

On Globalizing Gender Justice

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The question of who controls women's bodies – men, the state, church, the community or the women themselves – was one of the most important underlying issues of the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994. Although women have, traditionally, been identified with the body, they have not been seen as owners of their bodies. The fact that at the I.C.P.D. the traditional viewpoint was forcefully challenged by a large number of Muslim women indicates that Muslim women are ready to stand up and be counted.

The primary interest of the Cairo conference was on "population" issues focusing on the body, rather than "development" issues focusing on the whole person. My hope is that at the Beijing conference women in general and Muslim women in particular can shift from asserting autonomy over their bodies in the face of strong opposition from patriarchal systems to speaking of themselves as full and autonomous human beings who have not only a body but also a mind and a spirit. What do Muslim women – who along with Muslim men have been designated as God's viceregents on earth by the Koran – understand to be the meaning of their lives? Reacting against the Western model of human liberation no longer suffices. The critical issue that Muslim women must reflect on, prior to and at Beijing, is: What kind of model(s) of self-actualization can be developed within the framework of Islam that takes account of Koranic ideals as well as the realities of the contemporary Muslim world?

I believe strongly that feminist theology (or a study of Islam's primary sources from a nonpatriarchal perspective) can empower women to combat gender inequality and injustice. A grant from the Ford Foundation in Cairo for the last several months has enabled me to work on a monograph titled *Muslim Women: From the I.C.P.D. to Beijing*, which examines the main theological assumptions that have been used to legitimize gender inequality in Muslim culture, as well as the practical issues that Muslim women have to deal with. The monograph, as well as a number of working papers, will be disseminated and used at the conference. My fear is that women – particularly Muslim women who come from a culture in which millions of people live in grinding poverty and illiteracy – will not have the courage to confront their history. My hope and prayer is that there will be enough women and men of vision, courage and commitment at Beijing that, despite all the difficulties and darkness that surround them, they will light the way to a world that has a greater prospect of justice for all.

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