

# **Muslim Women's Empowerment and Self-Actualization: From I.C.P.D. into 21st Century**

**By Riffat Hassan**

The International Conference on Population and Development (1994) was an historic landmark in focusing global attention on a number of reproductive health issues which are central to women's lives. One of the fundamental issues underlying the discussions at Cairo was that of the "ownership" of the woman's body, for though women have traditionally been identified with body rather than with mind and spirit, they have not been regarded as "owners" of their own bodies in patriarchal culture. The traditional viewpoint was successfully challenged by Muslim women even though the I.C.P.D. took place in Cairo, regarded by many as one of the foremost bulwarks of Muslim "conservatism."

The breakthrough which took place at the I.C.P.D. gave rise to the hope that at the Beijing conference (1995), women in general, and Muslim women in particular, would be able to shift from the reactive mindset of those who feel disempowered, to the proactive mindset of those who have a strong sense of efficacy as makers of their own lives. But the promise that was seen and felt at Cairo did not come to fruition at Huairou which witnessed a sharp polarization between "conservative" Muslim women and other Muslim women. The former, who were more unified and better organized than the latter, considered the defense of "Islam" as traditionally practiced as their major objective and denied that women faced any serious problems in Muslim culture. The "liberal" Muslim women, who lacked a unified agenda or plan of action, generally failed to make a compelling response to the "conservative" backlash at Huairou.

The conferences at Cairo and Huairou are over but the larger historical process of which they were a part continues to pose a challenge, particularly to women. The Muslim Women's Empowerment and Self-Actualization Project addresses that challenge.

The larger objective of this Project is the empowerment of women in all spheres of life. Recognizing the dominant role played by patriarchal religion historically in the disempowerment of women, this Project is subjecting to rigorous scholarly scrutiny the fundamental theological assumptions regarding women in the Islamic, as well as the Jewish and Christian, tradition. Further, keeping in view the wide discrepancy between normative Islam and Muslim practice, the Project plans to construct an ethical framework based on Qur'anic teachings within which all important issues confronting Muslim women, including issues relating to their reproductive health, can be considered. Since the Qur'an strongly affirms human rights and is particularly solicitous about the well-being of women, the Project is developing a methodology for interpreting Islam from a non-patriarchal, justice-oriented, Qur'anic perspective.

Taking account of the fact that constraints to the empowerment of Muslim women are not only external but also internal, the Project aims to examine factors which contribute to the poor self-image and low self-esteem from which a large number of Muslim women suffer. A correct analysis of what causes a problem is necessary for finding a solution. By identifying and clarifying the underlying causes of women's disempowerment, the Project expects to clear the ground for women's empowerment both internally and externally.

The Project outcome -- appropriate course materials, training materials and country-specific reports -- will assist in addressing the critical issues related to Muslim women in the context of the Muslim culture of South Asia. Dissemination will be achieved with the collaboration of selected educational institutions, community-based NGO'S, and media agencies. What is obtained through this pilot Project -- in terms of educational materials, analytic reports, psychological insights and practical experience -- will be utilizable in similar Projects focusing on Muslim women in other regions/ countries/communities, particularly in Asia and Africa.

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Health and Ethics: News & Views, October 1997, [www.sacredchoices.org/newsletters/  
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