

## ON PROSTITUTION

While I acknowledge the right of women who view prostitution as work as their right. I view prostitution more as a violation of women's rights and integrity. For the body of a woman (or of a man for that matter) deserves respect, not to be used as a commodity, object nor thing that is compensated. Prostitution demeans, debases the sex act from its place as an expression of mutual affection, care and love between two caring and mature individuals. It violates the right of woman, any woman to her body to have control over access of anyone to her body. Furthermore, with too much focus on the physical aspect, other aspects of being human are overlooked—the precious psyche inside every human being, the spirituality deep within, the creativity and intuition, as well as intelligence that mark humans on the way to wholeness. Which is why, despite my qualified statement at the beginning of this short paragraph, I am deeply troubled about women who claim the right to be or continue to be, "sex workers." I feel it is a terrible indictment on society that cannot, does not offer or create opportunities for work that engages persons beyond the purely physical or sexual level.

Anonymous  
Philippines

## DEAR EDITOR,

I was able to read one of your magazines, *Women in Action*, and I was really impressed with it because I was able to gain a lot of information regarding women in our country and internationally. I am presently enrolled in my Graduate School and I was assigned to pass a term paper about "The Filipino Modern Women." Do you have any reading materials about my term paper?

Jennifer Grace O. Fernandez  
Dagupan City, Philippines

Your magazine *Women in Action* is educative, informative and

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interesting. I have been hearing much about your reliable magazine, that it always talks about the women's world affairs and global issues. Through your magazine I came to understand many things about women struggle.

In fact I am also interested in receiving it that I have decided to apply for it.

I will be very grateful if you can send me *Women in Action* regularly whenever you publish it and I would be grateful if you kindly place me on your subscription list.

Thanks for your special consideration, looking forward to your reply.

Hamza A. Jay  
Centre for Energy, Research and  
Training,  
A.B.U. Zaria Kaduna, Nigeria

I have just come across a copy of your *Women in Action* No. 3, 1996 and delighted with it! Would like to take up your offer on p.77 for taking out a subscription and purchasing some back copies. I am working in the area of feminist anthropology and am currently involved in some research work on women, religion and social change in the Philippines from an anthropological perspective. I am excited to know about your library and wonder if you have a web page through which it would be possible to access your Isis WEB and computer assisted data retrieval system. Or, if this is not possible at this stage, do you have available via E-mail a listing of the titles you hold in the subject area of culture, religion and spirituality and the names of the journal titles you have available?

Mary T. Drum  
MSC Sisters  
maryd@mnl.sequel.net  
Philippines

## Woman Leader

Massoumeh Ebtekar is one of five newly appointed vice-presidents under President Muhammad Khatami. In 1995 *Women in Action* ran an interview with her. Ebtekar is 37 years old, holds a doctoral degree in immunology, led the Iranian delegation at the UN Beijing Conference, serves as head of the Central Committee of Iran's Women's NGO's, and is editor of *Farzaneh* a women's studies magazine. She is a mother to two boys and credits her husband as her main motivator.

We decided to run excerpts of the 1995 interview to reintroduce her again to you. Excerpts of "Muslim Women After the Iranian Revolution," WIA #2, 1995 by Luz Maria Martinez.

Q: You told me that things changed for you when you went to Nairobi in 1985.

....[By the early 1980s] we were faced on one side with a revolution that had changed many ideas and a whole new world opened up for us. On the other hand there was a global involvement on behalf of the women which we could not resist.

Q: ...How do you perceive the women's movement in Iran prior to the revolution and after?

[Under the Shah] Iran was actually very closed politically, opposing groups were severely oppressed, the Shah was an American stooge, and, naturally, news was not coming out on what was happening in the country at that time, but most importantly, the identity of the Iranian nation was in crisis. Who are we? What is our his-

tory? During the Shah's regime all they could look at was the West.

Women who chose the traditional covering at this time were threatened to be expelled from the university and so it became national resistance. In 1978-79, it became clear that what the people were looking for was a religious alternative, they felt that religious, moral and spiritual values were a betterment to society and their way of life.

It was actually democracy that brought religion into power...

Q: ..{Feminists} who say that the patriarchy of Islam is hurtful to women. How do you see these issues?

{In Islam} Women are free to work and earn as a result of their work. There is no such thing as a man dominating the earnings of a woman. Now whether this type of interpretation has occurred later as a result of a particular misogynist viewpoint, that's something else, but according to the text and scriptures a woman keeps what she earns. So we have financial independence, human values which are exactly the same as the man. Her rights to the marriage are the same.

We have a decree in Islamic jurisprudence, the woman can obtain a salary for working in the home of her husband. That has been recently implemented in the legal framework of the Iranian civil code. That means that when a woman wants to obtain a divorce, she can ask for the years she has worked in her husband's home...

Q: Why then would you say

that Muslim feminists are also critical of Islamic structures? For example, the right of the man to beat his wife.

That is one specific point in the Koran. It is specific only to where the woman becomes unfaithful in her marriage...

{On polygamy} In the Koran [there are] cases where women need to be taken into the sphere of the family, [for example, due] sometimes to the imbalance of the population. One man should do this not on the basis of his egocentric lust and desire, but he should bring her into the spirit of the family, to help her and her children to overcome the disaster, and financial problems that she may have.

Q: What are the issues happening currently affecting Iranian women?

An issue affecting Iranian women is the struggle to engage in the decision-making process. The women have to be more effective in projecting their particular views, to be able to prove to the administration that it's to the benefit of the whole country to incorporate women's views and concerns at the national level. It is happening more and more as women are becoming more active and informed, they are developing their strategies at the NGO and the national levels.

## **ANTI-FATWA CAMPAIGNER WINS JOHN HUMPHREY FREEDOM AWARD**

Sultana Kamal, Bangladeshi lawyer and women's activist, is the winner of the 1996 John Humphrey Freedom Award, a \$30,000 award given annually by the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development to honor a human-rights activist.

"Never show your enemies that you are afraid. Never," says Kamal, 45, who has worked for 25 years for the poor, including street children, victims of fundamentalist Islamic assaults.

She and her colleagues at the legal aid group, Ain-o-Salih Kendra, have also taken on conservative Muslim leaders, challenging rulings or *fatwas* of Muslim clerics against women accused of adultery and other transgressions of Islamic laws. They have compiled a list of 243 cases of "*fatwa*-induced violence" against village women, most of them accused of adultery and ordered flogged. Several of the victims, who had been raped, were reportedly forced to marry their attackers.

In a landmark case, Kamal was able to secure the jailing of a local *imam* and eight other men in the village of Chattokchora over a *fatwa* that led to a woman's suicide. The *fatwa* stated that the woman had committed adultery because she had remarried, and ordered both her and her husband to be stoned, and her parents beaten. After the woman killed herself, the men were convicted of abetting the suicide.

According to Kamal, women are routinely targeted in the *salish*, a form of arbitration session traditionally held to settle land or family disputes and presided over by local notables.

These are being increasingly used to punish those accused of