

# “By Not Being Fully Aware... Western Feminists were... contributing to the Growth of Religious Fundamentalism in the Third World”

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*The extract below is from a paper titled **Was Cairo a Step Forward for Third World Women?** The paper was written following the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, September 1994.*

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[At the International Conference on Population and Development], while Western feminists falsely believed that the battle was between women and the church, they were engaging vicariously in a war between two patriarchies - the demographic establishment and the religious establishment. By not being fully aware of how the Northern women's movement is being used by the patriarchal establishment, Western feminists were actually contributing to the growth of religious fundamentalism in the Third World.

Instead of pointing out that it is women who are taking care of children, and holding family and community together in a period of social breakdown, women's groups contributed to a discourse that allowed 'women's rights' to be seen as antithetical to the rights of children and women's freedom as based on neglect of family.

However, in reality, it is women who are protecting children and carrying family responsibility. Today, more than one-third of the house-holds in Africa, Latin America and the developed world are female headed; in Norway the figure is 38% and in Asia 14%. Even where women are not the sole family supporters, they are primary supporters in terms of work and energy spent of providing sustenance to the family.

By ignoring the social, economic and family responsibilities that Third World women carry, the exclusive focus on 'sexual and reproductive rights' is disempowering, not empowering, for Third World women because it makes women appear socially irresponsible. As the social crisis grows, people will have to find ways of holding society together. In real life, it is women who have shown leadership in these matters. Wherever women have been active and articulate in rebuilding community and society, fundamentalists have been silenced.

However, the Cairo Conference was dominated by Northern women obsessed with individual sexual freedom, indifferent to society and to other freedoms. They, therefore, failed to highlight how women carry a disproportionate share of social responsibility and thus, created a stereotype of women's rights as implying social irresponsibility. The vacuum created in the domain of social responsibility, we know by experience, gets filled by the emergence of religious fundamentalists who create new restrictions on women for the cause of maintaining 'family values' and social norms. Western feminists, thus, unintentionally create a new space and power for the religious fundamentalists while shrinking the space within their societies. The politics of Cairo therefore, rendered women's multiple social and economic roles invisible, reduced women to their biology and put the entire burden of family planning on women. These are gains for patriarchy, not for women.

Source: **Third World Resurgence**, No. 50, October 1994, Third World Network, 228 Macalister Road, 10400 Penang, Malaysia.