We thank WOMANKIND Worldwide for their financial assistance for the production of two issues of the WAF Journal in 1995. WOMANKIND is a development agency supporting women’s initiatives for change. WOMANKIND supports women in developing countries who are struggling to overcome poverty and marginalisation.

WOMANKIND does not set up projects, instead, they respond to proposals put to them by women who have their own ideas about how to improve their situation and that of their wider communities.

WOMANKIND also supports women’s wish to have their voices heard, particularly on issues which are of concern to the wider community. WOMANKIND think it is particularly important that the wider public get a chance to hear and debate women’s alternative views on complex and deeply felt issues such as that of religious fundamentalism.

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Editorial

This issue of the journal appears in the wake of a number of significant UN events where the issue of women's rights — particularly our right to an autonomous sexuality and to control of reproduction — has been a central theme. We carry reports from women involved in WAF activities in Cairo and Beijing. In the forefront of the denial of women's rights have been fundamentalists of various religions. In Cairo the Vatican was the major antagonist, but governments of many Southern countries also opposed women's access to informed choice, in the name of tradition and culture. If the vexed meaning of reproductive rights was highlighted in press reports from Cairo, lesbianism was reportedly one of the hot potatoes at the UN Decade of Women Conference in Beijing. This was largely because the Chinese Government made it so, by initially refusing to accredit 'lesbian' groups, and then by harassing known or out lesbians at the conference itself.

These are but two sides of the same coin. The defence of traditional family structures, and the proposition that the proper sphere for the expression of women's sexuality is within these structures (under the control of men) are at the heart of the opposition to women's autonomy in the sexual sphere. That such opposition — based on fear, uncertainty and the naked protection of men's power — is not confined to religious fundamentalists is clear from recent political debate about single mothers in Britain; but it is religious fundamentalists across the world who voice it in the boldest and most effective way, appropriating liberal arguments about cultural relativism where it suits them. For example, Vatican foreign minister Jean Louis Turen recently accused the Beijing plan of 'imposing a Western type of household'.

Our debate section concentrates on the issue of reproductive rights, or as Gayatri Spivak calls it in her leading piece — population control. Rayah Feldman from WAF replies to her. At bottom, their disagreement reflects a significant difference of emphasis. Spivak concentrates on the exploitative nature of some Northern-led 'family planning' programmes, which by themselves do nothing to alleviate poverty and little for the emancipation of women. But, as Feldman points out, that is not the whole story. Poor women all over the world are demanding control over their fertility, including access to abortion. Where Spivak and Feldman would agree is that some Northern feminists underplay the significance of population control as a strategy for reducing poverty, without challenging its root causes, and discuss reproductive rights outside a broader political and economic context. They fail to recognise that reproductive rights are only part of a larger package, involving women's access to legal protection, healthcare, information, and above all, economic independence. Sajeda Amin and Sara Hosseini's article, focusing on Bangladesh, highlights some of these wider issues. Reports from a number of countries, in South America and Eastern Europe, complement the debate section by illustrating the difficulties faced by millions of women in obtaining access to safe control of their fertility.

We report also on a conference in New York which echoes the themes of Cairo and Beijing. Nearer to home, we carry reports of two public meetings organised by WAF in London, which attempt to make links between women's experiences in different parts of the world.

Some pieces look forward to the main theme of our next issue. In particular Frances Kissling's account of Catholic women in the US organising against the religious hierarchy, Julia Bard's of dissident Jewish women in Britain, and Michael McClure and Terri Murray's attempt to provide a lesbian and gay Christian apologetics, describe movements from within a religious framework. We hope to develop this in our next issue, by addressing the theme of women, feminism and religion. How much space is there in the major religions to develop and promote feminist perspectives? And for women (who may or may not be feminists) what strengths does religious belief provide? We will invite contributions from a variety of perspectives, but we also welcome unsolicited contributions from our readers.

NOTE
1. Thanks to Sonia Corrêa for the quotation.
Public hearing on crimes against women

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

I am a South Asian who lives and works in the United States as well as South Asia. I will relate the testimonies we have heard this morning to this experience. Because of the peculiarity of this experience, my argument might seem too polarized between North and South. However, as Frances Tardif’s (Quebec Federation for Family Planning) testimony made clear, my words apply also to the South in the North - “Native American women, women of colour, migrant women, disabled women, women of little education and poor women.” Whenever I say ‘South’, please also hear “the South in the North.”

A large part of Northern women’s energy at this conference is devoted to the wording of the UN document regarding reproductive rights. I have no doubt that the language of the declaration is of the utmost importance. Yet I am also absolutely convinced, and so should you be after our testimonies, that at the grassroots level, where doctors and health workers coerce helpless women at the bequest of governments that are obliged to accept population control as part of a so-called ‘aid’ package, the delicate nuances of the wording of a United Nations declaration do not make much difference. Do not for a moment think I am asking you to relax your interest in wording. But, as the statements of the testifiers should make it clear, we have to look at what is taken for granted in the debate over wording. It is my view that, unless some of its assumptions are changed, this conference cannot be considered international. To demonstrate this I will focus on the most controversial issue at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD): abortion. This is the issue around which the news media the world over is dramatizing this conference.

In the debate over wording, it is taken for granted by both sides that the issue of reproductive rights can be reduced to abortion. Farida Akhter has already stated forcefully that we are not against abortion. Let me quote from Peoples Perspectives, the journal she edits, to assure you through our published statement: “We are against criminalizing women for seeking abortion by the state or any religious institutions in any country of the world. Safe and reliable methods of abortion must be available for women who do not want to carry out the pregnancy. At the same time, we are against commercializing the need of women for abortion services by making it a profit making venture” (Peoples Perspectives, 1, August 1995, p. 1).

Speaking from this position, I urge that to reduce reproductive rights to the issue of abortion is to forget the poor women of the South. Let me clarify with a simple example.

Let us assume two women losing weight. One is dieting and the other starving. We decide to do a comparative study of the two from the point of view of weight loss alone and we claim weight loss as the most crucial right. To reduce reproductive rights to abortion seems to us to be similarly North centred – decontextualized. Remember we are not against access to legal and safe abortion. But we feel that to focus much of the energy of a conference as large as this upon the right to abortion provides the North with a huge alibi.

In a situation where extreme poverty made children mean social security, the right to abortion is immaterial. In a situation where coercive contraception lays waste a woman’s reproductive and general health, the right to abortion is immaterial. In a situation where the absence of resources makes it impossible to think of male and female children becoming equally competitive in future, the right to abortion may facilitate the removal of female foetuses, where internalized gendering is misrepresented as women’s choice.

Even the most patriarchal systems now allow abortion in the case of rape. It is interesting that the question: why do men rape? is left as much out of this provision as is the question: why should a poor woman of the South, or a disabled woman anywhere, want an abortion?

Focusing reproductive rights so intensely on abortion assumes that the able woman of the North is a person endowed with subjectivity and that the poor woman of the South should of course want what she herself wants.

In the service of ethnocentrism, a profound silencing mechanism is at work. Any position critical of the construction of abortion as the master-symbol of reproductive rights is immediately read as a sign of extreme cultural and religious conservatism.
addition, the Holy See has appropriated the language of women's choice and women's education. We hold no position against religion as a bearer of culture. But when the great patriarchal religions offer education as an excuse, they mean the internalization of patriarchal constraints masquerading as choice; just as women's education in the context of so-called Development means, either, preparation to enter a workforce devoted to mortgaging the future of a developing nation in the interest of export-based investment and resource-intensive technology; or the education of the elite into consumerism (or into sponsorship of population and development policies), so that they too, like former President George Bush, can say: 'Our lifestyle is not negotiable.'

Consider in this perspective the following statement by the US State Department:

One key aspect of the US belief in strong South-North Partnership is reflected in our position on consumption issues. The United States, and all nations, have an obligation to address unsustainable consumption patterns. In the US, we have developed a variety of policies and programs to improve the efficiency with which we use resources. And thus to lower our national consumption consistent with our Rio treaty commitments, we will work for strong language in the Cairo document that recognises, within the context of sustainable development, that consumption patterns in the North must be addressed along with rapid population growth in the South (Department of State Outgoing Telegram No SHC 7112, March 1994, item No 15).

What we have heard today tells us that the bodies of poor women in the South are being used as dumping grounds for surplus contraceptives produced by transnational pharmaceutical companies. We have seen that dangerous permanent methods and long-term contraceptives are preferred because these women are considered objects, incapable of choice. If we focused on these issues rather than abortion which, for the larger part of the world, is not unimportant but secondary, we would be looking at the increasing poverty that leads to excessive childbearing as social security. This conference is about Population and Development. By keeping our eyes focused on abortion as the central controversy, we contribute to the objectification of the women of the South and allow Development to be an alibi for exploitation. It is a hopeful sign that the International Steering Committee of the NGO Forum took a strong stand against the World Bank, IMF and GATT. It remains for us all to emphasize that population control is part of the so-called aid package that devastates the South. I quote from the same State Department document:

The United States is committed to working in the Cairo process to strengthen the partnership between the developed and the developing world — Dr Mira Shiva's comments prepare us to ask 'what partnership?' — on population issues. We have common interests in promoting sustainable economic development, — 'for whom?' — stabilizing population growth — 'what does the code word 'stabilization' mean?' — and protecting our shared global environment (ibid. item No 13).

If you are interested in language, consider that the World Bank has chosen the phrase 'Fertility Decline in Bangladesh' as a 'Success in A Challenging Environment' (Title, booklet for the Population Reference Bureau, Washington: 1993). If you are interested in image, consider the picture on the cover of its brochure on the Middle East and North Africa: the hardhaired white woman pondering leadership as the modern Arab woman in culturally-approved garb points the way to go ('A Population Perspective on Development: the Middle East and North Africa,' Washington: the World Bank, August 1994).

Whatever the outcome of this conference, we call upon our Northern sisters — not many of whom are present here — to situate abortion as an important but society-specific issue, and to examine the political economy of reproductive rights redefined with a global focus. Do not silence, or worse, ghettoize — as you have done today by your absence — the critical voice of the South between fundamentalism and racism.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a Professor at Columbia University and the author of Speak Reader (Routledge, 1995).

NOTES
1. This is an unedited version of the first of three speeches delivered at the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, September 1994.
Reply to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Rayah Feldman

In her article, Gayatri Spivak makes an impassioned claim both against an alleged focus on abortion within the international reproductive rights movement, and for the centrality of population control as the focus of this movement. Gayatri Spivak is an influential writer, and, in presenting herself as a South Asian, she also implicitly presents herself as a representative of women of the South, who, she believes, have an intrinsically different interest in reproductive rights from those in the North. Precisely because reproductive rights are an issue of such fundamental importance to all women, not least to poor women in both the South and the North, it is worth examining her arguments in some detail.

She makes three main points:

1. Abortion is not an issue for poor Southern women who have to have lots of children in the absence of any other social security provision for the elderly.

2. In the climate of public international discussion of reproductive rights, Northern feminists are reducing such rights to abortion and ignoring reproductive abuses involved in population control.

3. Support for women’s education by the North is really a covert attempt either to maintain the subordination of women, and/or reduce fertility in the South without reducing poverty.

She therefore calls for the reconsideration of abortion more firmly in the context of what she calls the “political economy of reproductive rights redefined with a global focus”, by which she means opposition to reproductive abuses in the name of family planning.

The most important claim in Gayatri Spivak’s article is that abortion is not an issue for poor women. “In a situation where extreme poverty makes children mean social security the right to abortion is immaterial.” In this statement Gayatri Spivak ignores the reality of abortion in the lives of countless poor Southern women. In doing so she repeats the fallacy that she accuses Northern feminists of committing, of denying the subjectivity of poor Southern women. For Gayatri Spivak, to be poor is to need children as social security. This may certainly be true. She does not mention that children also confer social status on women in many cultures. For this reason, religious and nationalist appeals to tradition have a resonance with many women who do achieve prestige as childbearers. The Vatican has recently used precisely this argument in accusing the Beijing Conference document of “imposing on the world a Western type of household.”

Nevertheless, although women may want children for a multiplicity of reasons, poor women are not a homogeneous entity who always, and without exception, want as many children as possible at all times. There are many occasions when poor Southern women do not want children, as evidenced by the demand for contraceptive services, and for abortion, when other methods are unavailable or have failed.

Margi Berer made the point eloquently in relation to the Cairo conference. “Apart from the views of the anti-abortion lobby, the most problematic view the conference needs to confront is that abortion is not a method of family planning. What is family planning then, from women’s point of view? How can the right to prevent an unwanted pregnancy exclude the right to prevent an unwanted birth? As if family planning is only possible as long as the plans do not fail. As if contraception never failed either.”

Both a special issue of Reproductive Health Matters and a report from the Africa Region of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) give countless examples of the effect of illegal, unsafe abortions performed on poor women. The IPPF document gives an estimate of 3.32 million unsafe abortions carried out in Africa in 1993, with an estimated 21,000 deaths. It reports a Kenyan study showing that nearly 70% of abortions involved either the insertion of foreign bodies or the use of traditional herbs or medicines, with only 30% of abortions medically induced.

Another Kenyan study in 1982 reported that 60% of gynaecological admissions in Kenyatta National Hospital in Nairobi were abortion cases. Of these, 62% were illegally induced. In 1985, 52% of maternal deaths at the same hospital were abortion related. 60% of these were of schoolgirls and unemployed women. In Enugu in Nigeria, 71% of women suffering from complications of unsafe induced
aborted were under 20 years old."

Are such women having abortions because they are not poor or because they are unconcerned about their economic security? The authors of a study of women who had abortions in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, show that either poverty is a factor in not wanting the birth of a child, or, in the case of students, the birth of a child would threaten rather than aid future economic security. Furthermore, the study reveals that nearly a quarter of the students and 30% of the adolescents were impregnated by partners over 45 years old; less than 9% had partners from their own age group, and in several cases, the sexual relationships which had given rise to the unwanted pregnancies were coercive.

The problem is by no means confined to Africa. A study of women who had incomplete abortions in Bogota, Colombia, where abortion is illegal, showed not only a high incidence of dangerous abortions, but also very frequent unwanted pregnancies.

Clearly abortion is not just a preoccupation of the rich. The reality is that it is a major health issue for millions of poor women, who in the struggle to control their fertility are all too often forced to turn to dangerous backstreet abortionists to prevent unwanted pregnancies. As Mpangile et al state, "By maintaining the current restrictive laws, we are actually denying a substantial number of poor women in our society access to the safe services that modern science and technology make possible. This amounts to denying equal treatment to the poor and the rich. At the moment it is the latter who can easily afford high prices for illegal pregnancy termination in the safe hands of private medical practice."

Gayatri Spivak's second claim is that Northern feminists reduce reproductive rights to the issue of abortion. Despite not a single example, this and similar claims are made repeatedly in the article: "it is taken for granted ... that the issue of reproductive rights can be reduced to abortion"; "abortion as the master-symbol of reproductive rights"; "focusing reproductive rights so intensely on abortion.

It is certainly true that abortion is a controversial subject and that it is being most vocally challenged where it has enjoyed a legal status this century — in some parts of the North, particularly in the USA. Abortion is also the issue on which the Vatican and other fundamentalists have recognised an opportunity to challenge a growing consensus on reproductive health matters. This is surely why abortion is such an important concern for Northern feminists. But there is a difference between fighting a key struggle in some places, and reducing reproductive rights as a whole to this single issue.

Why is Gayatri Spivak so insistent on belittling the importance of abortion for Southern women, even at the cost of playing straight into the hands of the Vatican and its friends who, as she rightly points out, have no interest in any reproductive rights for women? Ironically, it is because she has a reductionism of her own. She reduces reproductive rights to reproductive abuse carried out in the interest of population control: "The bodies of poor women in the South are being used as dumping grounds for surplus contraceptives produced by transnational pharmaceutical companies... Dangerous... permanent methods... are preferred because these women are considered objects, incapable of choice. If we focussed on these issues rather than abortion which, for the larger part of the world is not unimportant but secondary, we would be looking at the increasing poverty that leads to excessive childbearing as social security." (my italics)

If what Gayatri Spivak is really saying is that not enough attention was given to population control at the Cairo Conference, then she is right. Population control has been the motive for coercive and dangerous programmes of birth control in many Southern countries. Poor women, particularly, have been affected by programmes of birth control, abortion and sterilisation involving a lack of choice and of information, and often using dangerous, untested and experimental techniques without consent, and without adequate medical care and follow-up.

Gayatri Spivak argues that population control as a condition for development aid, is "an alibi for exploitation." The fashionable language of women's empowerment, initially promoted by feminists, and now enthusiastically appropriated by international agencies is meaningless for most women in the world today, for whom neither adequate health care nor sexual or economic autonomy are even in sight. In recent years, national and international policies such as structural adjustment programmes have led to increasing poverty and inequality in many debt-ridden countries, and to political repression to help implement and sustain them. A consequence in many countries has been a reduction in basic health care and an end to free education. Small wonder that young women turn to sugar-daddies to help finance their schooling and that sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, are spreading rapidly. This situation is, of course, also fertile ground for the spread of religious fundamentalism, which, far from improving the position of women, threatens it still further.

Gayatri Spivak is right that these issues are insufficiently addressed by many Northern feminists who tend to see reproductive rights out of any political or economic context, and thus unwittingly, play into the hands of the population controllers. Indeed, WAF members who attended the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 reported a lack of awareness on the part of many Western feminists of the connections between reproductive rights and such issues as poverty, structural adjustment policies, racist restrictions on population movement, and religious fundamentalism.
My quarrel with Gayatri Spivak is not with this criticism of some Northern feminists. My problem is that she crudely reduces reproductive rights to population control. Reproductive rights means the ability of all women to exercise control over their own fertility by means of access to safe and freely available methods of contraception, abortion and health care. For instance, the Indian feminist Madhu Kishwar has long defended the right of women to choose whether or not to have an abortion even though in her country abortion of female foetuses has become widespread in recent years. For her, reproductive rights are not reducible to this particular reproductive abuse despite the fact that it reflects the devaluation of women. Rather than narrow the debate over reproductive rights by arguing that this or that issue is of no concern to a particular group of women, we need to extend it and struggle to incorporate all reproductive rights within the broadest, international political agenda.

Kayah Feldman has been active in the women’s reproductive rights movement for many years and is a member of WAF and the National Abortion Campaign.

NOTES
1. Thanks to Sonia Garcia for this insight. Unpublished communication with WAF.
2. M Berer ‘Making abortion safe and legal: the ethics and dynamics of change’ Reproductive Health Matters, No 2, November 1993 p5. RHM is obtainable from 29-35 Farringdon Road, London EC1M 3JB
4. Ibid p9
5. All these statistics are derived from G Mpuangile et al ‘Factors associated with induced abortion in public hospitals in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in Reproductive Health Matters No 2, November 1993 pp21-22
6. Ibid. pp24-25
7. M Mora and J Villareal ‘Unwanted pregnancy and abortion in Bogota, Colombia’ Reproductive Health Matters No 2, November 1993
8. G Mpuangile et al, op. cit. p20
Women's reproductive rights and the politics of fundamentalism: A view from Bangladesh

Sajeda Amin and Sara Hossain

Will it be we, the women living in the Muslim city, who will pay the price...? Will we be sacrificed for community security in the coming rituals to be performed by all those who are afraid to raise the real problem — the problem of individualism and responsibility, both sexual and political?

We do not accept — and we will not accept — the concept of a single parent family or the concept of a family in its plurality of forms... Single parent family means a woman without a legal husband with a child without a legal father.

As women are gradually becoming more visible in public life, and are breaking the bonds of patriarchal control, they are also facing a backlash articulated in terms of the reassertion of cultural, traditional, and religious values. In the ensuing struggle over women's rights, rival interpretations of Muslim laws, reformist and anti-reformist, are enlisted by each of the parties for their own aid. What is forgotten in the process, however, are women's own experiences, and the struggle to bring those experiences to bear on the formulation of standards by which to secure women's rights.

ARTICULATING REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS IN BANGLADESH
The Constitution of Bangladesh of 1972 guarantees the right of life and personal liberty, to equality under the law, to non-discrimination on the grounds of sex, and to equal protection by the law. It provides, subject to 'reasonable restrictions', the right to freedom of association and freedom of thought, conscience, speech, and expression. There is an obligation upon the State to take all measures to ensure the right to health and education of all citizens.

However, to the extent that there is any articulation of reproductive rights in Bangladesh, it is focused on the right to health and derived from the principle that access to health and freedom from disease are basic needs. The family planning programme, instituted to meet demographic goals of reducing population growth, has been the principal source of contraception for women. Contraceptives are readily available at little or no cost to women all over the country. Denial of access to contraception, therefore, is not perceived, at least by married women, as a major problem. In these circumstances, rather than criticizing the availability of contraception, women's groups have frequently criticized the family planning programme for its overzealous commitment to increasing contraceptive prevalence for fertility control, because the programme diverts attention from meeting the full range of women's reproductive health needs. Demographically-driven programmes are accused of treating women as objects and being a means towards achieving population control objectives.

It is not surprising, therefore, that women's demands for reproductive health services are voiced in terms of freedom from violence, coercion, and inappropriate use of reproductive technology. The equally important focus on women's needs in positive terms such as better access to health services, better quality services, more diverse health services, and services for health needs other than for fertility...
control, receives less attention. Again, there are few attempts to explicitly articulate the notion of the right to reproductive health or freedom, including the right to reproductive self-determination. Women's groups in Bangladesh have largely remained conspicuously silent on the issue of sexuality. This silence exists despite highly publicized events of extremely grave violations of women's rights. These violations have not directly infringed on access to the means of reproductive control, but instead, involved digressions from socially acceptable sexual practices.

LEGAL BASIS OF FAMILY PLANNING
All family planning services, other than abortion, are legal. (By social consensus, contraception and related services are only provided to married women). However, abortion during the first trimester is widely practiced under the name of Menstrual Regulation (MR). MR services were initially justified as preventing botched abortions and consequent maternal mortality; it fulfills its legal basis in an interpretation that it is "an interim method to establish non-pregnancy." This effectively removes it from the Penal Code. MR services have been widely available since the late 1970s as part of the family planning programme and provided at government health facilities free of cost by government functionaries who receive high quality training.

Despite the widespread practice of MR, the criminal status of abortion undoubtedly contributes to the current moral ambiguity of the practice. In most rural contexts, MR/abortions are carried out secretly, because the woman obtaining the abortion and anyone known to have facilitated the process may face serious repercussions, including social sanctions. Although there are no reported court decisions regarding prosecutions for abortion, if a situation involving MR/abortion is exposed, it may be heard before informal village tribunals (shalish), in particular if the abortion is the product of an illicit relationship or adultery.

RISING CONTRACEPTIVE PREVALENCE IN BANGLADESH
Bangladesh has been noted for the very rapid rise in contraceptive use over a relatively short period. Most demographers attribute the rapidly changing fertility profile that has accompanied rising contraception to an aggressive family planning programme.

The Bangladesh Government declared population its number-one problem in 1975, and combined an elaborate family planning programme with a strong motivational campaign, which has been backed by extensive external financial support. The programme emphasizes access to contraceptive services and delivers them at the doorstep of women even in remote rural areas.

The use of modern contraceptives rose from 7.7% in 1973 to 30% in 1989 and 45% in 1993. Access to contraception went from being available to less than 10% to nearly 50% of married women. Contraceptive use is even higher among women who participate in credit schemes meant to give women independent access to cash and income.

