in Western countries behind individualized preferences or public health concerns, but rather acknowledge that treating girls' and women's bodies as sexual objects threatens their fundamental worth and dignity. Thus, although the evidence reviewed used Western examples to suggest that gender equity is

pivotal in attaining liberation from oppression, it should be clear that the same examples are not used to impose universalizing (i.e., Western) approaches to change (Grewal, 1999; Mohanty, 1984). Change requires addressing locally the specificities that create gender inequity. So, for example in the United States, inequality of income and wealth has not changed substantively from the 1950s and women are still heavily concentrated in a small number of low-level service and 'pink-collar' occupations. To address the normative sexual objectification of women's bodies that puts them at risk, structural changes in women's power and resources – whether they are income, occupation, political representation and so forth – need to be addressed. In addition to these crucial structural changes, change should be strategically approached from several different sectors of society. In the United States, for example, comprehensive education should include curricula for girls and boys aimed at identifying the myriad forms of sexual harassment and its destructive consequences. Within families, parents need to be well-versed in teaching active strategies for resisting sexism whereby girls and boys learn to identify mistreatment of women and critique it in accordance with women's well-being. In civil society, activism is needed in a multitude of forms to raise awareness of and protest sexualized images of women. Cultural boycotts of the sexual exploitation and violent treatment of women's bodies in entertainment should replace the cultural normativity of objectification.

In conclusion, although prior academic discussion on women's rights has contributed to producing a set of universal images of the 'Third World woman', images like the veiled woman and the genitally modified woman, this has set in motion a colonialist discourse that has made it nearly impossible to adequately uncover the mechanisms by which women's bodies come to be objectified. This chapter used research to uncover the mechanisms of objectification and violation with the intent of influencing activist efforts toward change. Of course, in order to make progress

toward the protection of women's rights there must be a diversity of feminist action, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women, and defined by them for themselves (Sen & Grown, 1987). Nevertheless, it seems that across the globe, to conceive of women's bodies differently is not just part of a conceptual and philosophical struggle that feminism involves, but it is related to questions of women's survival.

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## NOTES

- 1 Despite the cautioned use of the term 'Third World' (Mohanty, 1984), women writing from the perspective of the 'Third World' or Global South often position themselves as 'Third World feminists' to highlight the need for post-colonial and transnational analyses of women's lives in a manner that reclaims use of 'Third World'. As used in this chapter, the terms Global South (and North/West) are not meant as geographical references, but are used instead to reflect the socioeconomic and political divide between wealthy, 'developed' countries, known collectively as the North/West, and the poorer countries that are exploited in processes of globalization. These terms are meant to circumvent the implied inferiority that 'Third World' invokes.
- 2 The title of the chapter is borrowed from El Sadaawi's 1979 analogy.
- 3 The philosophical underpinnings surrounding questions of 'free will' or 'choice' cannot be adequately addressed here. Across cultures, regardless of the severity, girls and/or their mothers are 'choosing' disciplinary practices precisely because women's bodies are subject to cultural pressures that socialize them to be agents in the disciplinary practices surrounding their bodies. The point is not to equate all practices, but to underscore that within these practices women's bodies are engendered in an institutional ideology of patriarchy.

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