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Amnesty International Launches Campaign to Protect Women's Rights

In preparation for the Fourth U.N. World Conference on Women, The U.S. branch of Amnesty International has launched a campaign to draw attention to increasing abuses of women's basic human rights around the world. The campaign, entitled "Human Rights are a Woman's Right," will urge governments to do more than sign documents and make speeches about the need to protect women's basic rights; effective and decisive action is required to end such abuses as mass rape, public floggings and extra-judicial killings of women around the world. According to a recent Amnesty International report, women have become the invisible victims of the 1990s. They are the primary casualties of ethnic conflicts, constitute 80 percent of the world's refugees, and are the targets of human rights violations on a horrifying scale. Amnesty's current campaign hopes to hold governments more accountable and also aims to speak for thousands of women "who have been silenced by shame and fear." The campaign consists of five components: 1) launching a massive public education effort; 2) targeting abusive governments; 3) taking specific action on behalf of women at risk; 4) spotlighting the human rights activism of women around the world; and 5) confronting the community of world governments. The keystone of the campaign will be a 15-point program to protect women's human rights. For more information, contact your local branch of Amnesty International, or write to Amnesty International-USA, 322 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10001.

Egyptian Court Rules that Happily-Married Couple Must Divorce

In an unprecedented decision which was announced on June 14, 1995, an official Egyptian court ruled that a married

Arab Women's Beijing Women's

The following list of priorities for Arab women in relation to the Fourth International Women's Conference, to be held in Beijing September 4-15, were recently issued by a committee of Arab women activists and specialists during the preparatory conference held in March at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. These priorities will provide Arab participants with guidelines and serve as a basis for discussions and decision-making at the conference.

1. To strengthen the basis of the democratic process in both the political and social realms; to ensure the sanctity of human rights and the amendments of legislation that target the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women, in particular, family laws.

2. To ensure the immediate and complete withdrawal of foreign occupation forces from the Arab region to achieve a just and comprehensive peace based on international legitimacy and to safeguard the rights of its people to self-determination and freedom of choice.

3. To ensure the basic human rights of freedom for victims of armed conflict and occupation, such as refugees, displaced peoples, political deportees, political prisoners, and in particular, women and children.

couple, Professor Nasr Abu Zeid and his wife of more than ten years, Ibtihal Younis, must divorce on the grounds that Dr. Abu Zeid is an apostate. The respected Egyptian professor of literature has been branded an atheist and an infidel by Islamic militants because of his controversial views on the *shari'a* (Islamic Law). According to Islamic law, any Muslim who renounces his faith cannot remain married to a Muslim. Hence, the court's unexpected ruling implies that the couple, if found together alone, will be considered adulterers and may face harsh yet legitimate punishment -- even death -- for their abrogation of the law. Ibtihal Younis voiced the sentiments of all hu-

Priorities and the Conference

4. To ensure the commitment of all governments to the international conventions on banning the dumping of wastes and nuclear by-products in the Arab region in order to protect the lives of women and children.

5. To urge all governments to sign and ratify the International Conventions for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women without any reservations, and subsequently to incorporate these elements within their respective national civil laws to eradicate all forms of oppression against women.

6. To protect the lives and properties of Palestinian women and families who are suffering from foreign occupation and/or living in refugee camps.

7. To strengthen the international cooperation and support of Arab Women's NGOs, particularly those under foreign occupation and suffering as a result of economic sanctions.

8. To condemn fundamentalism and cultural extremism, which can lead to terrorism and violence against women.

9. To promote social development to counteract the negative impact of applied structural adjustment programs and to ensure the basic human needs of women.

man rights activists, intellectuals and feminists in the Arab world when she told a reporter that "we are in a state of shock. This verdict is a disgrace to the Egyptian judiciary; the court has submitted to the will of the Islamists."