RELIGIOSITY AND RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION TO CONTRACEPTION
A recent analysis of factors that affect women's contraceptive use shows that religiosity (as measured by both the frequency with which women pray and self-assessment) is not statistically associated with use of modern reversible contraceptives. However, religious fervour does affect the decision to adopt sterilization as a contraceptive method. In other words, women who report themselves as most religious are less likely to use sterilization as a method of contraception. Female sterilization has always faced the most severe opposition, primarily because doctors who perform the procedure are very often men. It is perceived, therefore, as a violation of the rules of seclusion that prohibit women's contact with non-kin.

Religious leaders voiced early opposition to the aggressive family planning campaign. The most common obstacles to birth control were social ostracization, refusal for burial, and lashings and other sentences imposed by shalish tribunals. As the programme matured, this opposition gradually faded. It is not uncommon, however, for fear of religious reprisals to make women unwilling to accept certain contraceptive services.

The family planning programme has addressed religious opposition through educational programmes for religious leaders. These programs provide information about the need to control population growth and the health benefits of reduced births. Additionally, there have been some concerted efforts to motivate religious leaders to make public pronouncements endorsing the use of family planning. For the most part, these pronouncements are based on liberal interpretations of the Quran. In 1985, in response to a request from the Government's Planning Commission, the Islamic Foundation published a book highlighting these liberal interpretations.

MUSLIM LAWS AND REPRODUCTIVE ISSUES
The practice of deploying progressive interpretations of Muslim laws in support of state-sponsored family planning programmes has found favour in a number of countries other than Bangladesh. Eminent religious leaders have issued among others these fatwas (religious opinions): I see no objection from the sharia point of view to the consideration of family planning as a measure, if there is a need for it, and if the consideration is occasioned by the people's choice and conviction without constraint or compulsion, in the light of their
circumstances, and on the condition that the means for affecting this planning is legitimate.

There is agreement among the exponents of jurisprudence that coitus interruptus, as one of the methods for the prevention of childbearing, is allowed. Doctors of religion inferred from this that it is permissible to take a drug to prevent childbearing, or even to induce abortion. We confidently rule in this fatwa that it is permitted to take measures to limit childbearing. (And the grounds on which contraception was considered permissible included economic, social, and medical factors).

Many jurists, however, rejected sterilization as a means of acceptable contraceptive practice, despite the absence of any prohibition on sterilization in either the Quran or the Hadith. Some jurists have pointed out that sterilization should be allowed in the absence of any specific textual prohibition, particularly because "the preservation of reproductive power was not one of the obligations under Islamic Law." In practice, in countries with significant Muslim populations, sterilization has been made illegal only in Iran and Saudi Arabia and is allowed in Egypt, Tunisia, India and Bangladesh.

In contrast to the relatively liberal position that jurists take on the issue of contraception, the juristic interpretation of the right to abortion has been more limited. For every school of interpretation except one, abortion is prohibited, except to save the mother's life, after the ensoulment of the foetus. Ensoulment of the foetus is considered to occur 120 days from conception. Jurists differ, however, as to whether and when abortion is permitted prior to ensoulment. The Hanafi school, which prevails in Bangladesh, permits abortion with justification before ensoulment. Several countries with a majority Muslim population have legislation permitting abortion within the first trimester, on the grounds of saving the woman's life, or for reasons of maternal health, or on any grounds whatsoever.

FURTHERING REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Given the liberty and range of interpretation of Muslim law on reproductive issues, any attempt to identify "a fateful triangle model that sees an inevitably ill-fated association between Islam, women and demographic outcomes" appears doomed at the outset. Similarly, any attempt to assert a monolithic and restrictive view of the "Islamic position" on reproductive rights would be misleading.

While the framework of Muslim laws permits the development and operation of family planning programmes, it remains unclear whether the framework of Muslim law alone can ensure women's reproductive rights. In contrast to other religious laws, Muslim laws are premised on the need to encourage marriage for all members of the Muslim faith. Muslim laws also assert that both parents in a marriage have a right to sexual enjoyment. In spite of such provisions, however, and while Muslim law may condone family planning, the notion that a woman may, for her own reasons, choose to adopt a contraceptive method is denied.

More importantly, personal laws that regulate rights within marriage in many Muslim countries establish a framework that denotes women equality and inhibits them from exercising their right to self-determination within the family. In particular, in the South Asian context, it has been argued that the combination of men's right to polygamy or unilateral divorce and women's lack of alternatives to marriage, restrain women from exercising the choice not to bear children. In this particular social and economic context, a woman's sole safeguard may be her ability to give birth to sons.

Moreover, traditional interpretations of Quranic verses and other sources of law tend to emphasize the inequality between men and women. While asserting that the introduction of Islam improved the status of women in Arabia, at the time of Mohammed, these traditional interpretations emphasize that Islam sanctions gender inequalities, particularly with respect to rights in marriage, rights to inheritance, and also establishes that one man's evidence is equivalent to that of two women.

The failure to establish that Muslim laws or Islam determine constraints on women's reproductive choices does not mean, however, that Islam or Muslim laws and beliefs are irrelevant with respect to reproductive issues. The powerful ideological influence of Islam ensures its impact on reproductive choices. This has prompted certain women's rights advocates (pre-eminently, Rifai Hassan and Fatima Mernissi) to adopt a strategy of attempting to reinterpret religious texts from a human rights and feminist perspective. They argue that texts used to legitimize women's inferiority should not be relied on outside their historical context, but instead be seen as limited to a particular historical context, and, therefore, subject to reinterpretation in an evolving society.

While such reformist strategies, which clearly situate themselves within the parameters of a religion, are useful for any community, their limitations need to be addressed. Reformist reinterpretations are unlikely to be accepted by religious leaders, and can offer no solutions across religious groups. A more effective strategy for establishing women's reproductive rights would ground such rights within an appropriate framework that takes into account, not only Islam and Muslim laws, and their varying interpretations, but also the specific cultural and political contexts of any society, and is based on a bedrock of universal human rights standards.
THE FUNDAMENTALIST CHALLENGE
The women's reproductive rights movement has faced challenges from all religious orthodoxies, as well as recent religious fundamentalist movements. Otherwise pitted against each other politically, religious fundamentalists, of whatever hue, appear to share a common agenda regarding the control of women's rights.

Interestingly, while Muslim fundamentalists have not directly threatened family planning programmes, they have reacted strongly to the assertion of women's reproductive rights within the context of such programmes. In their effort to challenge the ability of women to assert their reproductive rights, fundamentalist groups have sought to impose a monolithic and repressive interpretation of religious laws and religious views.

For example, Mouudud, a Pakistani religious leader, and founder of one of the leading Muslim fundamentalist parties, who was firmly opposed to family planning, selectively cited religious texts to support his claims that birth control was an anti-Islamic conspiracy, and that the introduction of family planning in developing countries would result in "the breakdown of the family and sexual promiscuity" and in women giving up their traditional roles.4

More recently, the Cairo Conference saw a coalition of Christian (led by the Vatican) and Muslim fundamentalists attempting, and succeeding in part, in restraining the affirmation and elaboration of women's reproductive rights. They strongly opposed the terminology used in the chapter of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action entitled Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Health and a small number of Muslim countries also opposed the language on women's empowerment. While some countries accepted the need for post-abortion counseling and care (including Bangladesh), the Programme of Action itself stated that no changes could be made regarding abortion law except by national legislatures.

An indicator of how fundamentalists will take up the challenge of Cairo domestically may be gauged by the following comments: "We do not accept the concept of a single parent family or the concept of a family in its plurality of forms ...." This commentator also appears particularly opposed to the provision of reproductive health care and information to adolescents and men. He argues that acceptance of these proposals would result in: a society in which extra-marital sex will be socially and legally permissible. Parents will have no control over their children. This has been prevalent in the West for the last half century and this has led to immoral behaviour, sexual anarchy, sexually transmitted diseases, more crimes, and more particularly, sexually related crimes.

In conclusion, he asserts: "As far as Bangladesh is concerned these offending clauses of the document offend our religious feelings, our culture and above all our civilization ... to agree to such a proposal would be ... unconstitutional."

Muslim fundamentalists thus deny more liberal interpretations of Muslim laws and foreclose the possibility of any further progressive interpretation. In seeking to impose an extremely authoritarian version of the sharia on an entire society, fundamentalists reveal their essentially autocratic agenda. Any attempt by an individual to assert her own sovereignty or right to self-determination is viewed as a challenge to the prevailing order. The combination of the individual and collective demands of women for social justice, explicitly insisting on a change in the distribution of power, may in this context provoke a violent response.

ATTACKS ON SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS
It is in the context of rehabilitation of fundamentalists in Bangladesh, despite its secular constitution, that the attack on women's sexual and reproductive rights has been launched. The increasing visibility of women in both urban and rural areas, prompted by women's employment in the garments sector and the activities of development organizations, has acted as a catalyst for such an attack.

The fundamentalists chose as their first target single women identified as having transgressed social norms. In a series of cases, fatwas were issued by imams or madressab principals, accusing women of zina (adultery/fornication), and sentencing them to punishments such as stoning, caning, and, in one particularly horrifying case, burning at the stake. Three women have died in such incidents. Other women who were accused by fatwas now face social ostracization. In each case, the fatwa was issued in the context of a shahish. A centuries-old method of alternative dispute resolution, the shahish is traditionally called upon to negotiate and mediate family or land disputes or petty criminal matters. Its judgements are usually accepted by both parties.

In the case described below, shahish authorities stepped far beyond their traditional bounds. Invariably composed of community and religious elders, the shahish tried and convicted women for acts that do not constitute offenses under Bangladeshi criminal law and sentenced them to punishments that also are not provided for by the prevailing law.

DULALI'S CASE
In one case, Dula, age twenty-five, became pregnant during an extra-marital relationship with Botu, another resident of her village. On discovering her
condition, her family arranged her marriage to another man. Her husband, on confirming his suspicions that she was pregnant, however, divorced her. Dulali’s family then reportedly called upon local elders to hold a shalish into the matter. At the shalish, Dulali was accused of zina and sentenced to be caned 101 times, to be administered seven days after the delivery of her child. No accusation was made against Boti, the man involved.

The execution of the sentence was pre-empted by the intervention of national women’s organisations and the consequent presence of the police in the village on the day appointed for the caning. Subsequently, all locals denied the shalish, the fatwa, and the sentence. Dulali is no longer able to live in the village.

Trial by shalish, as in the above case, is clearly illegal. Shalish authorities have invariably invoked the shari’a during these trials, although religious law is not applicable to criminal matters in Bangladesh. Shalish have no jurisdiction to hold trials for zina, which is not a criminal offence under Bangladeshi law. Although these shalish clearly violate the fundamental right to life and personal liberty, and the right to protection of the law, the failure of the State to respond promptly in each case has enabled perpetrators of such violence against women to escape with impunity.

Young women have been targeted by the community, led, in particular, by religious leaders, for having transgressed social and sexual norms. The risk of exposure and the lack of information combined to ensure that the options of contraception or abortion, which could have pre-empted the shalish and its ensuing consequences, were not available.

The focus of fundamentalist attacks shifted in their second phase to development organizations. Both the staff and the beneficiaries of a number of development projects faced threats of violence and criminal intimidation. Non-formal primary education schools, in which a large number of girls were enrolled and which provided secular education, were burned to the ground. Women receiving health care from NGOs were warned to boycott such organizations and were threatened with divorce if they failed to abide by such injunctions. Attacks continued to be targeted at sterilization programmes, with women who adopted sterilization being socially ostracized or refused religious burial rites.

THE BACKLASH EFFECT

Religious opposition to reproductive rights, in the wake of Cairo, has been identified as being fuelled by extremist groups and fundamentalists. Such opposition appears to be based, not on religious considerations, but rather on purely political considerations. Thus, fundamentalists are unable to provide any clear or comprehensive theological justifications for their position. They are compelled to attempt to whip up fears of a disintegration of social and moral order resulting from the application of reproductive rights.

Despite a steady trend of Islamization of the Bangladesh Constitution since independence, some far-reaching legislative interventions have been made, at times wholly at odds with the position under shari’a, and judicial interpretations have in certain instances also interpreted shari’a wherever possible, to allow for more equitable resolutions. In contrast, the failure to legislate in the arena of women’s reproductive rights effectively allows for the enforcement of such rights to be determined by community bodies solely on the basis of tradition or custom. In extreme situations, this, combined with the denial of information regarding reproductive health care and the lack of any access to such care, can result in situations such as those facing the fatwa victims described above.

The recent reaffirmation of reproductive rights at the Cairo Conference, combined with the existing legal foundations in international human rights law, as well as in the Constitution, provides an unassailable framework for women’s rights advocates to press for the enforcement of reproductive rights and freedoms. Specifically defining rights and elaborating their operation through the law is of importance insofar as this establishes easily recognizable and uniform standards to meet certain needs. The challenge for women’s rights advocates is to effectively use human rights law and the policy pronouncements at Cairo to establish the rights to reproductive security, health, and self-determination for Dulali, and all other women.

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NOTES
1. This is an extract from a longer article published in The American University Law Review Vol. 44, 1995.
Two members of Women Against Fundamentalism participated in the NGO Forum of the UN Conference on Population and Development which took place in Cairo in September 1994. They organised a workshop on "The political uses of religion, culture and ethnicity", together with Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Catholics for a Free Choice (who are featured elsewhere in this journal), Women In Black from Belgrade and the Palestinian feminist organisation Al Fanar. The workshop was one of a series organised by a variety of feminist groups from all over the world on the theme of "Reproductive Rights as Human Rights".

The following are excerpts from most presentations in the workshop:

**Nira Yuval-Davis, member of WAF and Reader in Gender and Ethnic Studies at the University of Greenwich:**

There appears to be two sides to this debate. On the one hand, we have imperialism as represented by a variety of international aid agencies and on the other hand we have the great world religions, especially Catholicism and Islam. However, we also have women — and what do we do as women vis-à-vis these two poles?

Women reproduce biologically, culturally and symbolically their ethnic and national collectivities, as well as the work force, their families and citizenship of the state. National and ethnic conflict and projects fulfill a very important role in understanding the issues of women's reproductive rights. Although imperialism and religion play a role in ethnic and national conflict, it's very important to understand that they cannot be reduced to this. There are three major discourses which are used regarding women's reproduction in relation to national and ethnic conflict: a discourse of people as power, a eugenistic discourse and a Malthusian discourse.

In the discourse of people as power, the future of the nation is seen to depend on continuous growth. Migration of people and having children are seen as the two major sources of population growth. Migration presents the danger that 'non-desirables' will come, so there's compromise, allowing in the least undesirable from the undesirable. The history of the migration policies of Australia and Canada are examples of this. Or women are turned to and told to have more children. In the Soviet Union and in Israel, there's the institution of the heroine mother who has 10 or more children.

There are eugenistic policies — Singapore's is the most developed example today, trying to encourage some women to reproduce and to discourage others. We have seen this in Britain too — because British traditions, manners and ideas are under threat — directed against poor women, black women, other minority women, and disabled women. Women from a higher class, the majority educated, are encouraged to have more children.

The Malthusian discourse occurs when the 'national interest' as defined by imposed structural adjustment policies, directs population control programmes.

Women are not just individuals, they are also members of their collectivities. We cannot talk about reproductive rights just looking at women as individuals. Reproductive rights campaigns should take account of this multiplicity and multi-dimensionality of identities, and we should not lose sight of the differential power of different collectivities in which women are members.

**Gita Sahgal is a film-maker and writer, and a member of Southall Black Sisters and WAF:**

I have been bewildered sometimes by some of the language that's used in speaking about this Conference in the media, by the reduction of the very complex ongoing arguments to a battle that is just pro- and anti-abortion, into a battle between the secular and religious, into a battle where the language of feminism and the language of anti-imperialism have been co-opted by both sides: by the American religious right — which has not been known to use it previously but is now using it as an attempt to ally with its right-wing allies in this part of the world — and also by the left. And where huge issues, such as development and migration are not being addressed to the same extent.

As an immigrant woman from India who works in Britain with a group of largely Asian women called Southall Black Sisters, we've been at the junctions of many of these debates, and in order to make ourselves heard about the competing claims of family, community, religion and state, we've
sometimes had to transform the terms in which these debates have been conducted. We set up separate organisations of black women, the reasons being firstly, we felt that the main feminist movements didn't address our agendas, and secondly, that issues of domestic violence and violence against women were not being addressed by the men in the community. We had to challenge the construction of the family within the community. More recently, we've had to fight against the constructions of the family that have derived their intellectual content from America — a language of family values derived from religious Christian discourse, but used by secular leaders. The political right uses a religious discourse when it's not itself a religious leadership.

When we took up the issue of the family within our communities we were attacked by religious leaders who said that we were going against our religions by daring to defy our fathers and our husbands and to challenge domestic violence and violence within the family. Quite often, we were attacked by the secular leaders of our communities who used religious arguments. These experiences led us into alliances with women from other communities. We fought with Irish women for the right to abortion and the right to information on abortion. We stood beside them on pickets of the Irish Embassy.

We've also taken up the cases of women in Bangladesh, where the religious right have been carrying out campaigns against voluntary organisations and have been attacking the progress of debates about reproductive rights and health, and where they've been successful to the extent that women have begun to organise themselves. In Bangladesh there's been an alliance led by women's groups which have united members of political parties. In one case, they formed a coalition of politicians from the right to the left.

Religion is used politically in many ways. Sometimes it's used in terms of traditional custom and practice, and what we've been seeing is a growth of movements of the right which sometimes use traditional custom and practice and insist on them. But there are some customs and traditions which have given women space, and we have tried to use those to fight against the ones that enforce control, severe repression and even murder against women. We have tried to use the combination of humanist possibility and spiritual discourse for women which gives them the courage to transform their lives.

**Stasa Zajovic, the founder of Women in Black, Belgrade, a women's organisation working against war and militarism:**

Sexism, nationalism and militarism are interlinked, and they affect the daily lives of women from all points of view and all the new states of the former Yugoslavia. The newly-formed nation states are based on the leading role of nationalist oligarchies. They marginalise and exclude all those who are different from an ethnic, religious, ideological and sexual point of view. Ethnic cleansing and other types of cleansing have been produced in this war, based on hatred towards others and the extermination of others. We know that the 'other' is first and foremost woman. Rape in war is a form of cleansing. Violence is a form of colonisation of the body of the woman, and has been used in this war as an instrument to conquer the territory of the enemy. Rape is also used to divide women, to reduce them exclusively to the role of reproductive organs, and to treat the children of the enemy — or as they say: "you carry within your entrails my son, the son of the enemy who will kill you one day".

All the cultural heritage of different national origins has been erased from textbooks, from books and from the media in the former Yugoslavia, in order to erase all this cultural heritage from people's memories — their memories of living together with others. Ideological cleansing means the so-called enemy or the traitors, and all nationalists, pacifists and feminists, are commonly attacked by the media and are sometimes harassed and physically attacked by the authorities.

Abortion is also a method of cleansing. At the moment when foetuses have a national value, the cleansing of the battlefield and cleansing of the woman's bodies are both different forms of the same cleansing of the woman raped in war. The double standards of population politics in the nation state shows the manipulation of cleansing. For the women of Serbia, there is a proposal in the Serbian Parliament to restrict abortions. But for the women of minorities with a high birth rate, such as the Albanian population, abortion is recommended.

Women throughout former Yugoslavia are subjected to different types of abuses by the military troops and the paramilitary troops as well. The Mothers Movement (MM) is a group of women demanding the return of their children from the war, wishing to save their sons. The MM was manipulated by civilian and military political structures and they've been used in Serbia and Croatia for the patriotic (or patriarchal) forced mobilisation of men, and given the role of looking after their husbands and fathers and sons who are going off to the war front. Women, therefore, have had to take on a great deal of responsibility — including for their sons deserting.

There are many types of sexual abuse in the war — forced prostitution in private prisons, brothels, night bars. There's also sex trafficking in some UN-based towns where women are subject to complete control and they have to obey strict rules of behaviour.

Women in this situation are used also as an instrument for purchasing social peace. In Serbia the state propaganda paints the role of mothers as victims and heroines, emphasising the unique unconditional mother's love.

Our ongoing, non-violent protest in Belgrade from October 1991 is also a way of sending a message to the regime, that a part of the Serbian collectivity don't speak on our behalf, we speak for ourselves.
Nawal Ass is co-ordinator of Al-Fanar, the Palestinian feminist organisation:

The status of Palestinian women is characterised by double coercion and subjugation — national coercion and social subjugation. This situation leads to the inability to separate women’s social struggle and national struggle. Anyone who believes that national and cultural oppression by Israel against Palestine has an equal impact on all strata is mistaken.

The group which suffers most is women, particularly those who belong to the poorer strata. The suppression of women is three-fold: social, national and economic. This leads to a link between the liberation of Palestinian women nationally and socially. The Israeli authorities exercise their national and cultural subjugation against the Palestinian masses through the strengthening of the patriarchal clan values and traditions which emphasise our backwardness. This facilitates the tightening of the grip on the Palestinians. This is carried out with the collaboration of the patriarchal authorities, as these leaders benefit from such collaboration.

It was stated here that the encouragement childbirth in Israel emanates from religious values. In my view, this is untrue, because the basic purpose of encouraging reproduction in Israel is political in the first place — to ensure a demographic growth of Israelis at the expense of the Palestinians.

Marieme Helie-Lucas is a sociologist and co-ordinator of an international solidarity network for women, Women Living Under Muslim Laws:

Nowadays, there’s a trend to enforce one single identity on us. We are in a time when we cannot choose our identity anymore in terms of religion, or country, or philosophy and we are forced, because we were born in a specific country or community, to belong for life to this community and to conform to the rules of these communities.

For me, an example of this is that the ex-Yugoslavia is now defined in terms of nationalities of which Muslim is one. Not only should we refuse to have forced identities and single identities, but we should stand for our multiple identities. We are women. We also belong to a class. We may or may not have a religious identity. We may have an ethnic or racial identity. And we stand for all these concomitant identities, not to be reduced to one single identity by political powers.

Our diversity, which we recognise and value, should not be seen as antagonistic. The diversity amongst us should be seen as enriching and eventually complementary.

The political powers use diversity against us so that identities are antagonistic to the point that we cannot even talk outside our ‘natural’ community. Breaking this isolation is absolutely crucial. It is really the task of women and feminists to seek alliances outside their own community, to seek dialogue and to undo this false construction of identity which is imposed on us. Doing this is generally seen as a betrayal of the community — whether religious, national, ethnic or cultural — and women are targets because we breed and raise the new generation. Therefore, for the authorities, we have to be controlled, in body and mind, and we are made to internalise our imposed identity so that in the name of identity we accept values and rules which only increase the divisions between us.

It is very important for us all not to accept these divide-and-rule policies but rather to see that in all cases, women’s reproductive capacities and women in general are exploited to the benefit of political forces for their own purposes and not for our benefit. We should be able to support each other’s struggle in spite of the apparent contradictions between our situations. For instance, those who are forced to produce and those who are forced not to produce — in spite of this apparent contradiction — should see the common ground between us, which is our exploitation.
Negotiating Reproductive Rights: A seven country study of women's views and practices

International Reproductive Rights Research Action Group

In a poor community in Sao Paulo, mothers express a sense of injustice about what they have suffered because of social norms that value virginity and sexual ignorance. The standard of care they want for their daughters' bodies includes access to sexual knowledge, protection from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)/AIDS, and the means to prevent unwanted pregnancy, early marriage and illegal abortions. They claim it should be a responsibility of schools and health services to provide this information.

