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**CHALLENGING
GLOBAL GENDER
VIOLENCE**

The Global Clothesline
Project

Susan D. Rose



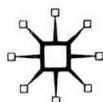
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Global Clothesline
Project**

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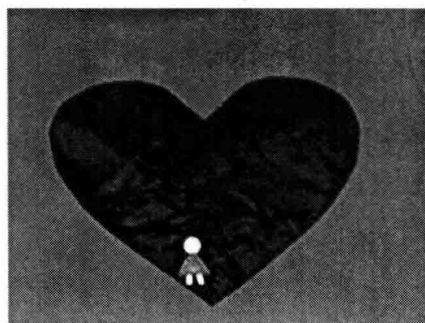
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To all the women and children who have contributed to the Global Clothesline Project. To all who have suffered violence, to those struggling and surviving, and to all whose lives have been claimed by violence. Let there be peace.

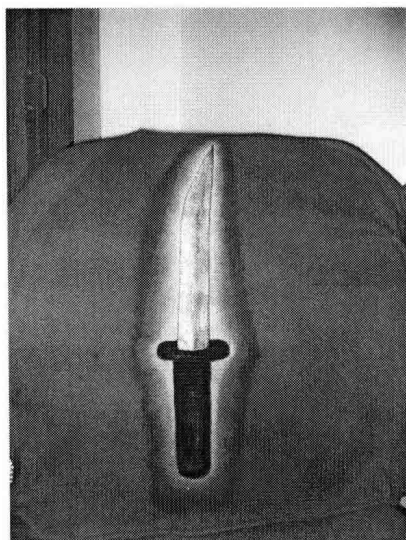
Preface



Black Heart: I knew I wanted to have a black heart on it. Maybe it was because I just felt that way about hearts, about love. That is was all very black (Liz).



Shame: I've always felt that my heart was damaged in some way. And that's why I wanted to start with the heart. I picked burlap because I feel that I am very rough (Pat).



Rape: When I made the shirt I kept feeling that it wasn't busy enough. The shirt looked so naked... it seems so stark. And then I realized that's how I was feeling (Kim).

These women quoted here all contributed to the *Global Clothesline Project: Bearing Witness to Violence against Women*. Organized in conjunction with the national project based in Massachusetts and part of the international movement against violence directed at women, the Global Clothesline Project (GCP) invited women to create T-shirts that expressed not only the violence they suffered but also the healing and recovery they were experiencing. The effectiveness of the project lies in the work that can be done at an individual or small group therapeutic level (anonymously or confidentially as women may individually or collectively create T-shirts), and at the social movement level with the public display of shirts that expose the violence and healing that has taken place within a particular community—be it a college campus, religious organization, NGO, or local community. The exhibit has the potential to open up a dialogue about violence and to engage victim-survivors, witnesses, and perpetrators to “see” what impact violence has and work toward ending it. A powerful tool to educate the community about the impact of gender violence, it provides both agency and safety to vulnerable victims. It empowers survivors and allies to come together to not only express individual stories

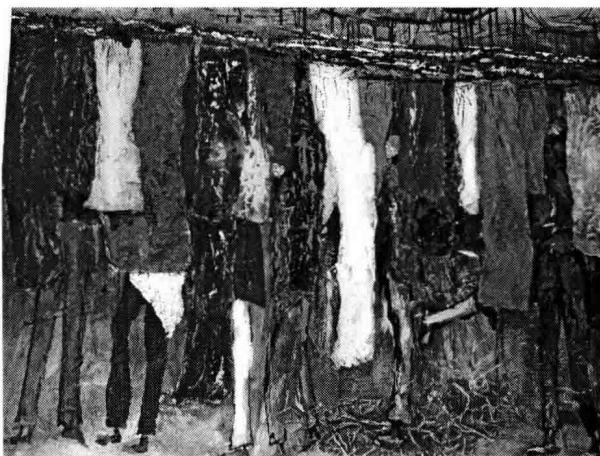
but also collectively challenge human rights violations that are often constructed and dismissed as traditional cultural practices.

A small group of women launched the Clothesline Project in 1990 on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, with a display of 31 shirts in Hyannis.¹ They were motivated by figures released by the Men's Rape Prevention Project in Washington DC that showed that while 58,000 soldiers died in the Vietnam War, during that same time period, 51,000 women were killed, mostly by men who supposedly loved them. One of the women, visual artist Rachel Carey-Harper, inspired by the AIDS quilt, envisioned the concept of using T-shirts hanging on a clothesline as a means to break silence about violence against women and raise awareness. A coalition of women's groups on Cape Cod decided to act and created a "program that would educate, break the silence, and bear witness to violence against women" (Clothesline, n.d.). And so the Clothesline Project was born—representing the days when women in close-knit communities would exchange information as they hung clothes to dry in their backyards and share what was going on in their daily lives, talking over the Clothesline.

