

From Isis International-Santiago de Chile: Interview with Carmen Posada

Our sisters in Isis International-Santiago de Chile are particularly active in the area of health and women's health rights, taking the lead in Latin America and the Spanish speaking Caribbean.

They publish a quarterly health journal in Spanish titled *Revista De La Red De Salud*, the following is a short interview, from the last issue of the magazine, with *Carmen Posada*, a feminist lawyer involved in the emerging area of bioethics, her interest and deep involvement in this sphere of law started in the Philippines in the early 1990's.

Her objective was to develop the reproductive health program for the Ford Foundation in the Asia-Pacific region. Now back in her home country Colombia, Carmen continues to be closely involved in this new discipline, vital in the discussions on women's sexual and reproductive rights.

“Let's Develop a Feminist Bioethics”

Q: In what way is Bioethics a field of interest for women's groups?

Carmen: “When we work within the structure of sexual and reproductive rights the theme of ethics is always included. Personally, since my work experience in the Philippines, I wanted to immerse myself in the study of ethics, and work it up to the discipline of bioethics that is currently evolving. This discipline began in the United States with the surge of medical technologies, particularly in the reproductive health area, where it has led to the creation of bioethic theories and analysis.”

“Taking into consideration the characteristics of the Philippines and the strong influence the Catholic Church exerts over state, private enterprise and individual decision-making, the need to discuss ethical aspects of health services, specifically reproductive health, sexuality and birth control was strongly felt. Until a

few years ago, the debate was family planning and morals, more than ethical factors, it was saturated with the Catholic Church doctrine that dictates the couple's decisions in relation to their reproduction.”

“We began with a group from the University of the Philippines and the women's movement, working within a frame of reference much wider than reproductive health. We created the University of the Philippines Reproductive Health, Rights, and Ethics Center for Studies and Training. At the same time I worked with the Reproductive Health Program of the Ford Foundation, this being a program with a gender perspective. From family planning we expanded to sexuality, towards a point where social science could also influence the biomedical aspect.”

“In Colombia, I continued this interest. There is a Latin American Federation of

Bioethics with headquarters in Bogota that networks all the centers in Latin America, the majority are oriented towards the biomedical and more traditional perspective. I felt the need to integrate the feminist perspective with all the bioethic studies that were being discussed, not only in reproductive health and sexuality, but in other vital themes such as quality of attention, doctor-patient relationships, etc., therefore globalizing all dimensions. I also attended a course in bioethics at the Kennedy Institute of Bioethics at the University of Georgetown, which brings together high caliber professionals who carry out serious work although centered in the western dictums of philosophy.”

Q: What could be feminist contributions to this theme?

Carmen: “In the Latin American region, we women can come into the discussions from the feminist perspective, the



bioethic movement is just beginning here. The OPS is sponsoring the creation of a Latin American Program of Bioethics, with headquarters in Santiago de Chile, at the University of Chile. We must be there from the very beginning because great importance is being given to the contributions of feminism in relation to women's health and social themes. Together with Feminist International Radio Endeavour (FIRE) in Costa Rica, with Catholic Women for the Right to Choose, and other groups, we must prepare and design our own strategies."

"I will be part of the University of Antioquia team that will integrate with the Institute of Bioethics to design programs, training, etc. We must exert influence in the Latin American Program, and it is especially important to note how the catholic networks can design strategies. There are not many women from the feminist movement in this area, therefore, our work as feminists is to link up with the local bioethic institutes and acquire the

necessary training. We should develop project studies to prepare ourselves in this field, we need to establish contacts through the women's movement networks."

Q: From a feminist perspective, what are the principles that should be defended?

Carmen: "All the great ethical principles can be worked out from the feminist perspective, for example, autonomy in decision-making, freedom in general, the social service principle (that has something to do with personal well-being and that of others), justice, etc., all these are universal principles applicable to

bioethics, by the way, autonomy is the core of sexual and reproductive rights. The principle of justice that permits other rights to be defined is also vital."

Editorial note: the Regional Program of Bioethics for the Americas and the Caribbean, a joint initiative of the University of Chile, the Chilean Ministry of Health and the OPS, was inaugurated in Chile in January 1994 and will be set up at the University. For more information contact Rectoria de la Casa de Estudios, Alameda Bernardo O'Higgins 1058, Santiago de Chile or Reproductive Health, Rights, and Ethics Center for Studies and Training, Rm. 116, Malcolm Hall, U.P. College of Law, Diliman, Quezon City, 1101 Philippines.

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SEXUAL reproduction : not best for babies?

Reproductive sex may not be a biological advantage over asexual reproduction as has been previously thought. An article published in the May 12 edition of *Nature*, highlights a new study by Canadian evolutionary biologist Rosemary J. Redfield who writes that, "Not only are the old theories inadequate, my work shows that the biological cost of sex for females outweighs any proposed advantage."

The previous evolutionary theory held that by combining genes from two different ancestries, the risk of getting two doses of harmfully mutated genes is reduced through sexual reproduction. Another idea was that sexual reproduction gives rise to more genetic variability so that evolution has more to work with to create even better adaptations. In fact, among primates, sperm are six times more likely to carry genetic mutations than eggs.

But Redfield pointed out that random genetic changes are more likely to be harmful than useful, and females would have a greater chance of having healthier offspring by not combining genes with a male to reproduce. She created a computer simulation model to show mathematically that the offspring of hypothetical females who reproduce asexually are far better off biologically. Furthermore, according to her model, if succeeding generations then began reproducing sexually, the effects of harmful mutations again increased.

She also notes that for many species, while the cost of reproduction for the male is merely a set of his genes, for the female it involves the work of rearing the young. So in this sense sexual reproduction involves more work for females for the same genetic input. But, as a caveat to radical feminists, Redfield emphasized that "I especially want it clear that these ideas do not apply to the vast majority of human males, who make many very important non-genetic contributions to their offspring."

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