Rural women in Nigeria ardently defend their right to a period of rest and relief from routine household and farming responsibilities after giving birth, on the ground that this is necessary for restoring their health and effectively resuming their maternal tasks. Having proven their commitment to fecundity, they feel entitled to care for their bodies—and receive support from other women in the village for doing so.

In a semi-urban village in Malaysia, a Chinese woman who works as both housewife and factory worker insists that she, not her husband, is the one to decide about contraception and family planning, since she is the one with major responsibility for the children's care. Her sentiment that "he does not suffer, the suffering is all done by me," and her concern about feeding and caring for additional children, are shared by Malay and Chinese women alike.

Women in Egypt say getting an abortion or using contraception is harām (forbidden by religious law and tradition) or up to the husband. Meanwhile, the same women recount using contraception and getting abortions clandestinely as normal decision they make, necessitated by economic constraints, their own health needs, or both.

In the Philippines, poor urban and rural housewives employ complicated tactics to control their number of pregnancies in the face of both husbands' demands for sex and the church's prohibition of artificial birth control. They use sanitary pads or new born babies as shields; leave the house to avoid sex; resort secretly to abortion or contraceptive methods; or submit to fate while teaching daughters how to cope and fight back.

Some poor African-American women in the rural US are told they must endure the side effects of Norplant because their problems (weight gain, excessive bleeding, irregular menstruation, hair loss) are "unpleasant but non-medical," so Medicaid — the government health insurance program for the poor — will not pay for Norplant's removal. The women feel angry at what they perceive to be medical and economic coercion and try to find other doctors.

In Mexico, where sterilisation is the most frequently used method of contraception, women seek sterilisations but avoid telling husbands because of fears of domestic violence. The same women express outrage at the idea of women being sterilised without their consent but would not file a public complaint against such abuse because of distrust of the authorities.

What are the common threads tying these stories together, when they are from such diverse countries and cultural contexts? What do they show to policymakers, international agencies and women's organisations concerned about promoting women's reproductive health and rights and implementing the Cairo Programme of Action? In a three-year collaborative study that looks at women's values and decision-making patterns regarding reproductive and sexual activity in seven countries, the International Reproductive Rights Research Action Group (IRRAG) has found that low-income women, through strategies and tactics geared to their diverse social and cultural circumstances, often manifest a strong sense of entitlement when it comes to decisions concerning childbearing, contraception, abor-
tion, marriage, and sexual relations. However, these some women do not always have the necessary material resources, supportive cultural and social environment, or responsive institutional mechanisms to translate their sense of entitlement into effective rights.

IRRAG's country studies reveal that the strategies women use to express their sense of reproductive entitlement range widely. Some women ('risk-takers' and 'rule breakers') use outright resistance through words or action against familial or community norms. Others resort to more common tactics of silence, subterfuge or even accommodating certain traditional beliefs about gender roles in order to win more space in other domains ('trading off'). More often than not, the women IRRAG's researchers spoke with did not use the language of 'rights' or 'human rights'. Yet, with only rare exceptions, they approached reproductive decision-making as active agents rather than passive victims. The story of how women negotiate their entitlements to reproductive and sexual health reinforces an important message contained in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action: that women's ability to exercise their reproductive rights is contingent on their economic and social empowerment and the restructuring of traditional gender roles to encourage shared male responsibility for child care and domestic labour.

Using qualitative ethnographic methods, IRRAG's interdisciplinary research teams have conducted fieldwork in both urban and rural sites in Brazil, Egypt, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, Philippines and the US. Results of the field studies have been compiled in lengthy country reports which are currently undergoing revision and synthesis into a single book, projected for international publication in several languages in 1996.

The IRRAG study offers a comparative analysis of reproductive and sexual decision making among primarily low-income women across diverse countries, regions, age groups, and ethnic and religious subcultures. It focuses on women's sense of entitlement and strategies in making such decisions and how they negotiate the real or perceived opposition of parents, husbands, religious authorities, and medical providers. While concerned with the influence of medical and health services, it concentrates on family and community settings as those where women's reproductive and sexual decisions usually get made. Utilising women's voices and practices as a primary source of data, it interprets these in the light of economic, social, legal, political and cultural contexts that create both opportunities and limits on women's feelings of entitlement and their realisation.

In a recent meeting to review the seven country studies at the Rockefeller Foundation's Conference Centre in Bellagio, IRRAG co-ordinators, researchers, and consultants observed a number of cross-country outcomes of particular interest to policy-makers and women's organisations around the world. Based on group and in-depth interviews among approximately 800 subjects, these findings reveal significant patterns of similarity despite obvious economic, geographic and cultural differences among and within the countries.

Concepts of reproductive health based on a biological definition of the 'reproductive years' (ages 15-45) are out of touch with most women's experience. For women interviewed in all seven countries, reproductive activity begins during their childhood and never ends through old age, 'reproduction' involves caretaking, work and risks to women's health throughout their life-cycle.

In all the countries studied, women's sense of ownership over their bodies was expressed in terms of a desire for freedom to work outside the home, contribute to family resources, and move about freely in public spaces. Often women negotiate for such freedoms, as for control over fertility, by trading off other aspects of their bodily integrity — accepting to circumcision of daughters (Nigeria and Egypt), marital defloration rituals (Egypt), unwanted sex with husbands (Philippines), or the constant threat of male violence (Brazil, Mexico and US).

Generational differences — which often correlate with differences in education and employment status — are a crucial variable in determining women's sense of entitlement in reproductive and sexual decision-making. This means not only that daughters have greater aspirations for independent choices than their mothers (eg being more determined to choose their partners or insist on condom use), but also that mothers hope for greater possibilities and knowledge (eg about sex) for their daughters than for themselves.

While in all the countries women affirm the importance of motherhood, they also refer repeatedly to the burdens, pains and responsibilities they bear in motherhood. Notably, women interviewed in all seven countries saw these burdens, not as the natural or virtuous lot of being a woman, but rather as their ticket to respect and decision-making authority. In other words, motherhood becomes the basis of a sense of entitlement — to abortion or contraception, financial support from husbands, preserving their own health or avoiding unwanted sex.

Women's sense of entitlement to make their own decisions about whom to marry, when to have children, whether to have sex, and how to avoid AIDS, unwanted sex or pregnancy may be enhanced by extra-familial contacts and resources. These include employment or income-generating activity outside the home; membership in organisations (church, civic, union, etc); or informal support networks of other women. On the other hand, such independent sources of support or resources may exact their own price, such as resentment and violence from husbands.

Women's sense of entitlement in the area of reproductive and sexual health is strongest and most readily affirmed with regard to decisions over when to bear children. While embracing the value of children, most women interviewed — especially the married women — claimed that decisions about how many children to have and when belonged to them. Reasons included economic constraints, their
own personal health, and above all their role and burdens as mothers, the ones most responsible for children.

When it comes to the means for controlling fertility, however, the women in all seven country studies often expressed their sense of entitlement more through actions than words. The disparity between women's speech and their behaviour was greatest in regard to abortion but frequently applied to contraception and sexual activity as well. Typically, women interviewed spoke of abortion as 'wrong' or 'sinful' while at the same time describing their own or their neighbours' use of various methods to terminate pregnancy as both necessary and commonplace.

With regard to existing reproductive health services, women in several of the countries reflected decidedly negative experiences with medical and health providers, as opposed to traditional birth attendants or popular healers, that diminished rather than expanded their sense of entitlement. These included insensitivity to complaints and side effects (US and Egypt), lack of cultural understanding or ability to speak one's language (Chinese women in Malaysia), and disrespectful or even violent treatment (Brazil).

IRRRAG's researchers urge that we must interpret these preliminaries with caution, since full analysis of the data is still in progress. Yet the consistency of the tentative findings across the reports does suggest several important challenges to current thinking about population policy and gender status, of special interest in the context of the Fourth World Conference in Beijing.

First, the conventional boundaries used by demographers and physicians to demarcate women's life-cycle, singling out the 'reproductive years', may not be useful to an understanding of reproductive and sexual rights from women's point of view. As the IRRRAG-Brazil team concluded from their research findings, women experience social reproduction (work outside the home as well as domestic labour) and biological reproduction as continually overlapping, together constituting "the structuring axis for their entire life cycle." Moreover, the 'reproductive career' — including child care and household tasks — stretches throughout a woman's life, not merely during fertile years. This suggests that definitions of reproductive health and rights need to encompass such issues as female child labour, child marriage, reproductive hazards in the workplace (including social as well as environmental risks to fertility), prevention of gynaecological cancers, and access of post-menopausal women to adequate health care.

Second, the gender-neutral approach to definitions of reproductive rights, adopted in many international instruments and referring to "all couples and individuals," conflicts with many women's felt sense of reproductive justice. In the IRRRAG study, most women interviewed felt that the final authority over decisions about number of children, child-spacing and use of contraception or abortion should belong to them and not their husbands. Though preferring the cooperation of husbands, the majority of these women expressed a clear ethical view: that the physical and social burdens of children and housework — everywhere borne mainly by women — confer on them an entitlement to reproductive decision-making autonomy.

Third, this ethical view challenges that of the Vatican, in its recent pronouncements on motherhood and women's rights. In fact, the findings of the IRRRAG study suggest that the Vatican position is only partially correct. Unsurprisingly, poor women in both the South and the North do embrace motherhood as a fundamental basis of their identity and value in society. But these same women also use their identity and responsibilities as mothers to ground what the Vatican would label a 'western feminist' moral perspective. For they assert that motherhood gives them — not husbands, parents, doctors, or religious authorities — the right to make decisions about how to express and limit their fertility.

Fourth, the frequent disparity found between women's words and their behaviour with regard to fertility control and sexuality suggests that the felt sense of entitlement in these areas is still to a large degree mired by a climate of cultural and religious sanctions hostile to women's reproductive agency. Yet religious and fundamentalist prohibitions against abortion, contraception and disobedience to husbands may have less influence over what women do in private than how they talk in public — especially when the well-being of their existing children or their ability to take care of them seems to be at stake. Women alone bear the costs of this tension between the dominant morality and real-life necessity, which may impact adversely on their reproductive health.

Fifth, women's ability to act effectively to realize their need for reproductive and sexual self-determination is often seriously hampered by the absence of enabling conditions. Without adequate education, information (including reproduction and sexuality), sources of income, or organisational support outside the home, women often lack the sense of self-worth necessary to make affirmative decisions about their health, sexuality and fertility, as well as the time and energy to utilize existing reproductive health services. With one or more of these resources in place, women are more likely to speak up and claim their reproductive and sexual rights. As one woman in Brazil said, "I was Mary Nothing before I started participating in the health movement." The IRRRAG study's preliminary findings thus confirm important provisions of the ICPD Programme of Action that "put the D into population and development." For women's sense of entitlement to reproductive and sexual health to be translated into
meaningful human rights requires government and international actions that:
- improve women's access to workforce participation, skill development and education (Article 3.18);
- increase men's and alleviate women's responsibilities with respect to child-rearing and housework (Article 4.11);
- encourage the expansion and strengthening of grass-roots, community-based and activist groups for women (Article 4.12); and
- improve the quality of reproductive health services by assuring providers who respect women's dignity, decision-making capacity and ethnic differences (Article 7.3, 7.6, 7.7 and 7.13).

NOTES
1. Principal responsibility for writing this text was that of Rosalind Petchesky, who is International Co-ordinator of IRRAG and Professor of Political Science and Women's Studies at Hunter College in New York. A full-length book containing all seven of IRRAG's country studies and a comparative analysis of their findings will be published in 1996. For further information, write or fax to IRRAG/Prof Rosalind Petchesky, Hunter College, 695 Park Avenue, New York NY 10021, fax (212) 772 4268.
The 4th world conference on women opened to great fanfare and lots of controversy in Beijing at the beginning of September. The conference consisted of an official arm of government representatives, and representatives of 'official' agencies, ostensibly to produce guidelines and policies on women, and a 'forum' of NGO's (non-governmental organisations). This was the biggest international conference on women ever, the NGO forum being attended by over 30,000 women.

Previous conferences, Mexico 1975, Copenhagen 1980, and Nairobi 1985 put women on an official International and development agenda, but were themselves the outcome of fierce lobbying and campaigning by feminists internationally to demand improvements in women's rights world-wide. This conference in Beijing was the first to follow the International Decade for Women.

Karen Newman, vice-chair of National Abortion Campaign (NAC), mainly attended the government conference. When asked for her views, “Was it fascinating?” she replied, “It was wet, but the Chinese had an explanation for this. Chinese culture interprets events and life in terms of opposites — men and women, yin and yang. Their view was that 40,000 women in one place upset the balance of the weather. The feminine is associated with rain.”

Serious though, Karen thought that what was bad about the conference was the separation of the NGO forum from the governmental conference. At the Cairo Conference on Population and Development it was universally agreed that the NGO's had made a really important contribution to the main conference, but in Cairo the NGO's were only 5 minutes away. The Chinese got away with having the NGO's over an hour away by taxi. This meant that conference participants always had to decide whether to attend the main conference or the forum, rather than interact between the two. It was inevitable that such interaction would not happen once the conference was given to a government without a concept of non-governmental organisations.

Karen thought that the NGO forum was probably the more exciting. At the forum there was “a fantastic kaleidoscope of women from all over the world. There was a packed programme of workshops, and a wide rich agenda.” The main problem with the UN conference was that the Beijing 'Platform for Action' — the document to be agreed upon — was a poor document. This limited the horizon of the conference to trying to put “unspeakable drivel into reasonable language”, rather than to develop clear ideas and policies. Karen sees the difficulty as being that ‘women’ are too diffuse a subject for such a conference to be able to focus on. So the Platform for Action is a jumble and its lack of structure meant that negotiation was more difficult.

As far as reproductive rights is concerned, the RR lobby had hoped that after Cairo, with the recognition of reproductive health, unsafe abortions etc, they would be able to take RR away from the narrower arena of women's health to the arena of women's rights. However, that did not happen because the Vatican were only interested in rolling back the achievements of the Cairo conference. This meant that even fairly strong governmental delegates, for example those from the Nordic countries, became defensive trying to hold on to Cairo, rather than opening up the issues. People had to be more circumspect. Nevertheless, what was good was that sexual rights were on the agenda; bad was that the final document did not deal with sexual orientation. Good — control over fertility was linked to women's empowerment. Bad — this issue was in square brackets all over the document. Square brackets meant that this is a contentious issue needing to be discussed — the brackets (or the text) get removed in the final document. Karen thought that something as basic as this should be a given, not a bone of contention.

PROBLEM OF DEMOCRACY AT THE CONFERENCE

A UN conference is a phenomenon involving nations, negotiations, committees, working groups etc. If you are an NGO you have an agenda. US based NGO's know the system, know how to lobby — some are very slick operators. Therefore, if you are Joe delegate (sic) from Kenya you feel left out. Mainly the western NGO's have influence. The problem is that these conferences have become so big that it's difficult for people to access them properly. Some people have access to both mainly from big NGO's like International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) which are semi-official anyway, or influential western ones like the US Women's International Health Coalition (WIHC) which get official accreditation. The only place you can have democracy is in the NGO forum but there there's a problem of funding for small or Southern organisations.

Ines Smyth is a long-standing reproductive rights activist and researcher (lecturer at LSE soon to work in the Gender and Development unit at Oxford). She attended the NGO forum. She said the focus of the RR workshops was on the question, "Has anything
happened since Cairo? There was a recognition that we need to go beyond the definitions agreed at Cairo, and to emphasise implementation. There are two main views. Some people are saying that everything is going wrong, and that RR is only used by governments and agencies as a label. Others are saying that things are changing — funding is being redirected; agencies are moving away from an obsession with family planning. Part of the problem is that organisations might be changing but they are doing so in a fragmented way. A few people are trying to develop RR issues, but there may be other pockets in the organisation where people are not making the connection between reproductive health and primary health care (ie focusing still only on narrow family planning — fertility reduction issues).

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ON BEIJING

Concerning Beijing, my own evaluation is that the international women's movement has rescued the Conference from the announced disaster of the first six months of this year. This was done against the unnecessary Chinese rules and surveillance, the smart and insidious strategies of the Vatican and their allies and even against the extreme incompetence of the secretariat. For those of us who went there to ‘save Cairo language’ it can be considered a victory to have got para 97 (elements of sexual rights) and 107k (recommending punitive legislation on abortion to be reviewed). It is true that the number of reservations was very high. In my view this reflects a new global geography in which the bi-polarity is defined by positions concerning gender and sexuality. The interesting evolution is that those lines are no longer drawn along the North-South boundaries as has been the case before the 1990s. This new geography expresses the growing and more articulated platform of the fundamentalist positions who are certainly growing stronger. However, I do not think they gained from the Beijing debates. As far as the Vatican is concerned, my understanding is that they lost ground in areas in which they have been fiercely struggling: including para 97 and 107k, plus the references to parental guidance and children's and teenager's rights to access to information and services in the areas of sexual and reproductive health.

The Platform document is not a visionary document as it has been in the case of ICED Plan of Action but in whole I think we should be happy about the results. It seems quite clear that fundamentalist forces, having lost ground at the institutional level, will move steadily their operations to the level of societies themselves.


WE SURVIVED HIAROU TOGETHER

T-shirts bearing this slogan appeared on the last days of the 10 day NGO forum. The Forum was a never ending obstacle course, a challenge to our logistical, intellectual, political and physical capacities and my first reaction on leaving was I have survived.

Since my funding depended on presentations at the NGO forum rather than attendance at the UN conference I was not unduly put out by the difficulties of commuting between Beijing and Hiarou: given I had to present four workshops on widely diverse themes — transition in Cuba, affirmative action in the UK, gendering development institutions and gender and macroeconomic policy: it was probably easier that the Forum took place in this cadre training town rather than being scattered around distant and diverse locations in the capital. Moreover, the couple of visits I made to the UN inter-governmental conference in Beijing convinced me that this world of hot house lobbying, over working and bracketing in documents was a seductive pot into which many kilojoules of women's energy were being irretrievably sucked.

For me I chose the more mundane universe of the two acre mud filled tented site at Hiarou, fringed by schools, hotels and commercial buildings, populated by 27,000 delegates including some 5,000 men plus a good 10,000 Chinese 'volunteers' — students who were there to assist, translate and vigilate, plus security men and other heavies in official cars carrying walkie talkies. In our residences — concrete five storey apartment blocks reached by a ten minute cycle ride out of town — we were again 'guarded': this time by high school students working in shifts round the clock who kept our names and keys and amused themselves in our absence with that party game where you go through the contents of the suitcase and try and memorise all the items.

These things were an irritant and were not unexpected given the very Chinese society is organised. But irritants are only on the surface and underneath was the real 'business' of the Forum. Some 3,000 workshops badly listed in the Forum directory and difficult to locate in a wildly inaccurate map, provided non stop entertainment and challenges. More difficult to locate were the special streams of events — on domestic violence, human rights, and the environment — listed in separate booklets that many of us never saw until it was too late. With a plenary hall seating a maximum of 5,000 many of the high profile speakers were unreachable pushing us back to the unexpected encounters with women from Eastern Europe, Women Healing Oceans, the Federation of Cuban Women, Afghans, Kenyan commercial co-operatives and Bangladesh health workers.

Behind all the mud and all the madness there were real moments of international solidarity and strength; the workshop for garment workers established a real and useful network for groups working not just in Asia but globally to compare information and tactics in dealing with wage rates, working conditions, environmental hazards, rights of organisations. The Workshops on Human Rights, where I ran into many of the other WAF members present, provided first hand information on the nature, processes and evidence of abuses of women in south Asia.
and South America by political groups acting under an umbrella of organised religion, tolerated if not promoted by the State. Detailed and precisely documented evidence is an important weapon in academic and political arguments and these encounters met one of my primary reasons for participating in the Forum.

Survival was difficult but diverting in Hiarou. While Vandana Shiva addressed rapt audiences about the links between species diversity, animal rights and women’s rights, women of the South queued in their hundreds at the MacDonalds stall, although there was a range of natural and vegetarian food outlets available. Torrential rain sent us all scurrying to the well stocked and convenient department stores, retail therapy being our main interaction with the local population outside those vigilating our security.

The Tibetan women got the worst of the security — on the Women in Black demonstration we eventually stood in front of a group of Tibetan American women whose faces were being worn away by the flash lights of Chinese cameras; at a showing of a film documenting the torture and rape of Tibetan nuns the electricity went off three times, such was the tension that it was easier to believe that this was the result of official harassment rather than the consequence of a right-on US State department official (attending the seminar with his 11 year old son) tripping over the wires at the beginning; but the previous day film and videos belonging to Tibetan women were seized by the omnipresent security men.

The Chinese authorities were disturbed by all us women, not only the Tibetans who they had tried to exclude altogether from the Forum, but of anyone who might criticise their own Human Rights record and the only sessions in which Chinese delegates actually spoke were in large rooms with official translators. It was rumoured that the police had been issued with cloaks to cover Western women who routinely stripped as a form of libertine protest called streaking. Certainly when I obeyed a notice requesting me ‘to go to the second floor to receive a free gift from the Chinese government’ I was dumb-founded by their generosity; a pretty pink box with a bottle of green cleaning cream and a white rubber vaginal douche and instructions offering cures for ‘pathogenic wetness, herpes, genital warts, overgrown membranes’ and a lot else besides.

At times it was hard to know if the obstacles were being set by the Chinese or by others. We were not allowed to demonstrate outside the perimeters of the Forum site but within this there were no restrictions although some male Chinese delegates carrying a placard reading ‘Lesbian Rights are Human Rights’ did ask me what ‘lesbian’ meant. Waiting two hours in the pouring rain for Hillary Clinton to turn up was one of my least wise decisions, in the end she swept in with the whole of the US delegation from Beijing which meant that only about 50 Forum delegates got in to hear her. Worse was the security organised by apparently reluctant Chinese whose request for Clinton to address the women in the rain had been denied. But when we threatened to take our clothes off if they did not let us in no cloaks or organs of repression appeared other than US members of the International League for Peace and Friendship who assured us it was all for our own protection. The superb final night con-
cort fronted by Australia's excellent Judy Small was also marred by the groupies of the superlative black acappella group Sweet Honey on the Rocks torturing everyone out for an hour whilst they sorted out their acoustics. Not everyone was able to exercise such control over their environment in Harou.

The NGO Forum was extraordinarily hard work. I was very impressed at the maturity of a lot of the debate which reflects the co-ordinated strategy of international feminism to ensure that what is agreed at previous international meetings Rio (Environment 1992); Vienna (Human Rights 1993); Cairo (Population and Development 1994) and Copenhagen (Social Summit 1995) are continued and built on. Not even the smart delegates gliding about the polished floors of the conference centre in Beijing could have failed to hear the concerted voices of women from round the world claiming a diversity and multiplicity of voices which refuse to be subsumed by political claims based on nationality, ethnicity and religion. In spite of all its problems and shortcomings China 1995 was for me successful and stimulating and we will survive.

