

Perspectives on women's issues in the Arab world excerpted from various publications

From *The Nation*, Vol. 261, No. 7, September 11, 1995:

“The question of who controls women’s bodies — men, the state, the 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 ICPD, 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 a mind and a spirit as well. What

do Muslim women — who, along with Muslim men, have been designated as God’s vice-regents on earth by the Qur’an — 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 upon, prior to and at Beijing, is: What kind of models of self-actualization can be developed within the framework of Islam that take account of Qur’anic 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 non-patriarchal perspective) can empower women to combat gender inequality and injustice....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.”

— *Dr. Rifaat Hassan, Director, Religious Studies Program, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, U.S.A.*

From *Elle Magazine (French Edition)*, August 21, 1995:

Elle published a special report on “The Conditions of Women in the World: Something Out of the Middle Ages?” Some of the facts published in the report include the following:

Political Power

“There are only seven women heads of state in the world, and they are from Sri Lanka, Ireland, Iceland, Nicaragua, Turkey and Pakistan.”

Work

“Women perform two-thirds of the work in the world, but earn only one-tenth of world revenue! Who gets the other nine-tenths?”

“If women’s unpaid housework and farm work were compensated, world production would increase by 20 to 30 percent.”

“The rate of women’s unemployment is higher than that of men’s in every country in the world.”

“In Algeria, a man who does not approve of his wife working can legally force her to quit her job.”

Property

“Only one percent of world property belongs to women, this includes land, real estate, and enterprises.”

World Conflicts

“In all wars, women become victims. According to Amnesty International, during the First World War, civilians represented only five percent of all war victims. Women’s fatality rate during wartime rose to 50 percent during the Second World War, and in the 1990s, it has reached nearly 80 percent....From 1981 until 1993, the number of refugees in the world more than doubled, reaching 20 million, 80 percent of whom are women and their dependent children. Currently, there are nearly 100 million women and children displaced inside the borders of their own countries.” [In Lebanon, nearly one-sixth of the population is still displaced from their homes as a result of the war, which ended in 1990. — Editor]

Rape

"The Nuremberg Charter, established in London in 1945 between France, Great Britain, Russia and the United States, did not consider rape as a war crime, contrary to the Tokyo Tribunal, which considered it as such since 1946. Only since 1992, following disturbing revelations about "ethnic cleansing" in the former Yugoslavia during which up to 60,000 women may have been raped, did the International Tribunal decide to consider rape as a crime against humanity. This decision was officially adopted by the court only one year ago, in 1994. In the Arab world, rape during war-time was most pronounced during the Gulf War (when many Kuwaiti women were said to have been raped by Iraqi soldiers), and during the recent conflict in Algeria, during which women not conforming to strict Islamic dress codes have been raped and/or murdered by the Islamic Salvation Front. [In Lebanon, on the other hand, despite sixteen years of civil war, there were scarcely any cases of rape- Editor.] In Bangladesh, a 13-year old girl was sentenced by a religious tribunal to 101 lashes in public because she was unmarried and pregnant as a result of rape. The girl, unable to find four witnesses to confirm that she had been forced to have sex against her will, was judged by the tribunal as being guilty of illicit sexual relationships."

Domestic Violence

"The United Nations has recently published a report stating that 'the most important facilitator of violence against women is without any doubt the inaction of governments towards crimes committed against women, especially domestic violence'. Even if laws against domestic violence do exist in a given nation, the report continues, most countries invoke local customs, traditions and religion to justify their occurrence. In many countries in the Arab world, domestic violence is neither reported nor punished. It is considered a private family issue. In Egypt, for instance, a man may kill his own wife if he witnesses her in an adulterous act and he will not necessarily be prosecuted or punished, as he can defend the killing as in keeping with the "code of honor." In India and Pakistan, women without sufficient wedding dowries often die in 'cooking accidents' resulting from being doused in kerosene and set on fire by their husbands or in-laws in search of a better dowry."

Genital Mutilation

"Clitoral excision still exists in forty different countries in the world, most in Africa. In Egypt, 91.8 percent of all women are genitally mutilated, and each year 1300 girls, aged less than ten, perish as a result of these operations performed under unsanitary conditions. Genital mutilation is unjustly associated with

Islam. It is a practice dating back centuries before the Islamic conquests of the African continent. However, the problem is that clitoral excision is perpetuated and performed by women who believe that it is an essential rite of passage for girls to become women. In Asia and Africa, there are 100 million women who undergo genital mutilation, and in Sudan, the painful and dangerous practice of infibulation is still performed on young girls."

Legal Code

"In Sudan, women who do not follow the modesty code can receive up to 40 lashes as a result of the new penal code, instituted by the military government in 1991. In Iran, this has already been the case for a dozen years. In Algeria, the family code voted into law in 1984 casts women in the role of perpetual minors from a legal perspective. They are not permitted to travel, to marry, or to work without the consent of a legal guardian, whether father, brother, husband or son."

Health

"In developing countries, life expectancy for women is only 43 years, while in Europe, most women can expect to live well into their seventies and even eighties. Each year, approximately half a million women (30 percent of whom are still adolescents) die as a result of complications of pregnancy or childbirth. In these less developed countries, women are 16 times more likely to die while pregnant than are women in industrialized countries.

Except for Tunisia and Zambia, abortions are not permitted in Africa. A Nigerian woman would be sentenced to 14 years imprisonment if she was discovered to have had an abortion. In Iran, an abortion is considered homicide. In Turkey, a woman may terminate her pregnancy only with the permission of her husband.

In China, India and South Korea, women often use ultra-sound tests to determine the sex of their unborn babies. If the baby is a girl, many women feel pressured to abort it. This practice is already leading to a shortage of females in China. By the year 2000, 70 million Chinese men will not be able to find wives."

Education

"There are 948 million illiterate people in the world, and 66 percent of them are women! UNESCO does not foresee a decrease in that figure until the year 2000. The average number of years during which girls attend school in the developing world is 2.7, half as much as boys."

Translated from French by Wafa Stephan Tarnowski