DAYO OLOPADE

Our Bodies, Our World

The fight for reproductive rights extends far beyond America's shores.

THE MEANS OF REPRODUCTION: SEX, POWER, AND THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD • BY MICHELLE GOLDBERG • PENGUIN PRESS • 2009
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On the third day of Justice Sonia Sotomayor's Supreme Court confirmation hearings, Senator Tom Coburn asked, "Do you believe that the court's abortion rulings have ended the national controversy over this issue?" Sotomayor was curt: "No." Coburn went further: "You don't have to name them, but do you think there are other similarly divisive issues that could be decided by the court in the future?" A measured Sotomayor again declined to get specific. "That, I can't answer," she said. "I can only answer what exists. People are very passionate about the issues they believe in."

From the May assassination of Dr. George Tiller, a provider of therapeutic and late-term abortions in Kansas, to the first of what may be a string of Supreme Court vacancies, reproductive rights have returned to the American political spotlight. The exchange on the Senate Judiciary Committee was one of several involving abortion law during the confirmation hearing, highlight-

DAYO OLOPADE *is the Washington reporter for* The Root *and a Bernard L. Schwartz fellow at the New America Foundation.*

ing a still-violatile domestic political debate surrounding how and under what circumstances women reproduce.

Yet according to Michelle Goldberg, nearly the entire conversation about sex, access to contraception, and abortion in America is a shibboleth. The 150 million women of the United States enjoy some of the greatest reproductive freedoms on the planet. Eighty percent of the world allows abortion in only the first 12 weeks of pregnancy; the United States permits therapeutic abortions until the sixth month. Three quarters of American women use modern birth control to plan their families, while in many countries birth control is inaccessible, if not illegal. Women abroad suffer under restrictions on their reproductive choices, including cultural stigma against condom use.

Ironically, Goldberg points out in *The Means of Reproduction*, it is the United States that exercises extraordinary and often restrictive control over the rest of the world's ability to promote women's health and family planning—not least because it is the largest funder of family planning programs worldwide. The current administration will give $545 million this year for such efforts to the United Nations Population Fund (also known by its French acronym, UNFP) and other international bodies. Indeed, while dramatic, the dispute between Coburn and Sotomayor over the threatened but consistent protections of *Roe* vs. *Wade* obscures a 30-year proxy war that's produced catastrophic outcomes for women outside the United States.

Religion has played a particularly destructive role. Goldberg, a journalist who has written on feminism and religion, unpacks the workings of a new alliance between religious conservatives around the world that aims to shred reproductive freedoms for women. American Protestants and Latin American Catholics join with the Mormon church, and Iranian clerics join with the Holy See, to prosecute a moral crusade for chastity, one that, in the age of international law and globalized culture, has become a high-stakes geopolitical fencing match.

"The globalization of the culture wars," writes Goldberg, "was revealing something important about the significant fissures dividing the world. Religious rivalries…masked an equally important polarization, both inside of countries and among them, between secular, liberalizing cultures and traditional, patriarchal ones." The longstanding conflict over women's bodies, she concludes, shows this particular clash of civilizations in high relief. And unlike traditional conceptions of grand strategy, it has never been a fight between East and West, left and right, or rich and poor. Instead, it is "a battle between a cosmopolitan network of reproductive rights activists and an equally cosmopolitan network of religious conservatives."

Goldberg reports from the front lines of this genteel but deadly conflict, describing sex and fertility as pressure points critical to reshaping the global

conversation on not just women's rights but the entire global economy. Allowing women access to reproductive choices, she asserts, is central to the cause of international development: "Underlying diverse conflicts—over demography, natural resources, human rights, and religious mores—is the question of who controls the means of reproduction."

In this ongoing battle, there is no disputing that the liberals landed the first punch. In the 1950s and 1960s, men like Harvey Kalman, an inventor and early abortionist, and Reimert Ravenholt, who took over USAID's Office of Population in 1965, saw the problem of unwanted pregnancies in developing nations as a severe threat to women's and public health. They developed some of the earliest modern abortion technologies and—with the other colorful characters in this drama, such as Adrienne Germain, Joan Dunlop, and Sandra Kabir—laid the groundwork for real change in women's lives. Their adventures were often straight out of a Western: Maverick American activists and doctors rocketed from Bangladesh to Egypt, their briefcases crammed with birth control pills, condoms, and manual vacuum aspiration kits. As the century progressed, these liberal pioneers pushed for the creation of the UNFP, which launched in 1969, and spearheaded the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975—ensuring the spread of safer abortion services, prenatal counseling, and maternal education.