Ruth Pearson is a member of WAF and was part of a delegation from The School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ.

**IMPRESSIONS FROM BEIJING**

Hannana: Before people went to Bejing there were a lot of logistical problems including, obtaining visas, securing accommodation and the fact that the NGO conference was one hour from the Government conference in Bejing. It was rumoured that the reason for this was to isolate 'rowdy, political, lesbian women and prostitutes' of the NGO Conference from the Chinese public.

The New York-based NGO forum committee threatened to boycott the Conference because of the difficulty for the NGO and the Government conferences to interact. They conceded only after a guarantee that women's groups already registered, 36,000 in total, were allowed to go. At the conference, however, we heard that of the 50,000 women who registered, only 20,000 were there.

Throughout the Conference people were saying that they were followed, telephone conversations listened to and human rights groups reported having their films taken. At a press conference the Chinese admitted that they had taken a video on Tibet because it was anti-Chinese propaganda and against their sovereignty. Everything else they generally denied.

It was difficult to know how much you could ask the Chinese women because of the surveillance, which prevented them from talking freely. On the first night, however, we were fortunate to meet and discuss with some Chinese women and one academic gave us a lot of information on domestic violence in China. She worked for a national hot line which has about 10,000 inquiries every year dealing with domestic violence. It is an independent and voluntary effort, operating within constraints. There are no women's shelters/refuges in China and the only recourse for victims of domestic violence is the Criminal Justice System: the police and the courts. The Government does not provide resources and there is a housing crisis in China so women end up being forced to go back to their husbands. She was defensive of the Chinese government and said that
women had achieved a greater measure of equality in China than other countries. She argued that there were problems for women in rural China, exacerbated by poverty and greater control within the family.

We talked about the 'one child policy' and she stated that there needs to be population control in China. In rural areas families can have a second child when the first child is six years old. She criticised Channel Four’s documentary the ‘The Dying Room’, which looks at the negligent treatment of female children abandoned in orphanages, saying that it was exaggerated. The Chinese even broadcast a documentary to counter the message of The Dying Room, and to highlight gains made by Chinese women in recent years.

A Chinese judge told us about the problem of abduction of women by organised crime, which is particularly prevalent in the new economic zones (territory where foreign capital is being invested), and the trafficking of women as sex workers or servants.

Fawzia: It is likely that Chinese women at the conference were given permission to attend by the Government and were, therefore, inclined to support the official line. Not surprisingly, they were defensive of the 'one child policy' and birth control was seen as beneficial to women in urban areas in the workplace and for women's rights.

Hannana: A Chinese American woman adjudicating at one of the tribunals, where women from all over the world were giving their testimonies, made critical comments from the platform on women not being free to express themselves. At this point the simultaneous translation stopped and officials said it was a technical problem. She reverted to speaking in Chinese and they could do nothing to stop her but the comments were guarded as it was even difficult for her to be critical.

One of the positive aspects of the conference was that it brought the Chinese women together. They were forced to talk to each other and meet women from all over the world who are critical of their own Governments. The Conference, therefore, had a huge impact on Chinese women.

Korean, Filipino and other women were demonstrating for recognition of 'comfort women' — women forced into military brothels to service Japanese soldiers and mass-raped. These women were also demonstrating for financial compensation.

Gita: The biggest demonstration was organised by Women in Black from Israel/Palestine, former Yugoslavia and India and joined by other women protesting against issues such as militarisation, violence against women and nuclear testing. There were also lesbians marching and using an ANC banner with an image of Nelson Mandela to celebrate the legalisation of homosexuality in South Africa. The demonstrations started in the second week of the Conference as people became more relaxed. Women demonstrated on a wide range of issues and there was a timely demonstration against French nuclear testing. To make an impact, the demonstrations were very media-orientated events.

I was involved in several workshops where I showed the documentary 'War Crimes File' about 1971 Bangladeshi war criminals living in Britain. I was also involved in a tribunal where Bangladeshi women spoke about fatawa against women. This tribunal was a continuation of the UN human rights conference held in Vienna (1994) to build on 'accountability for women's human rights': expanding individual testimonies to include the political implication of those testimonies. It was organised by an American organisation Centre for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University. The work they have done has had a major impact, particularly in Vienna, on incorporating a feminist perspective on human rights issues into a general human rights agenda.

The best elements of women's human rights issues had gone into the Vienna document which focused on the elimination of violence against women. In Beijing, however, some Government representatives were attacking the gains made, while women's human rights groups tried to defend these gains.

Hannana: One of the major issues of the Government conference in Beijing was wording. They argued if they should drop 'universal' in universal human rights and whether to use 'equity' rather than 'equality'.

Fawzia: The Islamic countries were arguing in favour of equity, which they defined as fair, rather than equal. Equality, and the empowerment of women, in contrast, takes away rights from men. The Islamist agenda was co-opting 'equity' to maintain the biological division of labour and women's place in the home. For the Islamists, the issue is not about equal or individual rights it is about rights and responsibilities. To give equality to both women and men would threaten the social system where men have greater responsibility to maintain and protect the extended family. Islamist women see their roles, therefore, as complimentary to men's.

Gita: Religion was an important issue of both the NGO and Government conferences. The Vatican and Iran were a major force at the Government conference but at the NGO conference, Islam was a dominant religious presence. There was some pro-life propaganda but the Christian fundamentalists (both Catholic and Protestant) who were evident at the UN Population Conference in Cairo were not as active in Beijing. In contrast, there was virtually something every hour on Islam and women were visible on the streets — demonstrating, handing out leaflets, putting up posters etc.

Nira: In Vienna there were discussions on individual and collective human rights and some women said that it is a collective right to retain cultural and traditional identity. What are the implications for this?
**Praarna:** The presence of women in various Muslim guises demonstrating on the streets may have to do with the North/South divide. Southern women are saying that in the wider context it is about preserving cultural identities.

**Fawzia:** It is about preserving family values and avoiding so-called corrupting Western/imperialist values to maintain a stable social system. They believe that in the long term, if women demand their equal rights chaos will ensue.

**Hannana:** In one workshop an American man was preaching that Muslims had to reject the ‘draft platform for action’ (policy document to be adopted by the Government conference) because it was not family centred. Many women, who identified themselves as moderate Muslims, protested and said that he could not speak for all Muslims.

**Gita:** The highlight of the conference for us was meeting Algerian women. These women are very brave as they are targets of armed FIS squads. They have continued to live and be active in Algeria and ironically they often have to move around in heavy hijab. One woman was interviewed on television and used the Conference as an opportunity to publicise the situation in Algeria. They are very critical of the government as well as the fundamentalists. They met up with other anti-fundamentalist women from Iran, Afghanistan and Sudan and made bold anti-fundamentalist statements to the press. It was an emotionally charged and moving press conference. Also present were a number of mysterious men with beards who were recording and photographing the women and this was possibly dangerous for them.

**Hannana:** Algerian women came out in the open to get international support and they were risking their lives. That day three journalists (two men and one woman) had been killed in Algeria. In their demonstration, which clashed with a Muslim (Iranian) women’s demonstration, we chanted slogans, ‘not the mosque, not the state, women shall decide their fate.’

**Nira:** It is interesting to see how the women’s conference which used to be the so-called property of feminism is now being expropriated.

**Praarna:** I was amazed to see the kinds of organisations that were accredited to go which could not be classified as feminist.

**Nira:** The debate is no longer focused on how we can reach women’s equality but is now completely rejecting this agenda. The whole arena has become one of conflict and unlike the past there are now vital resources available to women.

**Fawzia:** These Islamists are incredibly organised, have resources and are able to influence Government policy.

**Hannana:** The slogan of the conference was peace, development, equality and friendship. They failed to use words such as freedom or justice.

**Gita:** During the accountability for women’s human rights tribunal a group of women from the central Asian republic of Kazakhstan wanted to give a presentation on the horrific health effects of nuclear testing. At a preliminary meeting they indicated that they wanted to make a plea to the Chinese to stop the testing. The organisers were terrified that security guards would come and cause problems. They asked the women to refrain from mentioning China. I spoke up and said I realise the delicacy of the situation but they should be allowed to say what they want. An Algerian woman said that if women bring documents then they have a right to use these to support their case. The organisers finally said that they could exhibit photographs elsewhere (and face possible arrest) but they did not want to risk having the tribunal shut down.

There was a lot of self-censorship on the part of other delegates. I think many people were unable to relate their issues to China. There is such extreme censorship in China that Chinese people do not necessarily make the links themselves. They may not have heard the debates that people outside are exposed to on what their own government is doing.

There was a lack of economic analysis from Northern women and this is a major issue for Southern women. The debt crisis, structural adjustments — forced economic reforms subsidies, public health and rationing — and the effects of those polices on women is very stark.

**Fawzia:** At a press conference held jointly by women from Algeria, Iran and Afghanistan, the panel were asked what, in light of the large presence of religious groups, had changed from Nairobi to Beijing. The increasing globalisation of fundamentalism, particularly Islamic fundamentalism, is one of the major changes and it is made more frightening by the terror tactics they use. It is dramatic how the impact of fundamentalism is impinging on peoples lives, something that we do not feel to the same extent. These women need our solidarity.

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Hannana Siddiqui is a member of WAF and was part of a delegation from Southall Black Sisters (SBS). Gita Sahgal is a member of WAF and SBS and was funded by Women Living Under Muslim Laws. Fawzia Ahmed is a member of WAF and represented Brent Asian Women’s Refuge and SBS.

**NOTE**

1. This is a transcript of an informal and brief report back to a WAF meeting by women who attended the Beijing NGO conference.

WAF JOURNAL 25
Women resisting fundamentalisms world-wide

WAF Dayschool 18 March 1995

Religion and feminism in Ireland

Marie Mulholland

I am going to talk today about what is happening in Ireland. Everything that is central to what we thought was Irish is being challenged. When people think of an Irish identity the two things that come to mind are Catholicism and nationalism. Recently, I was having a conversation with a Protestant friend and she asked me what were the three things that I associated with being Irish. I said: Mary Robinson, Gay law reform and Riverdance. In some ways this reflects the changing nature of Irish identity. I believe that these are positive and constructive reflections of my identity as an Irish woman. I think that this sense of embracing an identity that is diverse and creative is not yet secure but the structures to accommodate it are becoming more flexible.

Perhaps the most profound and grave betrayal of women in Ireland was the 1937 Constitution for the Republic of Ireland. This document enshrined the Catholic church as the state religion and relegated women’s place to the home. Prior to 1937, many women had been responsible for the overthrow of colonialism in the 26 Counties, the rise of the suffragette movement and the progress of the labour movement. All of their ideals and aspirations were destroyed in the Constitution.

We now have the ironic situation in Ireland regarding Articles 2 and 3 of the 1937 Constitution: Ireland’s claim to territory of the North. The Unionists in the North will not enter into any negotiations on the peace process until the Articles are removed and the Irish government is considering removing them in order to facilitate the peace process. I find this extremely hypocritical because there are parts of the 1937 Constitution which are an obvious affront and a crime against women. For 60 years, women in Ireland have wanted the Constitution changed. And now this Constitution is about to be changed in order to accommodate a small group of conservative men in the North. In 'Clari na mBan' we would like to see a completely new Constitution and not just changes of a reactionary nature.

THE SOUTH

Let me firstly look at the position of the Catholic church in the South. In the Irish Times one day recently there were three cases of sexual abuse of children by the Catholic clergy. A case in Ballymena in the North, Wexford in the South and the infamous Father Brendan Smith case which brought down the Irish government in the South just before Christmas. The publicising of the clergy’s role in sexual abuse offences against children, the issue of celibacy, Gay law reform in 1995 and the current Abortion Information Bill have all sent the Catholic church reeling. Two major issues which the Church has always held sway over are sexuality and reproductive rights and the last few years have seen a phenomenal amount of territory taken back from the Catholic church, and the Abortion Information Bill, for example, has recently been passed by the Dáil (the Irish parliament).

The Bill is a result of the 'X' case in which a 14 year old girl was raped by her friend's father and became pregnant. Her parents, in consultation with her, took her to England for an abortion. The Attorney General of Ireland said it was illegal for her to have an abortion outside of Ireland. She later miscarried the foetus and the case raised questions as to whether or not it was legal for women to give out information on and make travel arrangements for abortion. The 'X' case changed the minds of a lot of ordinary Catholics on the role of the Church. At that time my mother, who describes herself as a good Catholic, said to me: "I want you to know that when I refer to myself as a Catholic I listen to God, I do not listen to men who say they speak for God". The role of the Church in Ireland, and particularly the Catholic right, is fanatical in terms of exercising conformity and diminishing choice amongst people. Fundamentalism cannot deal with choice nor diversity.

Many issues that I have outlined are about people's right to choice; the clergy's right to choose whether or not to be celibate, the public's right to choose their sexuality and women's rights to choose their method of controlling reproduction. These are
the core issues that the Catholic right cannot deal with. In response, the Catholic fanatics have mounted a devastating media campaign against politicians over the Abortion Information Bill. A few weeks ago we had an unprecedented situation where TDs (Irish MPs) were coming under sustained intimidation and hostility from the Catholic right, including threats to their families, if they insisted on voting in support of the Bill — which they did. The Catholic right is very angry and many of the tactics they are using have been imported from organisations like Operation Rescue and the fundamentalist right in the United States. This is a frightening sign. I believe it is a symptom of a desperate Catholic right fighting a damage limitation exercise because they are seriously under threat.

NORTHERN IRELAND
In the North there has been a general disillusionment with the Catholic church because of its collusion with the British state. Catholicism and nationalism have always been closely identified and the Catholic church was seen as the church of the rebel constituency. What was wanted in Northern Ireland was a Protestant state for a Protestant people and Catholicism was regarded as the spiritual wing of the Republican paramilitary organisations.

Over the last 25 years people have challenged British colonialism and the role of the British state in the North. In our education system there is a marked division between Protestant and Catholic schools. The state schools are Protestant and the 'maintained' schools are Catholic, the latter receive a 75% grant from the state and 25% from the Catholic church itself. This has guaranteed segregated education and it has also meant that the Catholic population was increasingly marginalised. This suited the Catholic church because it kept the flock together and made control easier. In contrast, Irish republicanism supports integrated education and it has over the past 5-10 years begun to redefine nationalism to incorporate pluralism and secularism. The Catholic church's alienation from nationalism has become more pronounced over the last decade.

The British state saw the Catholic church as a useful tool for maintaining control over a rebellious population and it has extensively funded projects and programmes of the Church. The collusion became more intricately bound. The Catholic church worked ceaselessly to end the hunger strikes in 1981 and for many people this was the last straw. In 1980, the Pope, on his visit to Ireland, refused to comment on the conflict in the North and on the role of the Catholic church in upholding the British state which oppressed Catholic people. For many nationalists this was the ultimate betrayal.

The Catholic church is under severe threat in Ireland and we have witnessed a dangerous manifestation of the Catholic right as a result. Catholic fanatics are threatened by the winds of change in the Republic of Ireland because it means that there will be a change in the role of the Catholic church and its relationship to the state. There is still a long way to go but I think that there is space, flexibility and a vacuum opening up to allow for many new and different voices to be heard all over Ireland.

Marie Molloy was born and raised a Catholic in Belfast, forsook Catholicism for the higher and more enjoyable calling of feminism and has spent most of her adult life as an activist within the community movement.

NOTES
1. Riverdance is an internationally acclaimed stage show of music, song and dance.
2. Clár na n-ealaín means ‘women’s agenda’. It is a feminist, anti-imperialist Republican orientation. It looks at where women fit into the Republican approach to the peace process. It is a radical, nationalist position that has made recommendations on the proposals for a new Constitution.

Fundamentalism and feminism in Egypt

Nadje Sadjig Al-Ali

The beginning of Egyptian women's participation in politics is 1919, when women took to the streets and demonstrated against British colonialism. This also marks the official date of the birth of the women's movement, which grew out of the Egyptian nationalist movement. However, women's rights were articulated much earlier in the writings of thinkers and journalists in a newly emerging women's press at the end of the 19th century (Baron, 1990).

Women and men marched the streets together to struggle for independence. As in most struggles of this kind, men tried to push women back into the home as soon as the goal of independence was achieved. A number of women resisted and started their own movement which focused on women's rights. Since then, Egyptian feminists have been blamed for importing alien Western ideas and betraying their own culture. Most feminists, even the Western-educated elites, articulated their demands, goals and struggles within an Islamic framework. In other words, in their view Islam did not contradict their feminist agenda but actually supported it.

The relatively few women who struggle for women's rights today have diverse social backgrounds and belong to different social classes. These activists — Muslims and Christians with different political convictions and orientations — do not correspond to the cliché of the oppressed, passive Arab woman. Just like the first generation of feminists in Egypt, these women are struggling against the oppression of women in a patriarchal society, against the oppression of citizens in an authoritarian and repressive regime and against the growing impact of Western hegemonic power and culture.

The women defying traditions and trying to improve women's position in Egyptian society today are representative of the diversity characteristic of the streets of Cairo. For as much as the idea of the
Muslim woman is a fiction, a cliché, a stereotype, so is the notion of 'the Egyptian woman'. Instead, there are Egyptian women in the plural: old and young, poor and rich, urban and rural, students, workers, professionals, scholars, Muslims, Christians, religious and secular-oriented women.

Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt today takes many forms. It cannot be reduced to bomb-throwing militants who attack tourists and exclude women by veiling or segregating them. Rather it pervades all aspects of society, and it is the more hidden threats and challenges, like the idealisation of women as mothers and housewives, the glorification of modesty and docility, allusions to the sexual promiscuity of women, and the appropriation of public spaces and discourses that women have to resist in their daily lives.

Fundamentalism is a term almost never used in Muslim countries. People speak about extremists or terrorists when talking about the violent militants. Some people have defined 'Islamic fundamentalism' as the beliefs in the precepts and commandments of Islam as stated in the Qur'an and as enunciated and practised by the prophet Muhammad in the Hadith. In this definition, Islamic fundamentalism is a return to the purest sources of religion, a movement to cleanse Islam from all impurities, heresies, and revisionisms which may have influenced its interpretations and practices. Others have defined Islamic fundamentalism as a form of militant extremism which struggles for an Islamic state and the implementation of the Shari'a or Islamic law. They stress the political and violent nature of fundamentalism (Ibrahim, 1988:633).

In my view, both definitions are valid, since fundamentalism is concerned with both doctrine and politics. However, it is important to distinguish between a general increase in religiosity among Egyptians and the organised groups that pursue fundamentalist goals with violence.

The call for the total implementation of the Shari'a or Islamic Law, and the notion of Islam being 'a religious state' are characteristic of Islamism. A consensus exists among Islamists that the Qur'an and the Hadith, the teachings and practices of the prophet Muhammad, constitute either explicitly or implicitly, once properly interpreted, everything that is required to establish an ideally functioning Islamic order. However, militant and moderate Islamists do not only differ in their strategies regarding the foundation of an Islamic state, but also diverge widely with regard to the precise content and interpretations of the Shari'a, that is the forms of government or the political institutions of an Islamic state (Zaki, 1995).

At one end of the spectrum we find militants who are split into several terrorist groups; at the other end are Sufi orders that are mainly concerned with the spiritual and mystical aspects of religion and can hardly be called fundamentalists. In between lies the broad mainstream element of political Islam, the Muslim Brotherhood — which has been labelled both fundamentalist and moderate (ibid).

While I am not sure that the Brotherhood can be labelled fundamentalist, I am sure that their non-violent and moderate strategy of recent years has been extremely effective in shaping the contemporary political agenda and discourse in Egypt. In its almost seventy years of existence, the Muslim Brotherhood has managed to politicise Islam as no other popular indigenous movement has ever done. Although the Brotherhood pursued violent means at different periods in its history, its leaders made the strategic decision to abandon violence in the 1970s.

Ever since then, the Brotherhood has devoted time and energy to religious teachings, moral reinforcement, and the setting up of modern economic and service institutions along 'Islamic lines'. They have been very successful in establishing Islamic Banks, investment companies, factories, large-scale farming projects, clinics and hospitals. They have easily won the competition with state-owned and conventional private institutions (ibid).

The Brotherhood has clearly accepted political pluralism and parliamentary democracy as the road to the future. This strategic shift coincided with developments such as rapidly deteriorating economic conditions, widespread corruption, rampant unemployment, and a growing foreign influence that have enhanced the Brotherhood's strength by breeding conditions of hardship, alienation and sweeping dissatisfaction among most of the population. However, it is not the only Islamist group that capitalised on the government's incompetence. More violent and extremist groups have been able to gain strength and recruit members from among the youth, lower and middle classes. What must be kept in mind is that these militant groups have tendencies as different as 'anti-society' on the one hand and 'anti-regime' on the other (Ibrahim, 1988).

The 'anti-society' groups deplore the corrupt, decadent and sinful nature of Egyptian society. They believe that moral change must come from the grass-roots level; thus their strategy is one of patience and long-term goals.

The 'anti-regime' Islamist groups aim at toppling the regime and creating an Islamic state. They contend that the decadence and corruption that characterises society is rooted within the ruling political elite. In their view, no amount of preaching, religious consciousness-raising, or behaviour-modelling can change this situation. Nor would any amount of non-violent political activism bring about the desired result, as the Muslim Brotherhood contends. In their view, Egyptian society is redeemable if and only if its leadership becomes truly 'Islamic' (ibid, 649-652).

The militant groups are united by their use of violence, their rejection of religious and political pluralism, and their view of Western societies and values as corrupting and threatening Muslim societies. But they are also united by the importance they give to women as cultural symbols of a pure and authentic Muslim society on the one hand and hostile Western values on the other.

Most Islamists severely criticise women's participation in public life. Since the 1980s, Islamist preachers have singled out the behaviour of women
as being responsible for the disintegration of society. Militants, moderates and Muslim brothers alike stress women's essentially natural and God-given domesticity. They glorify her status in Islam and predict a certain, terrible fate for the Muslim world if women desert or they are lure away from their traditional place in society. To the fundamentalists, the so-called liberation of women is one characteristic that shows that Muslims have strayed from the teachings of Islam. Women's emancipation is a deviation borrowed from the materialist West where its features are adultery, illegitimate children, and women so hardened by professional competitiveness that their reproductive organs have gone into a state of recession where they are unable to conceive.

As dangerous and threatening as the militant fundamentalists are, most women are not directly affected by their violent activism because their numbers remain very small. The more serious consequence has been the tremendous influence that the moderate and militant fundamentalists have had on the way Egyptian society views and thinks of itself. Women have been especially affected by the creeping, but steady shift to a more conservative and closed society within the past 15 years.

Women's dress and public conduct, for example, have become the subject of many debates. Since the Six Day War, school girls throughout Egypt began to express their growing social and moral conservatism by voluntarily adopting a white headscarf to cover their hair whenever they appeared in public. Gradually female students at the major Egyptian universities modified their clothing to create what is now being called Islamic dress (Ahmed, 1992). This growing trend is easily visible on the streets of Cairo; whereas 15 years ago wearing the scarf was rare, the majority of women wear the scarf or hijab today.

Egyptian feminists look upon this phenomenon with alarm and consider it a setback to their long and arduous struggle to liberate women. However, in recent years some of the most effective resistance to fundamentalism and mainstream Islamist doctrines have come from women who wear the hijab.