The Clothesline thus serves to symbolize the breaking of the taboo of speaking about abuse, often interpreted as "airing one's dirty laundry" in public. Not everyone immediately understands the word "Clothesline" or will use T-shirts to break the silence. For example, in Venezuela, we needed to translate the word "Clothesline," and in Cameroon, we used traditional scarves as well as T-shirts; women there also felt more comfortable sewing or doing embroidery, a more familiar medium than drawing with paints and markers. But once explained, the concept resonates across cultures. Remarkably, just after doing a Clothesline workshop in Yaoundé, I had the opportunity to visit the renowned Cameroonian artist Max Lyonga. As we walked into his gallery in Buea, I immediately encountered this painting:

This is one in a series of Max Lyonga's three "clothesline" paintings. A victim-survivor of child abuse himself, he found painting to be his form of expression and healing. We immediately connected and he agreed to have me reproduce an image of his painting here. "The painting represents women's work, and what so often goes on behind closed doors. It's something (family violence) that happens everywhere around the world. I want my paintings to speak to the world, to offer hope" (Max Lyonga, 2011, pers. comm., February).

By the late 1990s, the grass-roots project started had spawned over 350 Clothesline Projects in the U.S., many of them on university campuses.



My first involvement with the project began in 1993 at Dickinson College when the Women's Center assembled an exhibit as part of the Public Affairs Symposium on "Violence in America." Initially we conducted interviews with 20 women, and then collected additional interviews at the national exhibit in Washington DC, where over 5,000 shirts were displayed in the mall in April 1995. From this work, my colleague and I produced a 53-minute documentary, simply called *Clothesline*, that integrated images from the shirts and interviews with women who spoke to us about the making and meaning of their shirts. The documentary opens with a clothesline of shirts made by women: white shirts (contributed by family or friends) represent women who had been killed; blue or green shirts were made by victims of childhood sexual abuse or incest; yellow or beige shirts by women who had been battered (a common term used at the time); red, pink, or orange shirts by victims of rape and sexual assault; and purple shirts by women who had suffered violence because of being targeted as lesbian. The women drew upon different images and materials to portray the abuse and healing they experienced: black felt and burlap hearts, pieces from childhood dresses, broken candles, ripped out hearts, lace daggers, and photographs of graduation day.

The women spoke about the significance of the images to them and their experience in constructing the artwork. The choice of the burlap fabric, for instance: "I just feel like I have a very rough heart. This is the wound, the incest... And the little hammers are what I've used all my life to beat myself into not allowing me to be me." A striking red shirt, cut up the middle by an artist's rendering of a knife: "When I made the shirt I kept feeling

so naked... I better put something else on it. I better put something on the back. The shirt, it seems too stark. And then I realized that's how I felt... I was feeling naked, and I was feeling very vulnerable and very fragile and very exposed in thinking about the whole thing, and making the image, and bringing the image out into the public's eye... I think that's the tight rope that needs to be walked... It's a very empowering situation to go ahead and act, even in the midst of that kind of vulnerability."

In August 1995, I had the opportunity to screen *Clothesline* at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing/Hairou. As I contemplated how to most effectively present the project, I was conscious of being a white, middle-class, professional woman from the U.S. During the Third World Conference on Women in 1985, violence as an issue had barely been mentioned—the major concerns were poverty, potable water, access to health care. So I thought hard about the questions that might be useful in facilitating a meaningful conversation after the screening of that first documentary that featured mostly white women from the U.S.—albeit from various socio-economic groups.

Some of the questions included:

What are the connections/differences among the kinds of violence described here and those that women in other cultures and societies experience? What are the similarities/differences among the kinds of conditions likely to generate violence against women?

To what extent does incest, as an act of violence against an individual girl or woman, also act as political disempowerment of girls and women in general?

The women in this video are giving voice to the violence committed against them, thus taking back some of the power stolen from them. In what ways do women cross-culturally resist violence? To what extent is "breaking silences" important and possible for women in other cultures? What forms does this take?

"Clothesline" raises issues not only about violence against women, but also about feminist activists and scholars using video-making as the basis for their work. To what extent are women internationally using video as a means for generating knowledge, for reclaiming power of the media?

While I and many others have continued to explore and grapple with these questions, those in the audience that hot day in August were less interested in theoretical, academic questions of this nature and more interested in concrete details. They wanted to know what logistics were involved in organizing a Clothesline Project in their rural village in

Malaysia or Thailand. Can it be done by the riverside where women wash their clothes, by the well where we draw our water, in a church where we pray, or in a school recently opened for girls? Where and how might a Clothesline be displayed?