At the time, the overriding concern of both conservative and liberal Western elites was population control. The consensus, encompassing both anticommunist paranoia and worries about the environment, held that resource scarcity and Third World underdevelopment could one day destabilize the planet. For both factions fearful of a neo-Malthusian future, access to abortion and effective contraception was key. Biologist Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, which predicted famines as soon as 1970, became a bestseller in 1968, just as Richard Nixon was calling for a congressional Commission on Population Growth and the American Future. A bipartisan political coalition made the United States, Goldberg writes, "the global Santa Claus of birth control," providing millions in family-planning aid abroad. As George H.W. Bush put it in the year *Roe* was decided, "Success in the population field may, in turn, determine whether we can resolve successfully the other great questions of peace, prosperity, and individual rights that face the world." The willingness of a Republican politician, especially a Bush, to speak openly about regulating fertility seems odd. But then again, global reproductive politics wasn't the flash point it is today. In 1959, Goldberg writes, even the World Council of Churches, an ecumenical group of Protestant denominations, "strongly supported birth control."

It was not until the late 1970s, several years after *Roe*, that the population

control alliance fractured, and the Protestant right began to agitate against the freedoms that 1960s cooperation had helped normalize. Goldberg, author of 2005's *Kingdom Coming*, a book probing the rise of Christian nationalism in America, is well matched to the task of reporting the unique aggression of religious groups in this battle. She argues convincingly that the rise of the religious right, as well as the advent of globalization, began the outsourcing of the domestic culture wars. Suddenly, religious conservatism was not all prayer and sloganeering; American Protestant groups, as well as the Catholic Church, began to play a strong hand in the law and diplomacy surrounding access to contraception and abortion. The so-called "global gag" on abortion providers is the classic example. The Christianist Ronald Reagan coalition could not shake *Roe*, so it picked the lower-hanging fruit: withholding assistance to clinics abroad where doctors even whispered about abortion. Goldberg describes the seismic shift:

> As the global women's movement fought to make reproductive rights universal, conservatives from around the world joined hands across theological divides in opposition to what seemed the ultimate in aggressive cosmopolitanism. United Nations meetings and conferences would become forums for seemingly obscure but often intense and consequential struggles between universal rights and religious and cultural tradition, between the liberties due each individual and the power of groups—nations, villages, families—to regulate their members.

Borrowing the verve and methodology of liberal women's groups, throughout the 1980s Christianist lobbying shops like the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, and Human Life International backed interference in the work of established family planning organizations, ripping apart "informed choice" guidelines for practice abroad and funneling USAID money toward faith-based reproductive groups like the Family of the Americas Foundation.

At the same time, these groups muscled their own NGOs into international symposia on reproductive rights. At a 2000 U.N. conference to review progress on women's rights, Goldberg reports that "a crowd of men from Mormon and Catholic groups suddenly began streaming through the backdoors of the conference hall as if on cue ...They wore professional business suits...Their hair was short and clean-cut. The few women among them wore power suits and perfectly coifed hair. All of them wore bright campaign buttons emblazoned with a single word: motherhood."

In addition to such troublemaking at U.N. gatherings in Rio, Cairo, Beijing, and New York, religious conservatives convened their own alternative global conferences, such as the 1997 World Congress of Families or the 2004 Doha Conference on the Family. In heavily religious nations in Africa and Latin America,

they courted indigenous pro-life groups with a message of empowerment: At the same Manhattan gathering with clean-cut Mormon fundamentalists, a Kenyan woman in traditional dress excoriated "a culture of pleasure." In Nicaragua, a gynecologist circulated American-made pamphlets titled "Mortal Deceit: [Planned Parenthood]'s Attack on Children, Families, and National Sovereignty." As Goldberg notes, the visuals were perplexing: "In the past it was liberals who had always claimed to speak for the downtrodden representatives of poor nations, but now Western conservatives were basking in an anti-imperialist righteousness."

This is because religious zealotry, more than class or culture, binds this movement together. "When it comes to sex and reproduction, religious conservatives across the world have more in common with each other than with feminists in their own societies," Goldberg notes. This synergy, famously articulated by Dinesh D'Souza in *The Enemy at Home*, has even extended to Muslim fundamentalist factions that U.S. conservatives traditionally decry. Until the events of September 11, 2001 made close partnerships with Islamic activists seem untoward, alliances bloomed between American Christians, the Vatican, and groups like the ultraconservative Organization of the Islamic Conference, World Muslim League, and the College of Shariah and Islamic Studies. It was a coalition of the willing on both sides—former Iranian President Mohammad Rafsanjani, most recently seen on the side of the good guys opposing Iran's rigged election, once said, "Collaboration between religious governments in support of outlawing abortion is a fine beginning for the conception of collaboration in other fields."

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As Goldberg reports, even the temporary partnerships quickly produced concrete, distasteful results. In Kenya, pro-lifers dumped bags of stillborn children on the street. In Ethiopia, reformers pushed for liberalized abortion laws, only to see the gag rule stunt their progress. In Nicaragua, a pregnant nine-year-old named Rosita became a mascot of sorts for pro- and anti-abortion activists, allowing each to voice their support, or disgust, as she was passed from hand to hand. Each of these instances invited international attention, and the intervention of pro-life groups that would use each case as a means of attack on women's liberties. In a Colombian court case debating abortion in the case of rape and severe fetal malformation, writes Goldberg, a local partner of Virginia-based Human Life International "submitted thirty thousand antiabortion children's drawings—some by kids as young as three—as amicus briefs."