This resistance from within is, of course, ambiguous and open to much debate, since much of its premises are based on the struggle for an Islamic state and the implementation of the Shari'a. Yet, some women have managed to gain voice within the mainstream Islamist discourse as well as criticise and challenge their fellow Muslim men for misinterpreting Islam.

Women like Dr Zeinab Radwan, a professor of Islamic philosophy at Cairo university and author of the book Islam and Women's Issues, stress Islam's compatibility with international standards of women's rights. They argue that before Islam, baby girls were often killed because of their gender. She claims that by calling on parents to care for all of their children, Islam was the first religion to end female infanticide. She believes that women's rights have not been restricted by Shari'a, but rather by persisting traditions and conventions which date back to pre-Islamic times. Furthermore, some women argue that it is a widespread myth that Islam advocates polygamy; instead it limited the number of wives a man could marry at a time when men used to take an unlimited number of wives. These women further emphasise that Islam did not give men a license to seek pleasure and neglect their wives. This negligence arose from ignorance about the Shari'a. In many cases, it has been argued that polygamy protected women who had nobody to support them — if they were divorced or if their husbands died. These are just some of the ways Islamist women resist mainstream interpretations of Islam and the Shari'a (Ahmed, 1992).

One of the youngest and increasingly prominent activists within the Islamist movement, Heba Rafa' Ezzat, calls for the launching of a new women's movement — an Islamic one. She is creating a new discourse on women and politics which is seen as 'liberal' inside the Islamist movement. She says: "Feminists are secularists who are fighting male domination. Many regard religion as an obstacle to women's rights ... Conflict is the main concept of their theory ... my effort is quite different and even opposes such ideas. I am not an Islamic feminist. I do believe in Islam as a world view, and I think that women's liberation in our society should rely on Islam" (MERIP, Nov-Dec 1994:27). Whether one
agrees or disagrees with Heba and others like herself is beside the point for the trend to campaign for women’s rights within an Islamic framework has definitely become the most dominant challenge to the fundamentalists.

Other women who resist fundamentalism refer to the Qu’ran not so much because of their religious convictions, but out of fear of being branded traitors. Nawal al-Saadawi is a case in point. While her earlier writings clearly show secular and socialist tendencies, she increasingly uses Islamic terminology and concepts to frame her ideas and articulate her demands. Today, almost no woman, like no man, would publicly declare herself to be secular. However, a significant number of secular feminist activists are committed to resisting the growing impact of fundamentalism. Several groups exist that campaign for the expansion of civil and political rights, legal reform, and changes in the personal status law. Unfortunately, these groups limit their own impact on society by allowing ideological and personal differences to get in the way of forming a strong coalition.

The various groups are deeply divided over the issue of alliances and foreign funding. While some groups seek solidarity and coalition with international movements and organisations, others, especially those with leftist and nationalist inclinations, isolate themselves from both national and international organisations. In a few cases, feminists, human rights and pro-democracy activists work together.

In the past, issues like the Personal Status Law have prompted women to overcome their differences and campaign together. Most recently, because of fundamentalist attacks against the Population Conference in Cairo, new alliances were forged among groups that did not previously work together. Nevertheless, while all feminist activists are united in their fear of fundamentalism and increased social conservatism, no co-ordinated strategy or alliance has emerged so far.

Population and health issues, women’s legal rights, and social welfare have been at the centre of feminist activism in Egypt in recent years. Secular-oriented feminist groups are engaged in charity work, like literacy, basic health care, and professional training programs. They publish research and articles on a number of topics, hold seminars and give lectures, and are increasingly involved with legal issues.

Egyptian and Arab feminists in general, whose activism has been historically rooted in the nationalist struggle against the colonial powers, have often run the risk of being stigmatised as anti-religious and anti-nationalist. In recent years, Arab feminism has been accused, particularly by Islamist movements and conservative nationalist forces, of collaborating with Western imperialism by importing Western ideas and practices and spreading them throughout society. These very intimidating weapons have given rise to a specifically Arab feminist phobia among the general population and have silenced the voices of many women.

Egyptian women’s activism today, in Islamic and non-Islamic frames alike, is very much shaped by the broader question of self-definition. National identity — what it means to be Egyptian — has always been part of the struggle for women’s rights. While feminists set the agenda at the beginning of this century, today Islamist and fundamentalist groups have successfully co-opted that discourse; they have sharply limited women’s ability to manoeuvre by equating women’s liberation with un-Islamic thinking and western corruption. Unless the women who fight for their rights can overcome their differences — so that their differences become a weapon rather than a crutch — the nationalists will continue to dominate the discourse on women in Egypt.

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The impact of Hindu fundamentalism in Britain

Pragna Patel

The resurgence of Hindu nationalism and fundamentalism in India has had a profound political and social impact on the Asian (Hindu) communities in Britain. This contribution will try to trace some of the developments and their political effect for Asians in Britain. I also want to touch on the ways in which Asian women have resisted Hindu fundamentalism in Britain.

A NEW PHASE OF HINDU COMMunalISM

In December 1992, the world witnessed a terrifying unleashing of Hindu communal and fundamentalist violence and frenzy that culminated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid, a mosque in Ayodhya, North India. More than any other single event in recent years, it put paid to the idea that Hinduism is or can be resistant to the fundamentalist project. The widespread assaults, killings and rapes perpetrated on Muslims in India was widely perceived by many Hindus in India and in the Indian Diaspora, as legitimate in the ‘war’ against all Muslims, other minorities and anyone else who dares to display disloyalty to the notion of a Hindu rashtra (nation).

The key players in stirring up communal violence are the Vishwa Hindu Party (VHP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The VHP is a rabid Hindu revivalist organisation that was mainly responsible for the Hindu yatras (marches) organised all over India in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Its main objective is to forge a mass Hindu identity based on anti-Muslim hatred. The yatras were particularly effective in stirring up communal riots because they were carefully orchestrated to take place in Muslim ghettos. The RSS claims to be a cultural organisation working mainly with boys and young men (and more recently women), but whose leaders in the past, have aspired to emulate German nationalism under Hitler, built on anti-Semitic and racist ideology. Its central objective is to forge a militant Hindu identity, by communalising the arenas of sports, culture and other extra-parliamentary spaces. The BJP is a political party whose primary focus is to gain electoral dominance on the back of Hindu communalism and fundamentalism.

According to many social commentators in India, the 1992 period marked a new phase in Hindu nationalism, a particularly savage form of sectarianism involving a specific construction of the Hindu self; a masculine, aggressively communal self that is intolerant of other faiths and even other conceptions of Hinduism.

HINDUS IN BRITAIN

The destruction of the Babri Masjid created schisms not only between the Hindu and Muslim communities in Britain but also within families. It had a deep and chilling impact on me personally and more generally on many Hindu families living here. I found myself forced to question the open allegiances to the right wing forces, displayed by my family and relatives. It became clear that many Hindus, across the class divides, sympathised, if not directly supported the cause of the Hindu right. The arguments, quarrels, shouting matches and silences revealed a schizophrenia as memories and feelings of partition resurfaced, even though many were not even affected by it, to justify the need to take revenge against Muslims.

We have witnessed the impact that Sikh and Muslim fundamentalism has had in this country in such communities as Southall, Bradford and Tower Hamlets, particularly in shaping male youth identity, many of who have turned to religion as a result of legitimate disaffection with anti-racist and left/progressive movements. But very little is said about Hindus who are perceived to be a homogeneous group that has achieved success through economic success and high educational achievement, which in turn has led to a high degree of assimilation with the host community. Any attempt to understand the rise of religious fundamentalism within Asian communities, however, requires a careful and complex analysis of the political development of Asian communities, their history of migration and patterns of settlement with reference not only to the political developments in the Indian subcontinent but also in relation to multi-cultural politics by which the British state relates to minority communities. Muslims, Sikhs and Hindu fundamentalism have charted a similar and yet different course leading to different configurations of economic, social and political power at local and national levels, and, to similar and dissimilar demands.

There are two important aspects which feed into the making of the Hindu (political) identity in Britain; the first is to do with direct events in India and secondly, linked to this, is the impact of the rise of Muslim political identity amongst Muslims in Britain.

In the UK, Hindu revivalism has been quietly gathering strength — a result of the multicultural politics, a largely de-politicising and anti democratic, homogenising process with the effect of co-opting certain layers of the community, usually business and religious institutions and individuals into the state apparatus by giving them a voice as ‘authentic’ representatives of their communities. In this way, more radical progressive voices within the Asian communities are isolated. Hindu communal forces in the guise of cultural and religious organisations have often been well represented and funded at local and national levels. Operating within a social and cultural milieu rather than as overt political organisations, Hindu right wing forces often control resources and exert power over their constituencies in particular localities. During the period of the destruction of the Babri Masjid, many Hindu right wing groups/organisations flourished, some becoming ‘mouthpieces’ for the Hindu right, whilst others lay claim to hard
pressed resources to meet the needs of the 'new' Hindu community.

Hindus have always organised along caste lines in this country. Divisions in caste and class perhaps, more marked than in other Asian communities, coupled with prejudice against Muslims has led to fragmentation amongst Hindus. Until recently, these divisions at least at the political level, were often submerged under more general Asian and Black identities that prioritised struggles against racism. The aftermath of the Rushdie affair and the construction of a global Muslim identity and politics, has however, led many Hindus to forge a unity in order to achieve some measure of political power in India. The politics of multi-culturalism with its tendency to construct Asians as religiously monolithic entities, have also entrenched and perpetuated class and caste divisions, benefiting fundamentalist projects in Asian communities. Multi-culturalism has therefore successfully avoided a challenge to the divisions of class, caste and power. In many respects, British Hindus are following the example set by Muslim communities, demanding an end to the so called discrimination of Hindus. This demand was one of the driving forces behind the attempts to unify all British Hindus over the Watford (Bhakti Vedanta Manor) Temple affair. The temple was for a long time run by white Hindus and were largely regarded by Asian Hindus, as an alien and 'unauthentic' development. Now, however, demonstrations and rallies around the temple are organised by Asian Hindus, attracting thousands of Indian and women from around the country, creating a timely opportunity for the display of a daring and militant face of Hinduism.

Hindu leaders have cynically used the temple as a way of asserting the new Hindu identity. The struggle to keep the temple from closure has become a symbol of an 'unacceptable' threat from the British state to Hindu cultural and religious autonomy.

When the Babri Masjid was razed to the ground, Hindus in this country made a number of important demands through numerous press releases. The most important of these was the demand to be recognised as 'Hindus' rather than as Indians or even Asians. Interestingly, whilst 'applauding' and 'celebrating' the carnage that was perpetrated on Muslims in India, Hindus asserted their 'respect' for law as British citizens in this country. Hindus leaders were careful not to directly attack Muslims here, instead they referred to them as fundamentalists, so differentiating between mythical notions of Hindus as essentially non-violent and western and Hindu constructions of Muslims as unruly and fanatical. In the face of Muslim (imagined) provocation in India, Hindus appealed for calm and for the right to be protected presumably from Muslim retaliation, although this was never clearly stated.

Yet the aggressive and intolerant face of Hindu fundamentalism was clearly visible in their attempts to censor and ban plays and films that were deemed to have caused 'offence' to Hindu sentiments and religious beliefs. For example, a play by the renowned playwright, Habib Tanweer was picked in Leicester. Leicester council was also lobbied (unsuccessfully) in order to enforce a ban on its staging. In the case of the film 'Bhaji on the Beach', predominantly Hindu men actually surrounded a cinema in Nottingham, intimidating women as they attempted to get in. Many Gujarati newspapers refused to carry articles that voiced criticism or opposition to the Hindu right wing in India.

**WOMEN AND HINDU FUNDAMENTALISM**

In their Hindu manifesto of sorts, contained in the press releases they put out, Hindus also reiterated their commitment to family values. In India the impact of Hindu fundamentalism has been particularly devastating for women, for example the revival of sati practices and the attempt to universalise the Hindu personal laws are perceived to be integral to the new Hindu identity. The VHP has been very vociferous in demanding that the Hindu personal code should be applicable to all. The BJP, with its eye on electoral power, on the other hand, has been more guarded arguing for a Hindu code under the guise of a uniform civil code. Another frightening manifestation of patriarchal control was revealed when Hindu demonstrations took place in the city of Ahmedabad against abortion. Hinduism has never opposed abortion. In fact it has been vigorously promoted by the Indian state, over the years, with very little opposition, as part and parcel of family planning programmes. In Ahmedabad however, the demonstrators condemned abortion as acts of 'murder'. One can only make sense of this demand in the context of the overriding need for Hindu nationalism to encourage all Hindus to feel a sense of belonging to a 'dominant' community or risk becoming an oppressed minority! The anti-abortion demonstrations also condemned working women and advocated that women should give up their jobs in favour of unemployed men. Whilst, in this country, Hindus have not been as vociferous in the demand around abortion or to be governed by personal laws as some Muslims, their manifesto reiterates a commitment to the rule of patriarchal law. The law in Britain, in relation to marriage, divorce and child custody matters, has become a particularly fertile ground for fundamentalists of all hues. Much of the day to day casework of Southall Black Sisters and other Asian women's groups bears witness to these developments — where the law and the welfare system have become effective arenas in which fundamentalists and orthodox leaders attempt to assert the precedence of religious and traditional customs over rights and remedies laid down in civil family law. If India heads towards a thorough implementation of personal family laws, it is very likely that this will have significant impact on Asian women in this country.

**RESISTANCE**

The part played by Asian women, across the South Asian religions, in resisting Hindu fundamentalism in Britain has been vital, especially in revealing the interrelations between nationalism, fundamentalism and gender and in exploding the myth that Muslims
are the only fundamentalists in Asian communities. Women, have in particular, borne the brunt of the new found Hindu militancy and intolerance, insofar as it has been utilised to maintain the patriarchal family and to shield women from the ‘corrupt’ and ‘secular’ influences of British society. There have been numerous confrontations between Asian women, and anti-communist forces, and Hindu right wing supporters and leaders. One such confrontation took place between Asian women from Southall Black Sisters and Brent Asian Women’s refuge and the Kutch Leva samaj, a Hindu caste community, who had organised a mela in north London in 1993. The mela attracted thousands of Hindus and gave the appearance of being a cultural event, although it was presided over by religious figures, including some who openly supported the Hinduva movement. We decided to use the occasion to distribute leaflets advertising a forthcoming anti-communal public meeting organised by another group in which we were actively involved, the Alliance Against Communalism and for Democracy in South Asia. The leaflets appealed to all Hindus to uphold a tolerant and humane vision of Hinduism espoused by the likes of Mahatma Gandhi.

At the mela, we were made to seek permission from the ‘leaders’ and organisers of the event. We were marched to the main podium by male stewards and told to wait, whilst they disappeared to consult with leaders who remained ‘faceless’. They duly returned and without giving reasons demanded that we leave. The most we could get out of them was that they did not want to ‘mix the social event or even religion with politics’. It was clear that our leaflets caused great discomfort to their leaders. With the aid of mobile phones, the male stewards kept in close contact with each other to monitor our activities. Finally, they forced us out of the grounds, having first tried, unsuccessfully, to confiscate our leaflets.

We then decided to distribute our leaflets at the gates of the grounds, but we were met with a hostile and aggressive response. The stewards, including some women, hurled dignitaries and visitors in without giving them a chance to take a leaflet from us. Some stewards became hysterical and apologetic at the contents of our leaflet, screaming and lurching forward to assault us. Throughout, they hurled abuse at us, calling us ‘Muslim’ whores and bitches. They even threatened to rape us and humiliate us by publicly stripping us naked. Boys as young as 11 also mimicked the adults, threatening rape and making lewd gestures. Men and boys alike, distinguished us from their ‘wives, mothers and sisters’ to justify their acts of sexual aggression towards those who did not belong to them. (This logic does not apply when disciplining women within the family). It is not without irony that their threats of rape and humiliation were reminiscent of the actual act of rape and humiliation suffered by Muslim women in Surat, India, by Hindu mobs, who then widen the event and distributed the tapes for public viewing.

Those members of the public who did take our leaflets, were made to return them to the stewards at the gate. If they refused, stewards simply pulled the leaflets out of their pockets and tore them up. Very few members of the public protested in the wake of what they perceived to be ‘justifiable’ control of ‘trouble makers’ by the organisers, although a few did try. The tearing up of our leaflets took on ritualistic dimensions as they delighted in their displays of aggression. We were told that we were causing offence to the public, although the public were not allowed to make up their own minds. Eventually, the stewards called the police who duly arrived in a special riot control van and threatened to arrest us for ‘breach of peace’. The police were themselves bemused by the confrontation but were clearly intent on upholding the rights of the organisers. Our protests then took on a two fold struggle as we also battled with the police for failing to arrest or even warn the stewards who tried to assault and threaten us.

Geographically and metaphorically, we were confined to the margins of the event and by implication, the Hindu community, by being cast as ‘outsiders’ and ‘whores in the pay of Muslim fundamentalists’! But the most insidious aspect of their behaviour was the fact that they became the ‘thought police’ and ‘gate keepers’ of their community, guarding against any threat to their power and control over their constituency. No one was permitted to exercise choice or dissent or even have access to the information contained in our leaflets. No one was permitted to question the fact that, almost quietly and stealthily, using the pretext of a ‘social’ occa-
Jewish women challenge religious leaders

Julia Bard

The Jewish community is under pressure both from inside and from outside to define itself as a religious group. So if something happens in the world that affects Jews specifically, the BBC will go straight to the Chief Rabbi to ask for the 'Jewish view' on those events. But though the community has religious aspects to it, these are more complex than anything that could possibly be represented by a single rabbi and, if you look more closely, it's clear that the Jewish community is an ethnic community. It's diverse, it's divided along lines of class and religious belief; it's divided according to the institutions within it and whether or not people belong to them; it's divided in terms of geography, culture, sexuality and gender. This diversity means that it is very hard to make assumptions about a Jewish view on anything.

But there are traditional ways in which Jews have been rallied to single, apparently uniting, causes. Historically, and today, too, there are factors which make Jews feel that they are constantly endangered. Our recent history obviously makes us feel very nervous about what it means to live as a minority in a racist society, and there have been a number of responses to that.

Zionism was one. I don't want to digress on to a discussion of Zionism per se, but it is important to recognize its appeal for diaspora Jews. One strong attraction was that many Jewish people saw Zionism as a secular alternative to a religious establishment that they didn't feel comfortable with. That is breaking down now, which many of us see as all to the good, and some of us would also question whether it has a secular basis at all, but Jewish people's perception of Zionism as a secular focus for their identity is undeniable.

The other response, which is growing now, is a religious revival. This notion that religious orthodoxy offers a safe haven in a hostile world is encouraged by the community's self-selected leaders. The Chief Rabbi and the other members of the religious establishment are using a sense of danger, and a fear that Jews are likely to disappear as a way of rallying people around a false point of unity.

In this context, Jewish women have started to oppose an increasingly monolithic religious establishment. How this has happened is curious. Two or three years ago the Chief Rabbi identified women as a problem for him and for the religious establishment in general. So he set about doing some research on Jewish women — research which had never been done in any methodical fashion before. Meetings were held throughout the community. The researchers made a serious effort to reach Jewish women to whom they would otherwise not have access. So although they started with synagogue members, they tried to reach women who were...
members of neither synagogues nor secular Jewish institutions.

As these meetings progressed it was as if a lid had blown off a boiler in which the pressure had been building up for years. People started to say things that had never been said publicly. In a meeting in a synagogue hall a woman would stand up and say "I'm a lesbian. I'm a member of this synagogue and I've never felt that I've been treated as a complete human being. What are you going to do about it? Is the Chief Rabbi going to publish my views, my perceptions, my feelings?" Women who appeared respectable and mainstream were standing up and saying things that were explicitly feminist. They were very, very angry. Out of this, a debate started which is still going on, to the surprise of many of the people doing the research and even more to the surprise of the Chief Rabbi who has, unsuccessfully, tried to slam the lid firmly down on it.

From the point of view of Women Against Fundamentalism this has raised some important issues. One of the organisations which has been formed indirectly as a result of the Chief Rabbi's research is the Jewish Women's Network. Set up three years ago, it is an alliance between women from very different backgrounds, ranging from secular socialists right through to ultra-orthodox. This poses interesting questions about the relationship between religion and fundamentalism because a lot of the challenge to the religious establishment within the Jewish community has come from women who remain active members of their synagogues. They have been politicised by making demands of the synagogue as a political institution.

One of the campaigns which has challenged the authority of the Chief Rabbi and his office is a demand by a group of women to hold women-only synagogue services in which they read from the scroll of the law. The Chief Rabbi has forbidden them to do this, but the women have not been able to find any religious rule which would support his decision. However, they want to stay within the religious law, so they have asked the Chief Rabbi to give them a definitive ruling which they say they'll accept. The result is that the Chief Rabbi has been forced to admit that there is no religious prohibition on reading from the holy scrolls, but he has made his own decision and the answer is "No." This edifying discussion has been conducted publicly in the Jewish press and has raised debate not just amongst women but in the whole community about who is in authority and why, and about how that authority is used.

There are reasons why women have mounted this challenge in a way that men have not been able to do — and some that have tried to over the years — and that goes back to the Chief Rabbi's motives in setting up this research. The Chief Rabbi is preoccupied with 'continuity'. The way he and the religious establishment understand that term is contained in the question "Will we have Jewish grandchildren?" — the title of one of his recent books. That question raises deep emotional issues for many members of the community, hooking them into the debate about the future of Jewish life on his terms.

On these terms the issue of Jewish children and Jewish grandchildren depends on women being the hearers of the children and the transmitters of the culture. If they can't be relied on to transmit the religion and the culture in the authorised fashion, according to the law as laid down by the Chief Rabbi, then his notion of 'continuity' faces a problem.

What the women in the Jewish Women's Network and elsewhere in the community are saying is that this is not what they mean by continuity and nor is it what they want. But that if we do want to assure the safety and creativity of our community, then the way to do it is to open it up to make it more democratic and less authoritarian; to welcome in people who have been pushed out and to draw in people from beyond the margins.

So, for example one of the Chief Rabbi's preoccupations is intermarriage. The received wisdom is that if someone makes a relationship with a non-Jewish partner, they are lost to the Jewish community. But the conclusions of his own research team are that the opposite happens: people are very tenacious; they hang on to their culture and identity through all kinds of conflicts and difficulties. So if you take a positive view of diversity within the community rather than driving out non-conformists in an attempt to keep the community homogeneous, people would want to identify with it and the future would be assured.

The Jewish Women's Network is at a very early stage and is experiencing its own conflicts which need to be explored. Nevertheless, it has the potential to challenge many Jewish communal assumptions. In the first place it is an alliance between women in the community who have hardly had access to each other before — not just the secularists and the ultra-orthodox, but the orthodox and the less orthodox who have been contained within boundaries drawn by a male rabbinic establishment.

There are, as yet embryonic, debates about sexuality, race and class which urgently need to be developed. There are also debates about ritual which relate to the problematic distinction between religion and fundamentalism which Women Against Fundamentalism also needs to explore. On some of these arguments it is becoming clear that the discussions on prayer groups, divorce and other apparently religious issues, as well as having a religious dimension are cultural expressions of women demanding the right to participate in the public life of their community rather than being forced into their homes.

At the same time it is hard to avoid being drawn into an acceptance that a religious agenda is where these challenges will remain. If that happens, the challenge will, ultimately, fail. An effective challenge can only come from a secularist (not a secular) base, which will not allow power over a diverse, ethnic community remain in the hands of a single-minded religious establishment.

