

## Religion and the Continued Discrimination against Women

Rosemary Radford Ruether

In a recent visit to an American college, a male student told me confidently that “feminism is over” because women had achieved equality everywhere. Unfortunately this is far from the case. Despite many achievements, traditional patterns of discrimination against women continue. The growing disparity between rich and poor, caused by world economic policies, target poor women disproportionately, and the rise of religious fundamentalism, not only in Islam but in other world religions, including Christianity, has caused a regression of women’s status in many areas of the world. In this essay I will summarize the major areas where civil and religious discrimination against women continues, and I will conclude by highlighting the positive role that the 2009 Parliament of the World’s Religions could play in addressing such discrimination.

Structural adjustment policies, enforced by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the last thirty years, have caused many countries to cut investments in domestic services such as education, health, public transportation and food subsidies. These cuts in domestic spending affect poor women disproportionately. It is women in such countries who typically redouble their workload to compensate for lack of access to food, water and health care. If water or firewood is scarce, women walk farther to find it and bring it home on their heads and backs. When devaluation of the currency makes it difficult to buy food, women plant vegetables and fruits in their gardens to sustain daily life. Women take on extra jobs, going out to clean houses of the rich and producing cooked food and handicrafts to sell in the street.

Where structural adjustment policies have forced many poorer countries to cut back investment in education, families often choose the male rather than the female children to attend school, which means that education is another major area where women suffer discrimination. Two-thirds of the 900 million illiterate people of the world are female. In many Asian and African countries, girls are much fewer than boys in primary school enrollment and often drop out after the fourth grade.

As a result, women also continue to have fewer civil rights than men. Much female productive work is unpaid, and when women do work for pay they are generally paid less than men for the same work. In some countries married women are legally

under the guardianship of their husbands, cannot own property and have fewer rights to divorce. They are underrepresented in government even in Western countries, such as the United States.

Likewise, violence against women continues to be endemic worldwide. This starts before and at birth with practices of female feticide and infanticide due to preference for male children. Rape, incest and domestic violence plague women and girls in all classes and cultures throughout the world. Girls and women are far more likely than boys to be sold into forced sexual prostitution, usually under the false promise of finding them respectable jobs.

Of great importance but often ignored in this discussion is the discrimination against women in religious teachings and practices that justify the denial of equal participation of women in almost all religious institutions. Women are often denied the same education in learning and teaching religious knowledge that is available to men, and they are still not ordained or given positions of leadership in most religions, including among the majority of Christian churches.

Such teachings and practices also justify discrimination against women throughout whole societies, even when there are no legal barriers against them in the secular realm. Women in many parts of the world have lost ground in the area of reproductive rights. Religious fundamentalism, including the influence of the Christian right on the recent Bush administration, has resulted in a rejection of legal abortion and, to some extent, birth control. Religious conservatives have generally objected to international covenants that seek to eliminate all discrimination against women, claiming that such covenants contradict their divinely revealed religious traditions. Dowry deaths continue to be common in Hindu India, while “honor killings” take the lives of many women in Islamic countries.

Clearly, the United Nations Declaration has not succeeded in eliminating “all forms of discrimination against women,” and that principle needs to be continually reaffirmed. A plurality of approaches is required in order to effect deep changes in this pattern. Legal changes are still needed where women are discriminated against under the law. Equal education for women and girls continues to be crucial. Global economic policies that encourage exploitive employment of women need to be critiqued.

Reinvestment in nations' domestic services needs to be promoted. Finally, religious institutions need to confront the injustice of their teachings and practices of subordination of women. Real affirmation by the religious traditions of the equality of women in human nature under God would have a critical effect on the status and wellbeing of women in every society.

In recent decades feminist reflection has arisen in all major world religions, not just to critique discrimination, but to lift up the positive resources of each world religion for women's wellbeing and mutuality with men. Examples of dialogue and mutual enrichment among different world religions are increasing as people of faith engage with each other in this process of discovering their positive resources. This kind of mutual enrichment through engaging the other plays a key role in the dialogues that will take place at the 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions, where religious and civic leaders, as well as lay people from around the world, will discuss the major topic of "Overcoming Poverty in a Patriarchal World." Through this global event, as well as more than fifty local and regional meetings leading up to it, women and men of various religions will discover the riches that different traditions offer for transforming patriarchal cultures into emerging societies of human enhancement through gender difference and equivalence.