

# The 'War on Women' Belies the 'War on Terror'

by Reihana Mohideen

*On December 17, 2007, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for a worldwide moratorium on executions. On the same day, an Italian newspaper published a petition asking the UN to similarly support a moratorium on abortions. The Vatican quickly joined the calls for a moratorium. In Italy, the Catholic Church has also started a campaign against the country's abortion laws in the lead-up to the parliamentary elections in April this year. Former Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi, who is leading in the polls, is actively supporting the Vatican's call on the UN to vote for a moratorium on abortion.*

*Reihana Mohideen was a speaker at the panel "Women Contesting Fundamentalisms and Other Forms of Intolerance" which was part of the University of the Philippines Centennial Lecture Series.*

Photo from the UP Centennial Website, <http://www.centennial.up.edu.ph>

**The** campaign for the moratorium also has the backing of the Church in India, Sri Lanka, and South Korea.

Meanwhile, in Nicaragua, where a blanket abortion ban was put in place in November 2006 prohibiting it even in cases where a mother's life is in danger, there is increasing evidence that women's lives are at risk under the new law.

According to Dr. Leonel Arguello, president of the Nicaraguan Society of General Medicine, "Nicaraguan doctors are now afraid of going to trial or jail and losing their license. Many are thinking that, instead of taking the risk, it is better to let a woman die." Ironically, the new law was passed with the support of President Daniel Ortega, the former left-wing leader of the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional.

In April 2007, the US Supreme Court upheld the first ever federal ban on abortion procedures. The ban outlaws certain second-trimester abortions and has no exception for cases when a woman's health is in danger. This decision effectively eliminated one of *Roe v. Wade's* core protections: that a woman's health must always be paramount. President Bush's appointees to the Court cast the critical votes to uphold the ban. The ruling is part of a larger agenda to outlaw abortion entirely in the US.

One of the most significant defeats suffered by the women's movement against reproductive health choices in recent years is in Catholic Nicaragua—a 'historic compromise' between a former left-wing President and the Catholic Church. The call for the UN to place a moratorium on abortions comes from the heart of

'enlightened' Europe. And the US government under George Bush poses a far greater threat to women's reproductive health choices today than Osama bin Laden.

A common and principle characteristic of religious-fundamentalist movements is the control of women — their bodies, their sexuality, their physical movements, and participation in public life, dress codes, as well as family relationships.

A February 24 news report from Iran carried a story of the moral police arresting a young girl for the improper wearing of the "hijab." She resisted arrest and several police officers beat her with their batons. Her face and body was soaked in blood. Angry witnesses came to her rescue and protested against the police shouting, "Islamic Government, we don't want. We don't want."

In Jerusalem, the sexes are segregated on six public bus lines. Women board at the rear door and sit in the back. Men get on and sit in the front. The segregated line, is operated by Egged, Israel's main bus company, and link neighborhoods of ultra-Orthodox Jews and accommodate demands of the strictly religious for separate seating of men and women. Twenty-three other intercity lines, similarly segregated, serve cities and towns that have substantial ultra-Orthodox populations. Several women have petitioned the Supreme Court against bus segregation. The women said they were harassed, taunted and humiliated for failing to comply with seating and religious dress codes on the segregated buses. Women also reported being physically assaulted by male passengers when they refused to give up their seats.

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This random collection of recent reports underlies a basic premise argued by feminists—that women's bodies and sexuality are an ideological and political battleground fiercely contested to promote a range of vested interests.

However, the stories also warn us against a dangerous deception – that of

stereotyping these threats as coming from particular religions or religious organisations, such as the Islamists, or being limited to particular countries and regions of the world, such as 'Islamic' countries and the Middle East.

In Egypt, a strong movement against female genital mutilation (FGM) has emerged. And the government is now attempting to enforce a comprehensive ban on the practice, closing down clinics and banning anyone, including health workers, from conducting the procedure. The Ministry of Religious Affairs also issued a booklet explaining why the practice was not called for in Islam. Egypt's grand mufti, Ali Gomaa, declared it *haram*, or prohibited by Islam. Television advertisements have been shown on state channels to discourage it and a national hot line was set up to answer the public's questions about genital cutting. The issue is no longer considered a taboo to be discussed in public and has opened up a small but important space for a public discourse on sexuality.

In contrast, according to a March 4 Associated Press report, some 800 women in the Sierra Leone town of Kailahun demonstrated in favour of FGM and told donors opposed to the practice to keep their money. "Women wearing colourful beads and adorned with seashells chanted songs in the local dialect that warned authorities and foreign organisations against 'any attempt to take away our traditional ritual?'"

While the rise of religious fundamentalist movements, especially in the last three decades, poses a significant threat to women's rights, we are also witnessing a generalised assault against women by state and non-state institutions

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and political interests — an assault which is especially focused on women’s reproductive health choices and their right to control their own bodies. On this assault, the Christian right, the Islamists, assorted religious fundamentalists and the right-wing political establishment form a united front.

This ‘war on women’ belies the ‘war on terror’ propaganda of the West, which caricatures all Muslims as potential terrorist threats engineered by some essentialist feature of Islam.

For feminists, the reality is simultaneously more complex and straightforward. All religions have buttressed patriarchal systems and ideologies. Conversely, all patriarchal systems and ideologies have used religious reinforcements. Today, the patriarchal system of neo-liberal globalisation—the father of all

fundamentalisms— gives rise to extreme socio-cultural chauvinisms which foster religious fundamentalist political movements.

However, our struggle against this ‘war on women’ is a complex one: against the traditionalist women in Sierra Leone, allying with the grand mufti in Egypt and in opposition to Daniel Ortega’s anti-women laws in Nicaragua. The tactics, of course, must be context-specific. Most importantly, it requires the organisation of a strong women’s movement, guided by a democratic discourse and the active participation of the masses of women. ■

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