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This is an edited text of a Women Against Fundamentalism public meeting, held on 18 May, 1995 in London. Religious fundamentalism is very often connected with ethnic and national fundamentalism — this is seen clearest in Israel. The first speaker is Debbie Lerman, who is active in Women In Black and Women And Peace in Israel and has been working with these issues for many years. The second is Luisa Morgantini who, as a trade union activist and a feminist, has developed quite an historical role in initiating and in solidifying contacts and solidarity between Palestinian and Israeli women. The third speaker is Frances Kissling from Washington DC, President of Catholics For a Free Choice, whose talk is entitled "The Vatican Lost in the Pelvic Zone".

Debbie Lerman

I am a member of Women In Black and Women And Peace, which are two women's peace organisations in Israel. Because of that I will be talking mainly about women's work in trying to achieve peace in the Middle East. Then I will try to connect that with what I think is probably our next stage of struggle, which is fundamentalism.

The women's peace movement in Israel is today at a crossroads. The women's peace movement in Israel, as we define ourselves, is all the women's groups, both Israelis and Palestinians — Muslims, Christians and Jews — that oppose Israeli occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The first anti-Zionist groups became active after the 1967 war, when the occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank started. The feminist movement of the 1970s, because it was based on the same basic political and philosophical approach, established the women's peace movement in 1982, when there was what Israel calls the Lebanon War, which was actually the invasion of Lebanon. That is the first time where women got together as women to fight against occupation and to fight for peace, the first time there was an emphasis on women acting for peace as an independent political entity. There were two groups active: Parents Against Silence — mothers protesting that their children had to go to war and do terrible things to others; and a more radical one, the Women Against The Occupation Of Lebanon which called for the immediate retrieval of Israel's forces from Lebanon.

The second strong wave began after the Intifada, at the end of 1987. After the partial withdrawal, the groups kept working against the occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. During 1988 there were about 10-15 different women's groups acting against the occupation, supporting the Intifada, supporting the actions of the Palestinians to remove the Israeli forces from the territories. The group which is best known of all is Women In Black (WIB). WIB was a very loose coalition of 32 protest vigils that were held every Friday across Israel. There were
hundreds of women, both Jewish and Palestinian, standing on roadways both inside and outside cities for one hour, silently dressed in black with one sign which was common to all the demonstrations: 'End the occupation'.

It became very visible, the most hated and most controversial group against the occupation. With very little power, we created a very big effect. It was women-only, using tactics that were not used before in the Israeli arena and because of that we received all kinds of attacks — in the press, by other political groups. Every Friday it was a question of some women standing there to protect us — there were guys coming out of cars and hitting us, throwing things at us and calling us whores. The 32 vigils went on for years, from the beginning of 1988 to 1992-93, and there are still some vigils being held.

At the end of 1988 women decided to create some kind of a coalition of women's peace groups, so the Women And Peace Coalition was established and from that point on, once a year, apart from all the other activities, we had a large international conference. The main event, at the end of 1989, was a demonstration called Women's March For Peace. We had 6,000 Palestinian women from the territories, Israeli and Palestinian women from Israel marching from the west to the east side of Jerusalem. We were dubbed by the police and imprisoned, and a big deal was made about it; but in terms of uniting Palestinian and Israeli women, and as a major statement of our political stand, that was one of the main events. At the same time, women from the establishment created a parallel organisation called the Israeli Women's Peace Net which is more central, closer to the establishment. We do work with them — although our activism is very different — we have created something that is called the Jerusalem Link, consisting of women's centres in Jerusalem.

Recent Developments: Since the beginning of WIB, many political changes have happened in the Middle East. First there was the Gulf War which caused a split inside the Israeli women's peace movement. Some supported the government, some women opposed it. That made some groups stop, some diminish in numbers. We lost momentum. The main change in the Middle East has been the Oslo Accord and what has happened since. The Oslo Accord sounded like something we prayed all our lives for: the recognition of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people, the fact that at some time in the future there will be a Palestinian state and (supposedly) the alleviation of the burden of the occupation.

In actual fact, none of that has really happened in such a way. It has created instead despair, and a kind of dismantlement of the peace and women's movement. Most Palestinians and Israelis are disappointed with the peace accord. It has created a
change in the power structure in the territories in such a way, that on the one hand there is a growth of the Jewish fundamentalist groups who are settling in every area they can to stop a Palestinian state happening. On the other hand there's a very strong increase in the influence of fundamentalist Muslim groups.

The women's peace movement does not really have perspective. The women we used to work with currently do not know which way to go. We have had many meetings lately and feel there are three directions in which we can go. First, to continue to do some more of the same — we've been doing it for the last 28 years. We can go on working against the occupation, but the numbers of people who are willing to work with us is diminished. Another possibility, and something that some women are already doing, is to admit that we don't know what to do on peace and occupation issues, so let's go on and work on feminist issues — there are still women's issues in Israel that haven't been dealt with by the peace camp.

The third direction is one reason why I'm here on this visit. We should look at both Jewish and Muslim fundamentalism, at what is happening in Israeli society in terms of social and economic fundamentalism which is becoming very strong, and try and find a new way of approaching our problems, of approaching our co-operation with the Palestinians and see that because we have things in common, and because some of these things are directly linked to fundamentalism, we might be able to find in this a basis to go forwards.

Luisa Morgantini
In our experience in Italy, the idea was to cross boundaries (in the feminist saying 'rooting and shifting') to cross borders, to return and then to share experiences. Our experiences with Israeli and Palestinian women started collectively in 1986-87 (I became involved in 1982) starting with the massacre of Palestinians in Beirut. We wanted to do something and we thought it was important to establish dialogue, to overcome differences and to negotiate. It was a challenge to see if it was possible to find, in a situation of conflict, a way to overcome it. We wanted not just solidarity with Palestinians, who were suffering the most, but to have a dialogue between Palestinian and Israeli women together. We went to Jerusalem in 1988, seeking a different approach. Many of us thought it would be possible to have a conference straight away, others thought not — even if women on both sides were working together to oppose occupation, there were at the same time a lot of differences. It was not possible to have a conference together, so we had a meeting with Palestinian women first. We talked about the liberation movement and the movement for women's liberation. We also had meetings with the Israeli women. We met WIB, and found how difficult it was for Israeli women to fight against the occupation. We saw the differences between the Israeli and Palestinian women and the difficulty of building relations between them, although the will was there to do so. When the conflict involved having hundreds of children and families in jail, homes destroyed and land taken away, and the presence of soldiers during the Intifada, it made talking difficult. When the Israeli and Palestinian women were in dialogue, massacres occurred and it made the relationship strained.

When we got back from our trip, we decided to have WIB in Italy, to give validity to the flight of the Israeli and Palestinian women's struggle. At the same time we had a project of solidarity and exchange with the Palestinian women. We went on the street as WIB; during the Gulf War we used WIB as not only against the occupation of Palestine, but also as WIB against the Gulf War. We were on the street because our government was involved in the war. WIB became very important in Italy, it was present in 94 towns. During the Gulf War hundreds of women were in the street; we learned this kind of struggle from the Israeli women.

Then the Yugoslavian war broke out too. We went to Yugoslavia with a big human chain to the different towns, so also in ex-Yugoslavia WIB started, from our example. It is very important to see this kind of circularity of experiences. From the relationships built with the Palestinian and Israeli women we started to go across borders to ex-Yugoslavia. We went in solidarity and to give help and a voice to the women resisting nationalism, and women who were working with different ethnic groups. It was a way of working together and to organise relationships among women of different ethnic groups. In Italy we had a seminar with Croatian, Serbian and Muslim women together and now when we go to Belgrade with WIB, we talk with women from all sides in the conflict. In December there was a seminar in Israel, and WIB from different countries came together. We are trying to build an international movement of women, trying to empower women and trying to fight together with women in different situations of conflict, against nationalism, against racism, and for the rights of women.

Frances Kissling
In Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC) we increasingly understand that, just like there are many kinds of feminists and Catholics, there are also many kinds of fundamentalists and fundamentalisms. It is hard coming from Roman Catholicism, a religious tradition where the term fundamentalism has not been often used, to remember this. We most often hear the term fundamentalism associated with branches of Protestantism and with Islam, but rarely with other religions. But there is a growing awareness that in most religions there are liberating
aspects, and there are oppressive or fundamentalist aspects.

The larger question in my mind is why governments so often seem to embrace the fundamentalist aspects of religions and are so often punitive of the liberating aspects.

CFFC is a growing movement that started in the US in 1973 when abortion became legal. When abortion was illegal the Catholic hierarchy and bishops did not care very much about it. But when the state said abortion is a legitimate moral decision that women can make without the state, without religion, then the bishops became concerned. The CFFC founders, three Irish-American women in New York, thought the 300 Catholic bishops of the US simply did not represent the 52 million Catholic people in the US, and that if we were talking about politics, the viewpoints of those Catholic people were far more important in terms of what politicians should do and what the law should be than the viewpoints of the bishops. CFFC has grown to the point that we have three full-time staffed active groups: Mexico, Brazil and Uruguay (which covers the Latin American region) and there are many partners that we work with in other countries, predominately Roman Catholic countries. We have found that what we have to say resonates not only with Catholics but with others who are concerned with moral and ethical dimensions of decision-making and about women's rights.

We started as a very legalistic organisation. We were interested in freedom of religion and in pluralism in the US and we were interested in our rights as Catholics to disagree with teachings of the church without being penalised. We moved very rapidly to another phase; we came to understand that the institutional objections to abortion on the part of the church had nothing to do with life, or very little to do with respect for life and had a lot to do with disrespect for women. We were dealing with a classic patriarchal institution that had a profound inability to acknowledge women’s sexuality, women’s right and capacity to make a decision on when, whether and if to have children, and how. We were certainly not dealing with theology because we fully understood that the theology in the church was broad enough to encompass a range of views on whether abortion was a legitimate moral choice. And so we came to understand that this was about government and that the Roman Catholic church is both a religious institution and a political player concerned with its power.

Within the institutional church it is only 30 years since the church that the church and state can be separated became part of our consciousness. It takes a very long time within institutions that are as large and as monolithic as the power structure of the Roman Catholic church for any change of philosophy to be incorporated into the institution. So there is this constant tension in the church between its acceptance of a free state and its historical policy that the state has no rights but to fulfil the teachings or positions of the church itself.

Why do fundamentalisms always include control of women on the agenda? For Roman Catholicism, the reason goes back to what I said before. I'll use the example of abortion, and why the church is so vehemently opposed to the legalisation and recognition of it as a legitimate option. At CFFC we realised it was not about life, the contrast between the way in which the church treats the question of war and the way the church treats the question of abortion is illustrative of this. In the case of war, the church primarily gives guidelines to men at the top — generals, presidents, kings — about when and whether it will be justifiable to take life in war. And yet in the case of abortion there are no guidelines about when and whether a woman could make a decision to take the potential life of a foetus, so there is no just abortion. The reason is power.

We have a governing structure of the Roman Catholic church that has only two qualifications for power. The first is that you have to be a man — one of the few churches that still has this limited qualification — and the second is that you have to say you will not have sex. There is a presumption that people who don't engage in sexual activity are holier and better qualified to rule and to serve than people who do have sex. On one level it maintains an elite clergy, men or women, because there are not a lot of people who are prepared to say they won't have sex. On another level it implicitly says that people who have sex are bad. Or at least not as good.

Historically, the church has said that sexuality is redeemed by its procreative content, and abortion is obviously the single most visible sign that you have not accepted this teaching of the church — contraception, invitro fertilisation and homosexual activity are all signs that you have not accepted this teaching. If the church were to make any changes in any of these areas, it would threaten its own right to govern, because it would say that every Catholic, sexually active or not, has the same right to participate in ruling, in power and in service in the church.

And that is the heart of the matter. I think we all see, and we see it in other fundamentalisms, that where people behave with the greatest rage, you have most likely touched their power button. When it comes to the Catholic bishops, the greatest rage is reserved for abortion and for women. We don't see rage in the Catholic church over war, racism, the rising nationalism and xenophobia in eastern and central Europe and other parts of this continent. I'm not denying that the church has been a good friend to many who are seeking their human rights, but I am saying that nowhere has more energy been put than in limiting and controlling women's rights and freedom.
Gay and lesbian Christian apologetics

Theresa Murray and Michael McClure

Last year a group of Jewish and Christian scholars in the United States gathered to hold a colloquium in response to the phenomenon of the homosexual movement. The Ramsey Colloquium, as it was titled, described this social phenomenon as a *novum*, a new thing, in public life, "a gay and lesbian movement that aggressively proposes radical changes in social behaviour, religion, morality and law." The document which emanated from this Colloquium is sober and theologically reflective. No doubt it honestly presents the views of serious-minded religious individuals. Nevertheless, it puts forward a view of homosexuality, homosexuals, and the 'homosexual movement' that is typical of the religious right. The very honesty and seriousness of the document requires that the challenge it presented should not go by without comment. This reply aims to meet that challenge.

The authentic tradition of prophetic concern for justice and liberation which is so essential a part of Jewish and Christian teaching must concern itself naturally with justice and equality for a minority that has been so viciously persecuted down the centuries. The extent and true character of this persecution may never accurately be told, since the authors of history are those who have voices, while the history of homosexuals is one of silence and exclusion. It is no accident that American Gay Rights activists have made 'Silence=Death' their motto.

**CONTROL**

One of the fundamental objectives on the agenda of the religious right is the perpetuation of control over people's personal lives. The Colloquium states,

> It is important to recognize the linkages among the component parts of the sexual revolution. Permissive abortion, widespread adultery, easy divorce, radical feminism, and the gay and lesbian movement have not by accident appeared at the same historical moment. They have in common a declared desire for liberation from constraint — especially constraints associated with an allegedly oppressive culture and religious tradition.

This statement overlooks the fact that on all these issues — abortion, marital morality, the condition of women and homosexuals — intelligent and sincere people hold views that intellectually diverge from those of the religious right. There is a presumption here that the categories employed by the religious right are obviously the correct ones. This begs many rudimentary questions.

Those who are so sure that traditional family values and married life are the right formula for all must prove their case. The family is indeed in crisis for reasons that the religious right have failed to notice. The gay and lesbian movement is asking questions about why it has seemed so necessary to hand out such vicious ill treatment to a minority of women and men simply because they are different. It is posing questions that require answers.

Proponents of the traditional agenda have offered no good reason to suppose that there is a distinctively sexual morality, in the sense of a specific set of norms which operate in isolation from other spheres of moral consideration.

What links this cluster of plaintiffs who allege that culture and religious tradition are oppressive is not a concern for a general throwing over of all restraint but rather the demand for the freedom of people to make fundamental decisions about the management of their own lives. We would not dispute that liberty cannot be absolute, but demand that the standards which are used to impose restraints on liberty do so without destroying the quality of life of any minority. While democracy favours the majority, it is intended to do so without abolishing the basic civil rights of others. Actually it is we who are insisting on a limit to the freedom with which the majority exercises its privileges and powers. When the assumptions generated by the prevailing ideology go unchecked to the extent of interfering with the rights of individuals to privacy and equal protection under law, it cannot persist without justification — given in language which does not merely beg the question by presupposing the superiority of its own beliefs.

Conservative politicians have so far sought the requisite objectivity needed to lend their position credibility by reference to a metaphysical law ("God's will"). This supplies their position with the characteristics of omniscience and ubiquity which have more traditionally been sought through inclusive discourse among people who share differing perspectives. It can scarcely be surprising that scepticism has arisen over the fact that this divine cipher of 'objectivity' has elicited a version of Truth which coheres in every respect to the attitudes of its proponents. The overriding concern among pro-choice advocates, feminists, and homosexuals is that people's identities not be relativized according to the straight male's tastes and dictates, which have traditionally been regarded as absolutes.

Homosexuals want the right, at the very least, to
express their sexuality and organise their lives without being molested by others. All the above movements are marked by a wish to stop the control of persons' lives by third parties, who either address them without understanding their experience or wish to control them for the sake of vested interest of power or identity.

**SPECIAL INTERESTS?**

Portraying homosexuals as the aggressors has been an effective ploy in garnering support for the religious right's ideals and in creating an atmosphere of paranoia. The most threatening demand made by homosexuals is that they be permitted to openly exist without the fear of being assaulted, murdered, or fired from their jobs. The misrepresentation of homosexuals as the ubiquitous 'them' lurking invisibly in our midst and posing a constant threat to our most sacred norms prevails upon the very anonymity which it fosters. This anonymity has been thrust upon homosexuals by a heterosexist society, and now that same society denounces these individuals as subversives. If openly expressing who you are is not considered radical for straights, then how can it be viewed as combative behaviour when applied to homosexuals?

Nevertheless, some right wing politicians have had the beld-faced audacity to refer to homosexuals as a 'special interest group', the implication that they are a group who seek some sort of privilege which the rest of the country does not already enjoy. The unassailable civil liberties which the majority take for granted take on the status of 'special interests' when extended to homosexuals. Are homosexuals to be blamed because they take issue with paying dues to a club which refuses to admit them? Pat Robertson, president of the Christian Coalition, publicised his family values agenda under the slogan, 'Reclaim America' ... as if America ever belonged to anyone but the beneficiaries of the traditions he supports! Similarly, Ollie North, who only narrowly lost his Senatorial bid (despite admitting lying to Congress and being found guilty of serious criminal offences for his role in the Iran-Contra scandal) condemned President Clinton and his 'radical homosexual circles' of 'wanting to sacrifice the world's finest forces on the altar of special interest politics by letting homosexuals into the military.'

The real question behind the 'special interest' rhetoric is what on earth makes the heterosexual male's stance morally neutral? The time has finally come for the patriarch (and his loyal spouses) to justify the privileges which they have enjoyed without restraint in terms which do not boil down to some 'special interest' of their own. Nothing on earth can justify it — which may be why there is suddenly a revived interest in insisting that something in heaven does! This renewed political focus on the diviners is no less a novelty than the social phenomenon which it hopes to undermine.

**AMBIGUOUS PLACES**

The lesbian and gay movement is not trying to undermine the institution of heterosexual marriage but it does take strong issue with the purdah of the traditional right who see family as the only normative pattern of cohabitation and who see patterns diverging from it as somehow pernicious to the social fabric. The Colloquium states that:

Marriage and family — husband, wife, and children, joined by public recognition and legal bond — are the most effective institutions for the rearing of children, the directing of sexual passion and human flourishing in community. Not all marriages and families 'work', but it is wise to let pathology and failure, rather than a vision of what is normative and ideal, guide us in the development of social policy.

What is so irritating about this statement is not that it makes the assertion that families are the best places to raise children but its steadfast refusal to admit that the family is as ambiguous an institution as the alternatives offered to it. In fact, according to the findings of a recent American Bar Association report, and estimated 3.5 million to 10 million children witness domestic violence each year in the United States. In nine out of ten cases the mother is the victim, it said. "Family violence is the root cause of virtually every major social problem we face as a nation today," said Sarah Buel, a Boston prosecutor of domestic violence cases. "It is in our homes that children learn that it's OK to use violence to get what you want."

The fact is that the ever-precious family values which have had such a prominent political role in villainising the homosexual quest for liberty are not under threat from the outside influence of other lifestyles — they are crumbling under the weight of their own failure to provide a safe and humane environment for their own members.

**GENERALITIES AND MYTHS**

The religious right can overlook the realities which confront them by subscribing to the usual generalities and myths about homosexuals that so taint discussions of the subject. What is striking about these generalisations and characterisations is that they talk beyond and over the experience of those whom they are supposed to address. Typical of this is the following passage:

Advocates of the gay and lesbian movement have the responsibility to set forth publicly their alternative proposals. This must mean more than calling for liberation from established standards. They must clarify for all of us how sexual mores are to be inculcated in the young, who are particularly vulnerable to seduction and solicitation. Public anxiety about homosexuality is pre-eminently a concern about the vulnerability of the young.

In the first place, do we really want to inculcate our young with sexual mores? Sexuality is integral to the person, not merely to his or her genitalia. Sexuality is a sacred aspect of personal identity, and we don't usually attempt to inculcate children with that. Instead we attempt to set good examples and provide a safe and non-judgmental atmosphere in which it may develop. We have traditionally tried to provide a balance between theoretical teaching and
practical skills. In the area of sexuality we must recognise the limitations of theory. The student will no doubt learn much more in practice than from classroom discussions of the biological mechanics of sexuality. That is due to the profundity of the love relationships through which sexuality is expressed, and to which no mere theory can do justice. This does not reflect a disastrous failure in our teaching methods. It is due to the importance and subtlety of human nature and our ways of growing in relation to other individuals, as opposed to growing in relation to abstract generalisations about ‘men’, ‘women’ or ‘homosexuals’.

Homosexuals are traditionally more open and candid about sex. Here we agree with the Ramsey Colloquium that the lesbian and gay movement represents a genuine norm within the body politic and the religious communities. The frankness with which the gay community lives out and celebrates sexuality poses fundamental questions about the whole tradition of the Judeo-Christian sexual ethic. The gay community is able to live out the truth that sex may form a part of a loving and affirming friendship without interpreting the binding force of that commitment as a matter of public policy. Human relationships naturally involve risk. It would be foolish to instate laws for the purpose of removing that risk.

ALTERNATIVES
In the excerpt cited earlier the Colloquium asked the lesbian and gay movement for some clear guidance on how the young were to be instructed on sexual morality. Sexual morality, like any form of morality, has as one of its principle tenets the sovereignty of individual human persons. This means that people are to be regarded as ends in themselves, not just as vehicles to the self-promotion or fulfilment of others. The traditional ‘objective’ ethics are very evident, for instance, in the Pope’s Veritatis Splendor and the analyses of the ethical right wing in, for example, the pro-life movement. In this tradition the situation is analysed in terms based on ‘objective’ concepts such as the ‘beginning of life’, strict definitions of the marriage bond and a certain understanding of ‘nature’. Once the situation is analysed in these terms the logical conclusions are drawn. The tradition has the advantage that its conclusions are self-consistent and long-standing. Its disadvantages are that not everyone may agree with the initial premises and concepts and that it tends to ignore the involvement of the participants in the situation. Before anyone can legitimately claim ‘objectivity’ they must prove that there is more than a grammatical correspondence between their own descriptions of Truth and some reality which exists independently.

Perhaps we could take a few cues from Kant’s moral philosophy, which is deeply rooted in the gospels despite making no claims to metaphysical realities which cannot be established from within the human condition which forms the parameters of our knowledge. Common sense tells us that when we speak of morality we mean something more than behaving in a particular way or performing ‘good’ deeds. In other words, it isn’t enough that one merely acts as if she/he were good, one ought really to will the good itself. To define certain outward acts as moral or immoral may simply be an impossibility, since we can never ascertain whether a ‘good’ act corresponds to a good will or to a mental state of desiring the good itself above all other interests. The responsibility is not to act as if one were good (to do so presupposes some definite public idea of the good which one can mimic) but to genuinely do the good in a spirit of good will.