The June 14th ruling was only the latest episode in a three-year confrontation between Dr. Abu Zeid, a faculty member at Cairo University, and Egyptian Islamists. At issue are writings and statements by Dr. Abu Zeid which interpret the Qur'an and certain aspects of Islamic theology from an objective and secular perspective. Islamic militants are particularly outraged over Dr. Abu Zeid's

claims that a revered 8th century legal scholar, Imam al-Shafie, set down an interpretation of Islam's meaning and legal system which was too narrow and delimited. Because of these views, Islamists have labeled Abu Zeid an atheist and infidel. Islamic militants first took the case of Abu Zeid's marriage to court, without the permission of the couple, in 1993. At that time, Abu Zeid placed and won an appeal blocking the Islamists' move from a lower court, but the Islamists appealed, and last month the Cairo Appeal Court for Personal Status Issues reversed the lower court's earlier verdict in favor of the couple. Abu Zeid and Younis are now lodging an appeal for the court to reconsider the case, in the hope that the negative international reaction to the court's decision will facilitate repeal of the ruling. With the 1992 murder of Egyptian journalist Farag Foda, who was also accused of apostasy, fresh in their memories, Abu Zeid and Younis are living in daily fear for their lives.

Human rights activists in Egypt and abroad consider the court's astounding ruling to be as dangerous as it is unprecedented. Not only has the court's verdict transformed Dr. Abu Zeid into a legitimate target for militants ready to murder in the name of their faith, it has also called into question the inviolability of human rights, the independence of the judiciary, the future of personal status laws, and the extent of democratic freedoms in Egypt. According to a spokesman for the Egyptian Association for Human Rights, "on the basis of this verdict, anyone can be accused of being an infidel." Readers can voice their concerns by sending letters of protest to the Egyptian embassy in their country, or by sending letters to the Egyptian Ministry of Justice in Cairo.

Pope John Paul II Apologizes for Church's Oppression of Women

In a sixteen-page letter which is widely viewed by women's groups as an effort to win support for the Vatican's position at

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the upcoming United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing, Pope John Paul II apologizes to women throughout the world for the church's historic complicity in their oppression. Although phrased in general terms, the letter contains language and ideas of a far more feminist tone than any previous statements or declarations made by the Pontiff. Calling for increased respect for women and sensitivity to their needs, the letter also claims that "there is an urgent need to achieve real equality in every area: equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancements, equality of spouses with regard to family rights and recognition of everything that is part of the rights and duties of citizens in a democratic state." Recognizing women's significant achievements and sacrifices inside and outside of the home, the Pope expressed admiration for "those women of good will who have devoted their lives to defending the dignity of womanhood by fighting for their basic social, economic and political rights, demonstrating courageous initiative at a time when this was considered extremely inappropriate, the sign of a lack of femininity, a manifestation of exhibitionism, and even a sin." Although the letter heralds a new awareness in the Vatican of women's views, concerns and grievances, the Pope has not signaled any dramatic changes in official church policy: women's ordination, divorce, abortion and birth control are still considered beyond the pale of acceptability.

Women's Role in Science Reconsidered

The latest issue of *Sci-Quest*, the publication of the Science Sub-Committee of the Alumni Association of the American University of Beirut, featured as its key theme "Women in Science." The choice of this intriguing theme was explained by the members of the Science Sub-Committee in their editorial, which stated that "women...would bring a new dimension to science, making it less masculine and more completely human." The Sub-Committee cited a quotation by the famous British novelist, Virginia Woolf, who once noted that "science, it would seem, is not sexless; she is a man, a fa-

ther, and infected, too."

The issue contains eight articles focusing on the history and philosophy of women in science, the differences in scientific endeavor among males and females, the life of female scientists, and the claimed biological differences among the two genders that lead many people to argue that males are more talented in sciences than are females. Most important, the issue contains two articles that represent a statistical framework of the problem in Lebanon. The first addresses gender and university education in Lebanon, and the second surveys women physicians at the American University of Beirut Medical School. These two articles attempt to show the status of women in the scientific field in Lebanon compared to women's status in other, comparable countries. It is hoped that this issue of *Sci-Quest* will spark interest among researchers in the Middle East to undertake projects relevant to their own societies.

Sci-Quest is a quarterly publication of the Science Sub-Committee of the Alumni Association of the American University of Beirut. Issues can be obtained by writing to the following address:

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