My response was simple. The Clothesline concept is adaptable. Wherever women may gather and be safe in talking with one another, the shirts can be created and displayed—whether hung on a Clothesline on a college campus or in a religious institution or neighborhood park or laid on rocks by the river or the well where women wash and dry clothes. While originally there was a color code that helped to signify the type of violence one has experienced,² it may not always be possible to use it. For example, artists from the Adolescent Ward at the Hershey Medical Hospital only had access to white shirts—they were displayed on the Central Pennsylvania Clothesline even though the white color of their shirts did not designate death. Likewise, for workshops in domestic violence shelters and schools, we had no way of knowing in advance how many of which colors we may need and many women are survivors of multiple forms of violence. In some cases, women wanted to pick the color that spoke to them. And in the case of the National Disability Clothesline Project in New Zealand (<http://disabilityclothesline.weebly.com/>), the organizers expressed interest in designating a color for those who have experienced violence against them as people with disabilities. So it is best to adapt and use what works best for one's own particular community and setting.

Since the 1990s, I have had the opportunity to help organize some 20 Clothesline Projects in the U.S. among diverse groups of women and children; in Bosnia among women in a witness protection program who were testifying against Mlado Radić (who has since been convicted of war crimes and imprisoned); in the urban barrios and rural schools of Venezuela; in Cameroon, Cuba, and the Netherlands. In many cases, the Clothesline Project has now been replicated by people and organizations within those countries. For example, the original Clothesline Project done in Breda, Holland, in June 2010 spread throughout the Netherlands. By International Women's Day, March 8, 2011, women in all 23 domestic violence shelters in the Netherlands had contributed shirts to an open-air exhibit of the National Clothesline Project in the Hague with Dutch parliamentarians and the U.S. ambassador to the Netherlands participating.

While these countries are quite diverse culturally, politically, and socio-economically, they all face the challenge of how to deal with

domestic, family, intimate partner, and sexual violence. While the terms used to identify the problems and the resources vary from country to country, what is striking is how similar the experiences and expressions of violence are. The images that women and children draw, the feelings they express, and the very words they use in a panoply of languages reveal the ways in which women from around the world may be different but not so dissimilar from one another.

Hearts broken, daggered, ripped out, sewn back together; big hands and no arms and hands; birds caged and set free; the words NO! Geen! Pas! No Más! Stop! Nikad Više; black eyes, black hearts, black hands illuminate the shirts that women constructed, independent of one another, to express their feelings of despair, fear, anger, freedom, and hope. And no matter the race, ethnicity, or nationality, black was by far the most common color used in both images and words to express feelings of emptiness, despair, and hopelessness. The two other colors most commonly used across cultures were red to represent pain and blood—and in some cases a healthy, loving heart, and green to represent hope and growth.

The women who contribute to the Global Clothesline Project are survivors who are speaking out, some anonymously and others quite publically. To protect confidentiality, I will use pseudonyms for the contributors to the Global Clothesline Project even though some of the women have been active in the media and domestic violence campaigns. To break the silence takes great courage for speaking out is a political as well as therapeutic act, and as such is a claim to power. It involves risk as well as promise whether one is in the U.S. or the Netherlands, in Cameroon or Cuba. While governments and people are becoming much more aware of the prevalence of gender violence and the devastating effects it can have, violence against women continues to be one of the most prevalent, persistent, and pernicious human rights abuses across the developing and developed worlds. It has been recognized as a major public health issue (and for women—the major public health issue) and as an obstacle to development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs; UNIFEM, n.d.).³

While men also are all too often victims of violence and women abuse other women, men, and children, the vast majority of cases of sexual, intimate partner violence (IPV) involve male-on-female abuse. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 95 per cent of the victims of domestic violence are women and the data are consistent across national studies of IPV and sexual violence.

So while some attention will be paid to the experiences of men, this book features the voices of women and children as they tell their stories of abuse and healing through words and images. It starts at the grass-roots level, with a close reading of the shirts and interviews and then builds toward a more theoretical analysis of the ways in which trauma is experienced and expressed. The chapters move from an analysis of individual testimonies to a macro analysis of structural forces of inequality, examining the ways in which the development of socio-economic inequality leads to greater violence against women and children. One of the primary arguments of this book is that patriarchy and gender violence have not always existed—it is not just a part of human nature but rather of specific kinds of socio-economic and political conditions and cultural values; social constructions of gender roles, norms, and expectations, and systems of socialization. The data clearly indicate that societies that experience greater gender equality experience less gender violence. The final chapters explore effective strategies that are being used to challenge gender violence and the ways in which we may envision healthier societies that encourage respect and compassion rather than competition and control.