AN UNNECESSARY PROBLEM?
Whatever may be the traditions held in the Judeo-Christian ethic about homosexuality, we would suggest that those who maintain that homosexual acts are intrinsically wrong are under an obligation to show why the suffering that this causes so many individuals is necessary. Certainly homosexuals will get it wrong, will exploit others and make foolish decisions. This is a problem among heterosexuals as well. Why do human beings have a passion for inventing unnecessary difficulties over such matters as sexual orientation, race, nationality or creed? The inclusion of the other matters may seem unfair to the Ramsey Colloquium but what the modern world asks of religious believers who condemn homosexuality is to prove to them that what they are exercising is not just a cultural prejudice.

The story about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah had no association with ‘sodomy’ in Jewish tradition until what Christians call the inter-testament period and then only appears definitely in the writings of Philo of Alexandria in the first century CE. The Christian tradition on sodomy is a borrowing from the elaboration of Judaism. There is even speculation that the centurion’s servant cured by Jesus in the Gospel of Saint Luke could also have been his lover — a common situation in the Roman army of the period. This is evidenced by the use in the Greek original of the word paiz for the servant boy (boy, child, servant or boyfriend in the homosexual sense) rather than the more usual doulos (servant or slave).

Even if this exegesis cannot be insisted on, Jesus probably had a fair idea of the full gamut of human sexuality. The members of the Ramsey Colloquium might do well to join Jesus in his overriding concern for the love commandment, by putting themselves in the shoes of the oppressed just long enough to reflect on their condition.

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Counter-attack: women stand up to fundamentalism

New York conference 21 March 1995

This conference held on 21 March 1995 in New York by the Women’s Feature Service brought together several speakers on religious fundamentalism. As well as Frances Kissling who appears elsewhere in this Journal, American Minister Meg A Riley and Indira Kajosevic from the former Yugoslavia also spoke. Reverend Riley is the director of the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Office of Lesbian, Bisexual and Gay Concerns and works with local groups across the US to deconstruct and fight the conservative right’s propaganda on civil rights issues. The trigger for her activism was proposed legislation in Oregon and Colorado three years ago which aimed at denying lesbians, bisexuals and gays their civil rights. During the campaign before the vote on these new laws, she saw a video put out by the religious right called the “Gay Agenda”.

It really terrified me, because it is very slick, creative, well-done propaganda. After that video, even as a lesbian, I thought that gay people were disgusting and didn’t deserve anything. And I knew that if I thought that, it was pretty bad news for me and my people. This video was widely distributed before the election. It is filled with absolute lies — that gay people eat faeces, have hundreds of partners a week, are very wealthy, all white, are child molesters — all in a very pseudo-compasionate voice. I became aware of how disenfranchised the people in this country really are, and how desperate they are to feel better. I got very afraid for my country. So I spent a lot of time researching and reading the materials of radical religious right groups.

Riley quotes two of the big names on the religious right which indicated to her what the root of Christian fundamentalism is. The first is from Pat Robertson: “The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family, political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.” The second comes from a book called Dare to Discipline by James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family: “Respect must be commanded. It is not a by-product of human nature, but is inherently related to control. This factor is important for Christian parents. The moment a child expresses a defiant ‘I will not’ or ‘You shut up!’ you had better take it out of him, and pain is a marvelous purifier.” Riley explains.

Reading this crystallized for me what this agenda is about — control. Not witchcraft or lesbianism, but control and control is what families are made of. God is at the top of the structure; underneath God are men who control women. Women control children and are controlled by men and God. Children must learn to control themselves and be controlled by men and God. And anything that violates this structure is anti-family. This is the structure that religious right groups are seeking to make into laws for the United States.

Riley quotes various programmes that the religious right disagree with for being anti-family — multiculturalism, city health care, school breakfast programmes and battered women shelters: “We might think that violence against women in the family is anti-family, but in fact it is irrelevant to the right’s family construct. But if the woman has somewhere to go, besides her husband, this destroys the family.” However for the religious right, homosexuality is the worst anti-family evil. She also says the reason Pat Robertson believes all feminists are lesbians is because “anyone who’s not looking up to and afraid of and in a hierarchical relationship with a man is by definition a lesbian and not part of the family”. She argues that, just as the right believes children need to be spanked, it thinks that gay people, who are against authority, also need a ‘spanking’, hence the anti-gay initiatives in Oregon and Colorado. Riley goes on to describe how the religious right has been successful in using gay rights as a wedge issue to make inroads in the communities of colour in the US. She finds the trend of voting on basic civil rights very frightening:

Where the links are weak the attacks take place... I encounter so much despair when travelling around the country. However, Adrienne Rich says, “Despair, when not the result of absolute physical or moral defeat, is lack of imagination.” So I would encourage all of us to use our imaginations as we try to keep hopeful in this country and work together and support each other no matter who is being attacked.

Indira Kajosevic, a peace activist and journalist from the former Yugoslavia, does not identify herself ethnically. She spoke about how women’s lives in the former Yugoslavia have been abused by the explosive mix of war, nationalism and religious resurgence, a subject on which she says there have been few reports in the media. She began her talk by quoting the Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Pavle’s widely broadcast 1991 Christmas message in which he wanted that the low birth rate among Serbs was a “plague” visited upon the nation. He claimed that women were more interested in enjoying themselves than bearing and raising children and that: “Many mothers who had not wanted to have more than one child were now pulling out their hair and bitterly weeping over the loss of their children in the war, often cursing God and others for that, but forgetting to blame themselves for not bearing other children who could remain to comfort them. When they come before the final judgement,
those mothers who didn’t allow their children to be born will meet those children who will then ask: Why didn’t you give birth to us, why did you kill us? If the birth rate does not change significantly, in ten years time, the Serbs will be a national minority in their own country who will have nothing to say about their fate.”

Kajosevic says that, historically, the church has played the role of the guardian of the nation and that, more recently, both the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Croatian Church have called for women to serve the nation by giving birth to more children. She says reproduction is also a pressing concern for the Croatian government: “According to Croatian leaders, a foetus is also a Croat, an innocent member of Mother Croatia. Abortion is, thus, a direct attack on the nation and an act of treason. Croatian President, Franjo Tudjman blamed the tragedy of the Croatian nation on women, pornography and abortion: ‘Women who have abortions are mortal enemies of the nation; their gynaecologists traitors. Their acts are appalling because they hinder the birth of little Croats, that sacred thing which God has given society and the homeland.’ Women who have not given birth to at least four children are called ‘female exhibitionists’ who have not fulfilled their ‘unique sacred duty.’”

Kajosevic says that under the constitution of Yugoslavia, equal rights were guaranteed — ‘democracy’ has actually been repressive for women. She says the constitution adopted after the first multiparty elections in 1989 refers only to male citizens. In Serbia’s constitution, Article 27 holds that: “It is a human right to decide freely on family planning” but in the Serb language, this reads as men having the right, not women. Article 29 states: “The family shall enjoy special protection. Marriage and matrimonial and family relations shall be regulated by law.”

Kajosevic stresses that these laws are actually more progressive than the platforms of some Serbian parties which are based on “traditional and stable values, Saint Sava’s tradition, glorification of the protector of health, mother and wives”, all of which reduce women’s role to the reproductive. However, this onslaught against women’s rights has not happened without resistance:

In Belgrade as well as in Zagreb, women’s groups are protesting, demonstrating, and addressing political institutions, including the presidents of the republics. They take every chance to advocate women’s and reproductive rights. Although many of these groups started before the war, they’ve grown in response to it.

Kajosevic says that women activists have been threatened, attacked publicly and lost their jobs. In both Croatia and Serbia, there have been campaigns against feminists, who are called “witches”. However, women persist in their activities and recently, a network of autonomous women’s groups has started a campaign against limits to the right of abortion and linking reproductive rights to population politics.

Of all groups in the former Yugoslavia (for example: intellectuals, writers or other organisations), women’s groups are the only ones still in contact and meeting with each other in the new separate mini-states. These women are stubborn in their goal to protect life and to promote understanding, tolerance, support, compromise and compassion.

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### Poland’s law against abortion

**A Report by The Federation for Women and Family Planning, Poland (abridged version)**

**Context** The old abortion law was passed in 1956, and virtually guaranteed abortion on demand to all women over the age of 18, in state-run clinics. This law was designed both as a means of providing women with greater freedom to control their fertility, and as a form of birth control. By the time the law was repealed, there were 600,000 legal abortions a year. The 1993 law outlaws all abortions except in cases of rape or incest, if the life or health of the woman is at risk, or if the foetus is seriously malformed. Women who have abortions do not face prosecution but those who perform them, or who are accomplices to them, do.

From the moment the law about family planning, the protection of the human foetus and acceptability of abortion came into effect, the Federation for Women and Family Planning has been collecting information about its consequences.

**Sources** The information has been obtained mainly from the Confidential Telephone Line for Women, which the Federation started operating in October 1992, from letters and telephone calls received in response to an appeal for information by the Federation, plus information from doctors.

**Results** The most important conclusion to be drawn is the anti-abortion law is considerably more restrictive in practice than it is on paper.

**The difficulties encountered in obtaining abortions due to medical causes** Women encounter incredible difficulties in trying to obtain the appropriate documents allowing them to have a legal abortion. Many women had been refused the operation, despite serious medical indications. Some doctors (particularly those in small medical centres), are very often afraid to refer the patient for treatment. Sometimes, having successfully overcome this first hurdle, the woman encounters other problems, such as being referred for an abortion to a hospital where the director is an anti-abortionist and will not allow the operation.

**The doctors’ attitude** It is important to underline
how the attitude of the doctors and entire hospitals influences the question of abortion. Doctors working in hospitals where the director is opposed to abortion are often even afraid to examine women referred for abortion.

Regionalisation is an important factor. If somewhere between the regional doctor and the regional hospital (which is the only place where, according to the law, the operation can be carried out) the woman encounters a doctor who is either frightened or opposed to abortion, then her chances are nil. Sometimes doctors who are afraid to take a decision attempt to shirk responsibility by referring the woman to other doctors. This is also a delaying tactic until it is too late to have an abortion.

This fear among doctors and the vagueness of medical guidelines results in a situation where women turn to private services instead, at great expense. The vast majority of women who encountered such difficulties in a hospital maintain the hospital doctors were all too ready to help, but asked a lot of money.

Rape Women whose pregnancy is a result of an illegal action meet with another kind of difficulty. Women who have been raped often have trouble in getting the prosecutor to agree to the operation. If they do not decide to lodge a complaint immediately after the rape, but only when they realise they are pregnant, they have practically no chance of having their pregnancy terminated.

Genetic indications In cases where indications of a genetic nature are concerned, particularly for women living outside large urban centres, access to prenatal testing is minimal. Out of all the tests from six national centres, over 50 per cent were carried out in Warsaw. As a rule, provincial doctors do not order any such tests, and frequently they do not even have the basic information regarding the availability of such tests at their disposal.

Social aspects Before the anti-abortion law came into effect, terminations of pregnancy due to medical and criminal causes comprised a small percentage of all the operations. The so-called social considerations accounted for the majority of terminated pregnancies. Now, abortions motivated by social causes have gone underground. The law affects the poorest women in particular.

Women who decide to terminate their pregnancy despite the interdiction have several prospects open to them.

Private doctors and co-operatives The first option is to find a private doctor who will carry out the operation which will cost on the average 10-20 million zlotys. The daily press is full of advertisements for treatment, which includes “a full range”, “activation of menstruation”, “comprehensive services” etc. Doctors with private practices and co-operatives, but also hospital doctors, have started performing abortions on a large scale, once having got rid of their fears. They reduce their risk by a system of interme-
daries, and compensate themselves by charging outrageously high prices.

Agencies A network of agencies arranging trips abroad has sprung up. These trips are frequently well organised. One of the agencies working in Olsztyn organises trips to Kaliningrad (costing about 6 million zlotys). These trips from Olsztyn to Gdansk take place once or twice a week, mostly in private coaches. It is thought that the service offered to Polish women constitutes a second income for the staff of the Kaliningrad hospital. Women also go to Lithuania, where these services cost a great deal less than in Poland. Some women have been going to the Czech Republic where, despite a ban on carrying out abortions on foreign women, one can find willing doctors.

A certain agency specialises in trips to western countries such as Germany, Austria and Holland, where the cost amounts to approximately US $1000. This agency has monopolised the market, forcing all the other smaller ones which sprung up just after the law was introduced, out of business.

One of the problems encountered by women who decide to go to Holland, is the high level of inaccuracy of the tests carried out by Polish doctors. The prices in Holland are determined by how far the pregnancy is advanced, and it often happens that, after arrival in Holland, women find that the pregnancy is at a much later stage and the price is higher — and sometimes that intervention is no longer possible.

The poorest ones There is a large group of women who cannot afford even the lowest price for an abortion ie 6 million. These families attempt to find a doctor who will agree to carry out the operation at the lowest possible price. They try and talk the doctor into accepting instalment payments for performing the abortion. Sometimes, whole families collect for the operation.

Hazards Poor women often resort to non-medical services. A much greater number of women attempt to “sort out” things for themselves than it would appear from the Ministry of Health report, even though it does confirm the existence of this phenomenon. Such women often end up in hospital for the “clearing up operation”.

FACTORS WHICH INCREASE THE RISK OF UNWANTED PREGNANCY

Restricted access to contraceptives The threat of unplanned pregnancy is extremely high, because modern contraceptives are not generally available, and are used by no more than 8 per cent of the population. Over 40 per cent have never used any kind of contraceptives — the most common reasons given are: religious considerations; lack of access to information; fear of negative side effects; too expensive. Even though it seems there are more contraceptives available in pharmacies than two years ago (but this is not always true in the provinces), their high cost makes them no more accessible than before.
Low level of knowledge Women who phone the Federation, particularly the young ones, often show a lack of basic knowledge about the functioning of their own bodies, disease prevention and family planning.

Doctors There are very large numbers of doctors in Poland who do not prescribe contraceptives. Some of the doctors, for ideological reasons, do not recommend any other type of contraception apart from the "natural" one. It frequently happens that these doctors (particularly the provincial ones) actually warn patients against using the pill or coil by exaggerating their side effects. The same doctors proclaim that the natural methods are the only effective ones. Some doctors simply do not know about the newest methods of contraception. This subject is never taught at the Medical Academy. And then others are afraid of the local priest, and do not wish to expose themselves to censure from the pulpit — such things have been known to happen.

Sexual disorders The high risks of unwanted pregnancy together with the ban on abortion has had a definite influence on the psychological state and sex life of many women. Women in a state of terror about the possibility of becoming pregnant telephone the Federation. Sometimes their partners telephone to complain that their women are refusing to have sex because they fear pregnancy. The sexual sphere has begun to be considered a source of threat.

Implementation of the law by other government departments The Ministry of Education (MOE) is unprepared for the implementation of this law, and is in fact not implementing it. A parliamentary resolution obliges the MoE to introduce sex education to schools which is supposed to include the preparation of young people for family planning, but so far it does not exist.

Textbooks which discuss problems of adolescence and family planning which won prizes in a competition announced by the MoE, are based on a Catholic world view. No other educational aids, such as leaflets, films or models are available either.

There are very few teachers and educators who have the essential training qualifying them to teach in this field and who have the experience to pass on this kind of knowledge. Many teachers who have to teach such courses, have been turning to the Federation for brochures and leaflets which present this kind of knowledge in a simple and non-ideological manner.

The programme's declaration states: this "programme is to include knowledge about human sex, the principles of conscious and responsible parenthood, family values, newly-conceived life and the means and methods of conscious reproduction."

The Ministry of Employment and Social Policy is implementing the law, but only to a limited extent.

Any help it would offer women would exceed the Ministry's financial resources. The help, which was anyway mainly token, after April 1994 became even more modest. Many of the women who were entitled to it, never received it.

SOME COMMENTS REGARDING GOVERNMENT REPORTS

The Ministry of Health report confirms the existence of problems which a woman with the legal right to have an abortion may face, and that the number of women giving birth whose pregnancies are high risk has also increased. The report also mentions women who "are forced into sexual relations against their will", in other words who are raped, and who give birth to children conceived in such circumstances.

It also confirms the existence of back-street abortion, both in Poland and abroad, and the resulting complications with which women are admitted to public hospitals, as well as the number of women reporting to hospital with a miscarriage "in progress".

The report confirms the generally low level of knowledge about methods and means of family planning and the low numbers of people using modern contraceptives. It also attests to the damage to family life caused by attempts to limit sexual relations within this context and the negative influence of the threat of pregnancy on women's psychological state. The report also confirms that "contraceptives are too expensive and many people cannot afford them"

The parliament voted in a law for which the government lacks the practical means to implement. The estimated number of women who would need such help was badly miscalculated by the Employment Minister. The Department of Employment assessed the number of women who would need help at about 10,000, despite the fact that various social organisations, including the Federation for Women and Family Planning warned them that these estimates were too low. Then, this support which was inadequate to begin with, was cut dramatically after five months. This law has mainly affected the very poorest women and families, and the sex education programme is being implemented in practice only to a very limited extent.

Even though it says in the Ministry of Justice report that, as the law has only been in force for one year and this is not sufficient time to be able to draw unequivocal conclusions, nevertheless it seems that at least some of them can be drawn without any doubt at the present time, namely that the law is ineffective as it has failed to abolish the phenomenon of abortion. This phenomenon continues to exist, but apart from a few extreme cases, it has eluded any attempts on the part of the law to enforce it.

Wanda Nowicka, for FWPP
BOOK REVIEW

The right to know: human rights and access to reproductive health information

Reviewed by Kate Clark


This report looks at "the myriad ways... governments restrict, censor and manipulate" information concerning reproductive health, as well as the "exasperating influence" of a country's religion, culture, state of development and the actions of foreign donors. Looking mainly at family planning, abortion and HIV and AIDS, it also offers recommendations for future action. Article 19 who produced this report are an anti-censorship organisation, so the reports stated remit has to be information. However, much of it does spill over into dealing with the availability and legality of services.

The framework taken is human rights discourse, particularly as outlined by international law. In her introduction, Lynn Freedman says that although the subject of reproductive health does not have the same stomach-churning horror as one on torture or rape in war, the human rights abuses are on a massive scale involving "state control over some of the most basic elements of what it means to be human." The statistics are certainly horrifying: 2.5 million deaths so far from AIDS, half a million women dying each year from avoidable, pregnancy-related causes, 60,000-200,000 deaths annually from unsafe abortions.

The reasons why governments censor information are familiar. In the case of family planning, Freedman argues that, in general, state policy is determined by a desire to limit or encourage population growth or to enforce moral codes on sexuality and the 'proper' role of women in society. She argues instead for the necessity of a woman-centred approach which trusts women to make the best decisions for themselves, their families and their communities.

The strength of this book comes in its country by country reports (Algeria, Brazil, Chile, Ireland, Kenya, Malawi, Pakistan, the Philippines, Poland and the US). Experiences are diverse. In the United States, despite family planning and abortion generally being legal, restriction and censorship of information causes huge problems particularly for poor, rural and young women; among industrialised countries, the US has very high teenage abortion and pregnancy rates and high abortion rates generally. The rise of the religious right has forced cuts backs in funding for state services, limiting access to abortion and family planning advice. Particularly grim are teenage sex education programmes which emphasise abstinence rather than giving clear and factual information about reproduction and contraception.

Brazil is an example of a country which does not have strong religious, social or cultural obstacles to family planning and, theoretically, information is available. However, government indifference means it is difficult to get hold of and, on the whole, it fails to reach poor and rural Brazilians: the result is unsafe abortions and contraceptives used which have harmful side-effects.

In Malawi, it is estimated that at least a tenth of the population are HIV positive. Emerging recently from a very closed one-party state which censored information, it now has a more open government which wants to improve access to reproductive information and services. However, this is extremely difficult in a country with few resources or trained personnel.

The right to know is comprehensive and clearly written. As well as discussing important theoretical matters, it is also a very practical handbook. The chapters on international law are heavy going, but are useful for reference. Appendices, listing the relevant international laws and conventions and which countries have signed up to them are included, as well as an extensive bibliography.

The publication of this report has presumably been timed to coincide with the year of the UN Conference on Women in Beijing. The detailing of statistics, policies and experiences forms a useful bed of information from which to judge much of the debate aired in Beijing and Cairo. Countries vary, and initiatives and action must take account of this. However, the need for information and effective choices in relation to family planning, abortion and HIV/AIDS does appear to be global.
War cries: it's a boy

Reviewed by David Rosenberg

It's a Boy, dir Victor Schonfeld, Channel 4

To circumcise or not to circumcise? That was the question that rose menacingly to the surface in the months of my partner's pregnancy, 10 years ago. As two secular Jews who had no qualms about incurring the anger of our traditional Jewish families over any number of issues, we found ourselves balking at this challenge. Of course we knew a few Jews who had not circumcised their sons — but these were Jews who had abandoned Jewish life altogether. We, on the other hand, were both involved in struggles to wrest power away from the religious and political establishments that were misleading our community: we did not believe in abandoning those struggles and leaving the field to them.

But most Jewish parents did have their sons circumcised. Even the most marginalised secular Jews we knew, who were often painfully at odds with the community they saw themselves as belonging to, had retained this ritual without any obvious ill effects. People whom we trusted assured us that any pain for the baby would be minimal and momentary. Others stressed how important circumcision would be as a symbol of identity. We were less convinced by this argument. The last person I sought advice from before our twin boys were born was a Jewish humanist who, in the course of her work, is in constant contact with mothers and babies. I asked her what she would do if she had a baby boy tomorrow. She replied that she would have him circumcised and she would definitely do it with a ceremony 'otherwise it would just seem barbaric'.

After negotiations with the extended family we managed to keep the occasion small. Apart from the grandparents there was my brother, given the honour of holding one baby, my partner's cousin, to hold the other baby, and his wife, whose main role seemed to be to quash our lingering doubts with lies and propaganda. And then there was the mohel — the circumciser — an orthodox Jew with no medical training. As he laid out his implements I knew I had been lied to about the magnitude of the operation. When the women were shut out of the room I felt completely isolated and powerless. When the first baby had been circumcised and was being returned to his mother, screaming, crying and frightened, I wanted to scream too. The ceremony that I had hoped would give the occasion some meaning felt completely alien and smacked of superstition and witchcraft. When it was all over we felt angry — with ourselves, for handing over our babies for this humiliation and mutilation and for betraying their trust. We were bitter that we had been fed so much disinformation, and sorry that we had not shown more stubbornness in the face of such an unreasonable demand from our families and our community.

It didn't end there. Our boys were in pain and discomfort for several days after the operation. We were still naive enough to be surprised when our doctor told us that discomfort and infections were quite common after circumcision.

Thanks to Victor Schonfeld's documentary, It's a Boy, screened recently on Channel 4, parents who are aware of a dilemma can now make a more informed choice. Drawing on the testimony of Jewish, Muslim and African parents and the opinions of medical workers, it presented a strong case against circumcision. In a disturbingly close-up view, it focused on the pain and the risks to the child of an operation performed without anaesthetic, on the longer term ill effects and on the absence of any regulation of the people who perform circumcisions.

At the heart of the programme was the case of Joshua Hawkesworth — born to an Israeli-Jewish mother and a non-Jewish father, living in relative isolation from the Jewish community in the Midlands. The father was opposed to having his son circumcised but the mother insisted. She was backed up by the mohel who stressed that, in the absence of the father's consent, he was performing it on behalf of the rabbinical court. The circumcision was badly performed and the child ended up in intensive care fighting for his life. The hospital confirmed that the infection threatening the child was acquired during the circumcision. Other participants in the programme courageously told their horrific stories about what is claimed to be a medically beneficial practice. The most poignant moment was when an African mother described the death of her two-week-old child: a child that she had no photo of. Equally shocking, though, was the ignorant denial of such problems by the Medical Officer for the Initiation Society, which supposedly overseas Jewish circumcisions.