Goldberg's reporting toggles easily between the macroscopic geopolitical arguments and the remarkable personal stories of several men and women caught in the decades of crossfire. She remarks wryly on a public debate in Manhattan between Fuambai Ahmadu, a "sleek-ponytailed" Sierra Leonean economist who defended female genital cutting, and Grace Mose, a Kenyan activist who abhorred the practice: "Apologists for female circumcision don't interact much with the global women's movement, which is generally no more inclined to debate the merits of the practice than it is to ponder the upside of rape or wife beating."

Such surprising nuance is everywhere in Goldberg's book. In a thought-provoking chapter on "Missing Girls," Goldberg travels to India, where deeply ingrained prejudice against daughters has made female infanticide, or sex-selective abortion, disturbingly de rigueur. Here and in China, where a similar practice obtains, she notes that the political and ethical calculations for feminists are unclear:

> Sex selection poses an additional challenge to women's rights activists, one that's philosophical rather than tactical. To confront the issue of sex-selective abortion as a feminist is to see the world in much the same way pro-lifers do, at least for a moment. It's to look in horror at a culture where potential life is tossed away in the quest for economic advancement and status, debasing all involved. It's to see some choices as illegitimate.

As with Mose and Ahmadu, Goldberg parses this reality in a direct attempt to confront cultural assumptions about agency and authenticity. This is not to say that Goldberg does not abhor the sexist act of aborting girls. Nor that she is a sworn relativist (she is, for example, very hard on anthropologist Richard Shweder's relativist arguments regarding female circumcision). But generally, her critiques tend to focus on external actors and theories of empowerment rather than lamentable local outcomes. At one point in her discussion of population collapse in Italy and Japan, for example, she notes that "reproductive rights include the right to reproduce, and when huge numbers of women want to but cannot, it means their freedom is being curtailed." That's exactly right—and a credit to Goldberg that she reports those aspects of the debate that push the boundaries of her own liberal sympathies.

"Catch the Baby," a documentary filmed in Kano, Nigeria and slated for domestic distribution in 2010, neatly complements the proxy war described in *The Means of Reproduction*—even as it demonstrates ways in which the divide Goldberg presents may be bridged at the local level. As a result of the religious pacts and invasive policies Goldberg describes, "Some of our patients have delivered seven, eight children," says Dr. Bello Dikko, head of obstetrics

and gynecology at the local hospital, in a scene from the film. The uterus, he adds, "is just like your ordinary clothes; when you wash it today, tomorrow and the next day it is getting weaker."

Director Dawn Shapiro repeats some of Goldberg's methodology but with somewhat different results: Instead of a destructive, religiously motivated assault on reproductive health, she finds "a mix of local progressives and hardliners" fumbling toward progress on women's health in a heavily Islamic community. In Kano, some doctors work in concert with the Islamic council and local imams, hashing out disagreements and devising public health strategies in a collaborative, almost academic fashion. The meetings"fight the stereotype that faith based groups, whether Muslim, Christian, or whatever, are backward," says Shapiro. "It's pro-science and pro-information."

This evidence matches some of Goldberg's reporting on the role of sex politics in religious society—and extends it. The elite, "cosmopolitan" battle sketched in her book may be powerful, but, as this film shows, is not absolute. In fact, earlier collaboration between Islamic organizations and western religious conservatives was "never really about birth control or abortion, since most interpretations of Islam don't share the church's absolutist stance on either." Indeed, both Saudi Arabia and Iran sanction abortion, and no Muslim country bans birth control.

The Means of Reproduction builds a smart, strong case for a cease-fire in the damaging global argument over the female body, and it restores a sense of nuance and motion to a well-worn discussion in the United States. However, Goldberg ignores the proverbial elephant in the room—the HIV/AIDS epidemic. I'm sure the omission was not intended to gloss over an issue so intimately tied to the means of reproduction. But here, too, the religious component is replicated: Faith-based groups flood AIDS organizations with funding for retroviral drugs, yet see no reason to emphasize the condom use that could prevent infection.Perhaps the most interesting provocation of this well-reported book is its suggestion that a regime of global morality and of strong rights for women need not be irreconcilable. Slowly, Goldberg writes, an "amorphous architecture of soft power" is accruing to women; international law has shifted to "increasingly put the rights of individual women above the rights of groups to preserve their traditional customs and hierarchies." As the Sotomayor hearings revealed, American jurisprudence still frowns on the idea of using international standards for national governance, but as this new morality seeps into global and local legal conventions, Goldberg believes we may experience the rise of a new secular religion that values women and "move[s] into the role the great world religions once occupied." That would be something to behold. **D**