Chapter 1 lays out the problem (definitions, prevalence, and consequences) of gender violence drawing data from multi- and cross-national studies.

Chapters 2–4 analyze the themes and images that emerge from an analysis of over 700 Global Clothesline shirts and 200 interviews. They highlight the artwork and voices of women and girls who have suffered domestic, family, intimate partner, and sexual violence. These chapters include: Black Heart (Chapter 2); Shame (Chapter 3); Difficult Decisions: Staying, Leaving (Chapter 4) with a focus on despair and hope.

Chapter 5 is a more theoretical chapter that plays off of an essay titled “The Adventure” by Georg Simmel. It considers the ways in which trauma may be seen as the shadow-side of adventure that draws one in rather than out. The research literature on trauma and gender violence and excerpts from memoirs inform the analysis of childhood sexual abuse narratives from the Global Clothesline Project. This micro analysis synthesizes the research literature, memoirs, and interviews.

A more macro analysis is presented in Chapter 6, “Abuse Is Not Traditional,” which argues that patriarchy and violence against women and children have not always been common or condoned. As pastoral and agricultural societies developed out of gathering and hunting societies, the increase in economic surplus led to greater socio-economic inequality

and an increase in violence against women and children who increasingly became the property of men. The chapter integrates case studies of Maori and Native American peoples, both of whom now have the highest rates of family and sexual violence within their respective societies, even though abuse was not common prior to colonization. Based on the research literature and ethnographic research I've conducted in New Zealand and among Native American communities in the U.S., the chapter highlights the ways in which culture is being applied as a resource in the fight against gender violence rather than being used as an excuse.

Chapter 7, "Facing the Challenges: Creating and Sustaining Healthy Relationships and Societies," examines effective strategies (from international treaties to government legislation, media and educational campaigns, and NGOs) being used in Cameroon, Iceland, New Zealand, and the United States to support victim-survivors of gender violence, raise awareness, and challenge (de-normalize) gender violence. The most common argument used to defend the practice of violence against women and children is a cultural relativist one: that such practice is a part of "the culture." This defense values the preservation of the patriarchal family over the human rights of women and children, and acting on social pathologies that exist in every culture. Drawing upon the research literature on inequality and masculinity studies, the chapter explores how healthier relationships and societies can be built. The argument reinforces the importance of a positive relationship between economic and gender equality in breaking the cycle of gender violence.

Notes

- 1 Growing out of a grass-roots group in Cape Cod, the National Network for the Clothesline Project is now located at P.O. Box 727, East Dennis, MA 02641.
- 2 For guidelines in creating a Clothesline Project and the color guidelines, see <http://www.clotheslineproject.org/>.
- 3 The MDGS are eight international development goals ranging from eradicating extreme poverty and hunger to achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child mortality rates; improving maternal health; and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases. Articulated in the United Nations Millennium Declaration, all 189 United Nations member states and at least 23 international organizations agreed to achieve these goals by the year 2015.

Acknowledgments

This has been a collaborative project from the very beginning. I want to thank Ethel Jensen, Lonna Malmsheimer, and Jean Weaver, colleagues at Dickinson College, who helped organize and document the Central Pennsylvania Clothesline back in 1993. A very special thanks to all who contributed to that first Clothesline project and to those who were the courageous ones willing to talk about the making and the meaning of their shirts in those early interviews. In many ways, the Global Clothesline Project took on a life of its own, resulting in exhibits, documentaries, articles, and workshops around the country and globally. Many thanks go to former students who worked with me over the last 20 years on this project, including especially the work of Gabriela Uassouaf, Oahn-Nhi Nguyen, Manu Saralegui, Sarah Wright, Hannah Farda, and Shannon Sullivan. International colleagues were central. Thanks to their vision, willingness to trust the process, and their understanding of the importance of raising awareness about family and sexual violence and fighting against it, we were able to do Clothesline workshops and exhibits in the Netherlands, with special thanks to Jan Werd, as well as Carin, Inge, and Marloes; in Cameroon, thanks to Pochi Tamba Nsoh, Georgette Arrey Taku, and RENATA; in Venezuela, thanks to Irlanda Espinoza, Gabriela Uassouf, and the *Circulos Femininos Populares*; with the Tribal Council of California, thanks to Tami Tejada and Anita Anaya; and in Bosnia, thanks to Shannon Sullivan and Dzana. Thanks to those who have supported me in so many ways along the way: Joyce Bylander, Sue Gilius, Lonna Malmsheimer, Sharon O'Brien, and Kim Rogers—and to my family—*Abrazos Fuertes*.

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