Some people have found one apparent way through the dilemma. A Muslim couple on the programme took their child to be circumcised in hospital by a doctor who now insists on using anaesthet-
The Editor, The Guardian

Dear Editor,

I believe that the anti-circumcision message of Victor Schonfeld's film on Channel Four is a very important message. As a Jewish mother of a son, who agonised for a long time on that question and who finally gave in to the pressure to do it on grounds of identity and culture as well as social conformity, I welcome the push this powerful film will undoubtedly have on the growing counter movements within Jewish and Muslim communities to challenge and put a stop to this practice, as has been the case with other objectionable practices like animal sacrifices which Dr. Goodman mentions in the film.

However, the film also left me uneasy for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I believe the film has included a factual error. The wine which is given to the babies is always given, as far as I (and the friends I checked it with) remember, before the circumcision and the common assumption has always been that the wine has an anaesthetic effect on the babies. In the case of my son, I remember that he was given a double dose of wine because of his crying. If this fact would have been incorporated into the film, one would not be left with such a strong impression of the incomprehensive indifference of the parents to their babies' suffering, however inaccurate such an assumption might be.

Secondly, I believe that the film would have been much more effective if it were less sensationalist. As Julia Bard mentions in the film, it is important to fight the communities' silences about the babies who become damaged and who die as a result of circumcision, whatever the statistical rate of casualties might be. However, to present a supposedly 'typical' circumcision with a baby who almost dies as a result is scaremongering.

Moreover, the father in that case is the one person in the film who is not Jewish or Muslim. His distress in the circumstances is perfectly understandable, but to let him voice in the film his rage against 'the arrogant people' who have done this barbaric thing to his baby echoes with constructions of the demonization of the Jews and Muslim 'Others'. No wonder it was reported that as a result of the programme Channel 4 received phone calls which saw in the programme a 'proof' that Hitler was right. The Jews and Muslims are constructed in this way as barbaric, cruel, dirty and with pathological sexuality. Although it was important to counter the unfounded beliefs that male circumcision is healthy, the images in the film which associated the circumcision with disease, abnormality and in extreme cases almost macabre monstrously are very problematic.

I have always objected to the silencing of internal social and political dissent within communities and collectivities for fear of external repercussions, as this silencing usually serve very specific interests within the community and covers up real gender, class, sexuality, age etc based internal conflicts of interest. However, such a critique has to be contextualized.

Yours sincerely
Nira Yuval-Davis

One other thought following the film. I found Dr. Goodman's explanation that the rule about circumcision of the whole foreskin as a fundamentalist rabbinical rule aimed at preventing Jewish males from being able to assimilate extremely interesting. It made me reflect about the difference between the practices of male and female circumcision, which, by the way, was completely ignored in the film. It seems that male circumcision has been practised as a sign of identity and difference, while female circumcision has been practised as a sign of sexual subjugation.
Women in Black

Cynthia Cockburn

Women in Black held weekly silent vigils through July and August on the steps of St Martin's in the Fields Church, Trafalgar Square, London, in protest against aggression and violence in the countries of former Yugoslavia and in solidarity with the victims of ethnic cleansing (see photo).

The vigils are likely to continue at a different venue, yet to be decided, and an open meeting for women to discuss the gender implications of the Bosnian situation is also planned for October. Details from: Roslyn Cassidy 0171-624 8206.

Women in Black, an idea initiated by Israeli and Palestinian women protesting against the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza by the Israeli state, is developing into a widespread network.

A particularly active group exists in Belgrade where women demonstrate in Republic Square each Wednesday against the violence in the former Yugoslavia.

Many other groups of the same name — there are two in Belgium for instance — also currently focus on Bosnia. Women in Black and other women’s peace groups held a conference in Jerusalem in December 1994.

Groups in many different countries share a focus on protest against male violence and war. They also share a symbolism: a strong, silent, repeated presence on the streets by women wearing black.
Jewish tactics in divorce wars

Male extremists have created consternation in New York’s Orthodox Jewish community by secretly arranging betrothals for their pre-pubescent daughters. The effect is to bind the young woman, who may be less than twelve years old, for life to someone she has not met and who is unknown to her and her mother. She may not even know she has been betrothed. The reason is usually to put pressure on the wife in a divorce battle, particularly where custody of the child or children, including sons, is at stake.

Rellying on a verse from the bible (Deut. 22:16, “I gave my daughter unto this man for wife”), Israel Goldstein, earlier this year, in the midst of a prolonged and bitter divorce, betrothed his 11 year old daughter to an undisclosed bridegroom. The practice, known as kedusha ketana has not been observed for many centuries. “This is as ugly a thing as I’ve seen,” said Manhattan Orthodox divorce lawyer A David Stern. The New York Times (27 May 1995) quotes him as declaring “It’s a satanically brilliant ploy to open up a new front in an old war.”

Women can use civil law in the USA (and many other countries), but if they want to stay in their Orthodox Jewish communities they are unable to do so. The threat of the kedusha ketana lays on the mother the terrible choice of inflicting marriage slavery on her daughter/s or of trying to obtain her own freedom. Gita Goldstein, the mother in this case, spoke of the cruelty she and her daughter have been subjected to. “If you love your children, you walk on water and through fire for them. I’ve been going halfway round the world trying to get it annulled, but it’s very hard, because it hasn’t happened in a thousand years and they are baffled.”

So far, about twenty Orthodox Jewish fathers have made kedusha ketana. The community is desperately distressed. “It’s blackmail of the lowest sleaziest type,” said Rabbi Steven Dworkin of the Rabbinical Council of America. This Council has also called for fathers who use minor betrothal to be ostracised and shunned. At least one rabbi has been able to limit the minor betrothal practice in his community.

However an Orthodox Jewish men’s rights group named Shalom Bayis (peace in the home) is encouraging the practice in the interests of gaining custody of children and disputing the divorce requested. Apparently, they are providing financial support to such men, who may have had to “go underground” as a result of public opinion against them. Another bizarre aspect of this organisation’s work is to provide a concubine for the husband “in the interest of family harmony”. A concubine, unlike a mistress will live in the family home and must be an observant Orthodox Jewish woman. Orthodox Jewish women in dispute with their husbands also face the possibility of agunah — chained, whereby divorce can only be granted by the husband, who may refuse, leaving the wife literally chained, unable to remarry and liable to the stigma of adulteress if she finds a new partner. Rivka Hunt and Susan Aranoff who help women caught in the agunah trap fear that this idea may grow. “They are searching out every quirk of Jewish law to torment their wives,” they declare.

How far Shalom Bayis can put their ideas into practice rather than indulge in fantasy is not clear. But with regard to the betrothal of young girls, the Rabbinical Council of America is firm: they say the practice is “abhorrent and contrary to the teachings of Torah and Halacha.” However, the practice of only the male partner being able to divorce is not under question in these circles and still leads to continuing agony for numerous women.

When the church and medicine clash

More hospitals are merging with Catholic facilities to survive. Vital care is preserved, but some patients lose access to family planning or options for the terminally ill. Faced with uncertain financial futures caused by escalating costs, private, independent hospitals in many communities must merge and consolidate to survive.

The Catholic Church is the largest private health care provider nation-wide, accounting for about 16% of hospital services. Because of their size and resources, Catholic facilities are able to buy and affiliate with many smaller hospitals that need such support to stay open.

Some consumer health groups, however, say the expansion of Catholic healthcare institutions threatens the medical needs of women and men whose
views lie outside the church’s conservative doctrine. They say that although Catholic hospitals provide a valuable economic boost in assuming struggling facilities, they may eliminate important choices for many patients.

Under the ‘Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services’, revised by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops in December, Catholic hospitals may not offer contraceptive counselling, sterilisation and abortion. They also may not offer artificial insemination, in-vitro fertilisation and other treatments for infertility. And they are limited as to what action can be taken when a patient is dying, such as the use of pain medication if it may hasten death.

About half a dozen partnerships between Catholic and non-Catholic hospitals have occurred in California in the past two years, said Bud Lee, executive director of the California Association of Catholic Hospitals. An estimated three dozen agreements have been reached nation-wide. In some cases, the ethical directives are imposed. In others, the non-Catholic hospital is not required to adapt to Catholic doctrine.

“The church is not trying to impose its will on others,” Lee said. “What the Catholic Church and its ministries want to do is maintain a level of service to the community that it deserves. It’s not to take anything away from anyone.”

But instances in which a non-Catholic hospital became Catholic have generated criticism when the hospital is the sole provider of medical services in an area.

With a steady stream of purchases, the Sacred Heart Health System organisation of Eugene, Oregon, has acquired almost 70% of the hospitals in Lane County, Oregon, as well as a number of outpatient clinics and physicians’ networks. It denies patients such services as artificial insemination and sterilisation unless ‘medically necessary’. Other mergers have been accomplished without discernible community response.

The increasing influence of Catholic health care is troubling to some — even those within the Catholic Church. The nation’s bishops have expressed their own unease at Catholic and non-Catholic health care coalitions, noting that even loose affiliations could result in conflict over the church’s teachings.

At the bishops’ conference last December, leaders noted that while the acquisitions are generally good for the church and individual communities, potential problems exist. The bishops said: “The risk of scandal cannot be underestimated when partnerships are not built upon common values and moral principals.”

“This is a major trend with major policy implications,” said Frances Kissling, president of Catholics for a Free Choice. “In order to preserve revenue, hospitals and other health care institutions have to merge, acquire, grow and develop into these integrated networks. The Catholic health care institutions face the same pressures.”

But Kissling said she fears that some communities, especially in isolated or rural areas, may not realise that when its hospital is purchased by the church, the Catholic ethical directives require that some services be halted.

According to research conducted by Catholics for a Free Choice, many of the mergers and affiliations have resulted in limits on sterilisation, contraceptives counselling, safe sex counselling, treatment of rape victims and infertility treatments. In a few cases, such as Mercy Healthcare Sacramento’s merger with the Methodist Hospital in Sacramento, hospitals that were performing abortions have stopped as part of the affiliation.

But how the ethical directives — a list of 70 specific rules issued by the bishops — are applied to non-Catholic institutions varies with each case and often depends on the hospital’s board, bishops and dioceses involved, Lee said.

“I think a lot of people mistakenly believe that the restraining the Catholic institutions operate under preclude them from having mutually beneficial partnerships. That’s not so”, he said. “Let’s just say that miracles do happen.”

Full implementation of the ethical directives usually only applies to situations in which the non-Catholic hospital converts to a Catholic facility.

Kissling says she objects to a certain evasiveness, on the part of hospitals and church officials, surrounding many mergers. “This is a truth-in-advertising question and an informed-consent question,” Kissling said. “People should be told what services will be available, especially in situations where the hospital is the sole provider of services in the region.”

Sometimes the differences in secular and Catholic philosophies cannot be reconciled. In one proposed merger involving three hospitals in Portland, virtually all hospital care in the city would have been subject to the ethical directives. The deal fell through when the two non-Catholic hospital boards balked at honouring the directives and the church leaders refused to compromise. Nevertheless, the impetus for hospitals to consolidate remains strong. After rebuffing the Catholic hospital, the other two are continuing their own merger negotiations with each other.

Extracts from Los Angeles Times, 2 February 1995
JEWSH WOMEN PROTEST DIVORCE LAWS

"We won't wait quietly for our freedom any longer." This was the promise of Gloria Proops who has recently been granted a religious divorce or get after being forced to wait for twenty years. She was at a vigil outside the Chief Rabbi’s office on 22 October 1995 to protest against discrimination in Jewish divorce law.

Under this law, only husbands can divorce and if they refuse, either out of vindictiveness or as a lever in negotiations over money, their wives become agunot or “chained women” who are banned from remarrying. Any children they may have, for example after a civil marriage, are considered bastards who are effectively ostracised from the community or must live in a state of limbo.

The date of the vigil marks two years since the Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, announced that prenuptial contracts would be made mandatory in the United Synagogue. They would make it impossible for a husband to refuse a get if a civil divorce had been granted. Since then, a report on women in the Jewish community, commissioned by Dr Sacks, also recommended that the law be altered. However, the promised changes have yet to come.

Gloria Proops commented: “If men suffered this agony, a solution would have been found long ago. I was deprived of the chance to remarry and there are many more women whose lives are being blighted. This is an unjust law which allows greedy or vindictive men to deprive their ex-wives of another chance.”

PAKISTANI HUNTED DOWN FOR BLASPHEMY

Due to international pressure, two Pakistani Christians sentenced to death earlier this year for blaspheing against Islam were acquitted. Salmat and Rehmat Masih, aged 14 and 40, had been accused of throwing scraps of paper with remarks against the prophet Mohammed into a mosque.

Receiving less attention has been the persecution of Ahmadis, an Islamic sect which believes the Messiah has already come. In 1984, it became an offence in Pakistan for Ahmadis to call themselves Muslims or do anything “to injure the feelings of a Muslim”. Last year, nearly 2.500 were charged with these offences and six of the cases were upgraded to blasphemy which carries a mandatory death sentence. Ahmadis also face false from mullahs calling for their death as well as violence from ordinary people.

In April, an attack on a courtroom where an Ahmadi was making a bail application resulted in his friend and supporter, Rashid Ahmad, being stoned and having his eyes guaged out. The police, standing nearby, reportedly did nothing.

LIVING IN SIN NO LONGER

A Church of England Synod working party has published a report on the family which has been described as liberal and left-wing. It makes hard-hitting recommendations to the Government: with three times more poor children than in 1979, it says the poorest families need more social security and better social services, housing and education. It also called for more jobs, better employment conditions for parents, support for asylum seekers and greater mediation for couples seeking divorce.

The report “celebrates” all families, gay and lesbian, single parents and cohabitees. It also recommends that the terms ‘living in sin’ and ‘fornication’ be struck out, arguing that, by the year 2000, 80% of couples who marry will have lived together for an average of two years.

There is a celebration of new freedoms, particularly for women who are said to be living more fulfilled lives than ever before. The working party approves of the shift of power between women and men even though it thinks this has lead to more family breakdowns. As working women won’t tolerate men who don’t contribute to family life, the authors call on the Church to help make men better, “supporting them in adapting to new roles.”

Not surprisingly, the report caused a furor.
Christians and the right

2 March 1995

Dear WAF,

Many thanks for the WAF leaflet which I have read. There are some points I would like to comment on and seek further information. I will try to be as brief as possible.

Firstly, a bit about myself. I am strongly opposed to the establishment of the Church of England (CoE). Even though I am a member of the CoE, I have sought disestablishment over many years. I also believe that the blasphemy law of this and other countries should be repealed, especially in Pakistan. I taught RE in a state comprehensive school for 25 years and consistently opposed compulsory worship in schools and the imposition of any religion (including Christianity). I tried to deepen the children’s understanding of religion and to promote respect for people’s religions or non-religious status for living.

Could you kindly develop more fully, in order to clarify for me, what is stated in your leaflet concerning one or two points? The leaflet states that ‘Christianity is playing an increasingly central role in the redefining of European identities and the growing nationalist movements’. 1. In what ways do you see this ‘increasingly central role’ in Britain and other European countries? 2. How is Christianity ‘playing an increasingly central role in the growing nationalist movements’ in Europe for example in the National Front and the British Movement and British Nationalist Party? 3. How do you see Christianity being exploited to produce ‘new expressions of racism’?

Like you, I am utterly opposed to Christianity or any other religion or ideology being used to promote socially harmful consequences. I wish you well in your efforts to combat such abuse.

Yours sincerely,
Reverend Roger Polland

5 April 1995

Dear Rev Roger Polland,

First of all let me say how delighted we all were when your letter was read in our business meeting to hear about your work within the Church and within education to promote the disestablishment of the Church of England and for the abolition of the blasphemy law as well as the resistance of fundamentalism of all religions. We know you are not alone, and we would like to hear from, and get in touch with, others like you.

Concerning your queries, I would like to clarify that Christianity is playing a growing role in the definition of European identities and the growing extreme right-wing movements in Britain and Europe in two different ways. Firstly, as a marker of a collective/identity boundary, and secondly in the way that some Christians who are cooperating with the fascists help them to legitimise their message. Our leaflet does not intend to claim (nor do we think anyone who reads it might be tempted to interpret it in that way) that all Christians in Europe are racist, or to play down the important anti-racist and ecumenical activities that different churches, including the established churches, have been carrying out.

First I would like to clarify the way in which Christianity is being used as an identity marker. In the ‘new racism’ which Enoch Powell and many others in Britain and Europe have developed since the 70s, ‘culture’ rather than ‘race’ becomes the essential (ie fixed, ahistorical) characteristic which differentiates people. According to this ideology, people, their culture and their place of living are all bound together. If people from other ‘unassimilable’ cultures are mixed together, the result is ‘rivers of blood’, to use the famous Powellian prediction. Therefore, repatriation — ‘ethnic cleansing’ — is the only way forward, according to this ideology.

This ideology has been around, as I said, since the 70s. However, it has become much more important since the end of the Cold War. As Etienne Balibar has pointed out, before that, the boundaries of ‘Europe’ were defined by the dominant political system of Western Europe which was parliamentary democracy. Once the Iron Curtain crumbled, there was a need for a new defining principle of the boundaries. ‘Christian civilisation’ has come to occupy this role, especially since the Rushdie Affair and the Gulf War when the ‘other’ has come to be defined primarily as ‘the Muslim’, although East European Orthodox Christianity has remained ‘beyond the pale’ as well. Generally, religious cultural identity, rather than political cultural identity has come to occupy centre stage. This does not imply, however, that people have become necessarily more religious.

An extreme example of the appropriation of Christianity by racists and fascists has been the organisation of the British Ku Klux Klan. The Ku Klux Klan, which originally grew in the defeated Southern states in post-civil war USA, has been a secret order whose members, while carrying crosses, attacked and burned blacks and Jews. In Wales, skinheads who were supporters of the British National Party were brought weekly to the village of
Caerau by Alan Beshella, boss of ‘the Invisible Empire Knights of the Ku Klux Klan’, ‘to get rid of Catholics, Jews and blacks from the village’ (reported in Searchlight, October 1993).

As Ken Leech in his article ‘Fascist cancer in the heartland of Christianity’ (The Guardian, 26 June 1963) has pointed out, “authoritarian, racist and repressive attitudes have become accepted in mainstream political groups. Fundamentalism and Pentecostalism are the forms of Christianity which are most evidently increasing.” Leech points out that “none of this amounts to fascism but it does indicate a climate and framework within which fascist explanations and positions become more likely.” And he explains:

What needs attention is the link between such movements and Christianity. For historically, fascist movements have found their home in the heart of Christian culture, Catholic and Protestant. It is vital that Christians reflect on the spiritual roots of the fascism of the twenties and thirties if they are to understand the dangers in our own age.

Both the French Front National and the Italian Northern League have declared their support and admiration of the late Archbishop Lefebvre, an anti-Semitic right-wing French cleric who defied the Vatican and ordained his own bishops and was therefore excommunicated in 1988. CARF (September/October 1994) claims that his movement is active in France, Belgium, Norway and Germany as well as the UK where he has 3,000 followers, a church and 30 other mass centres.

However, Lefebvre is far from being the only right-wing Catholic organisation working with FN, Le Pen’s organisation in France. Nor are the Catholics the only active right-wing Christians in Europe. David Irving, the ultra-right-wing ‘revisionist’ historian, who has made his career by denying the Holocaust took place and is therefore the hero of neo-Nazis all over Europe, has declared himself a ‘Christian democrat’, with Christianity playing a clear boundary role against Jews and Muslims.

As the CARF article points out, the Christian right-wing is united also around their conservative attitudes to women and ‘the family’. In that they are not alone, as the alliance between the Vatican and Iran’s Ayatollah has shown during the September 1994 Cairo UN Conference on Development and Population Policies. However, it is important to point out that there are many women who are supporters and members of the European racist and fascist right. No sex, ‘race’ or ‘culture’ is inherently immune.

With all my best wishes
Niva Yuval-Davis (for WAF)

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WAF would like to apologise to Frendiz Atasu for publishing extracts from a letter in WAF Journal No 6.
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56 WAF JOURNAL
Women Against Fundamentalism was launched on 6 May 1989 to challenge the rise of fundamentalism in all religions. Among the founders and present activists of WAF are women from across the world and from a wide range of backgrounds, who are involved in many different political campaigns. By fundamentalism we do not mean religious observance, which we see as a matter of individual choice, but rather modern political movements which use religion as a basis for their attempt to win or consolidate power and extend social control.

Fundamentalism appears in different and changing forms in religions throughout the world, sometimes as a state project, sometimes in opposition to the state. But at the heart of all fundamentalist agendas is the control of women's minds and bodies. All religious fundamentalists support the patriarchal family as a central agent of such control. They view women as embodying the morals and traditional values of the family and the whole community.

We must resist the increasing control that fundamentalism imposes on all our lives. It means that we must take up issues such as reproductive rights and fight both to safeguard and extend abortion rights and to resist enforced sterilisation. We must struggle against religious dogma from whatever source which denies us our right to determine our own sexuality and justifies violence against women.

Christianity is playing an increasingly central role in the redefining of European identities and the growing nationalist movements. In Britain, Christianity is the established state religion. This formal relationship is today being exploited to promote Christianity as a cultural definer, producing new expressions of racism. Therefore, resistance to racism and fundamentalism in Britain must involve a struggle for secularism, in opposition to the state's official recognition of one religion. Secularism is a precondition, though not a guarantor, of pluralism.

We must also resist fundamentalism within British minority religions. We must challenge the assumption that minorities in this country exist as unified, internally homogeneous groups. This view assumes that women's voices are represented by the 'community leaders' and denies them an independent voice. We want to live in a country of many cultures, but reject the politics of what has come to be known as 'multi-culturalism'. The multi-cultural consensus, forged by sections of all political parties, delivers women's futures into the hands of fundamentalist 'community leaders' by seeing these as representatives of the community as a whole.

WE CALL FOR
- the disestablishment of the Church of England;
- repeal of the blasphemy laws;
- an end to the imposition of Christianity in state schools, including Christian assemblies;
- a phasing out of state funding of all religious schools;
- the development of a social policy that addresses the genuine needs of women and which does not attempt to deal with them on the basis of racist and sexist assumptions as to how they are expected to behave according to their particular racial or cultural origin.

WOMEN AGAINST FUNDAMENTALISM IS COMMITTED TO
- Challenging and organising against manifestations of fundamentalism. This includes defending individual women and women's organisations against the attacks by fundamentalists; supporting non-religiously based refuges and protection for women experiencing violence inside and outside the home; disseminating information within Britain and outside both about fundamentalist activities affecting women and about attempts to organise against them. To this end, we will use the WAF Journal and pursue all other available forms of communication and networking.
- Examining the effects of policies (eg pro-family or multi-cultural) which result in the denial of women's independent existence.
- Studying the common strands of fundamentalism in all religions and their linkage to sexual, ethnic, class and political divisions within British society.
- Looking at international links and examples and working in solidarity with similar movements in other countries.
- Challenging racism, including the new culturally-based forms which are influenced by religion.

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