

Paper addresses ethics of bioethics conference in Qatar

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The decision by a global bioethics association to hold its 2024 congress in Qatar, a nation with laws against LGBTQ+ people, has provoked controversy, including objections from some of its own members.

The outcry motivated the organization's president and colleagues to draft an ethics framework to guide future site selection. The framework, published in *The American Journal of Bioethics*, might also help global organizations make decisions about ethically appropriate conference sites.

"Many organizations around the world are addressing these questions," said Nancy Jecker, the paper's lead author and a professor of [bioethics](#) at the University of Washington School of Medicine. She is also the International Association of Bioethics (IAB) president, a post she was elected to after Qatar's selection.

Every two years, IAB members from around the globe gather to discuss weighty bioethics topics regarding health care, scientific research, education and public health. In 2022, its president announced the choice of a university based in Doha, Qatar, for the 2024 World Congress of Bioethics.

"We've had 16 world congresses spanning more than three decades, and it's striking that this will be our first in the Middle East or an Arab country," Jecker said. The choice of Qatar, in the global South, helps "dismantle the global North bias embedded in our usual way of doing business," she said, noting that 80% of IAB's congresses have been held in the global North.

In the just-published paper, the authors propose a framework with seven ethics principles:

- Being anti-discriminatory
- International
- Green (minimizing carbon footprint)
- Inclusive
- Leaving no one behind

- Freely exchanging ideas
- Being epistemically just

Rather than comprising a "litmus test" to apply to a nation's government, the paper identifies multiple values and principles at stake, Jecker said, adding that the authors' aim is to begin a broader conversation within bioethics and other academic fields about the ethics of international conferencing.

The paper argued that if governments globally were subjected in earnest to a human-rights test, "all countries would fail it." To the question of whether to shun places where human-rights abuses are reported, the paper offered an analogy: "Some people effect change by protesting the government, while others run for office. Both can be effective ways to instigate change."

With anti-LGBTQ+ laws increasing across the African continent, Jecker asked, "Should we never go to Africa—and turn our backs on people in that region?" She noted that while half of U.S. states have enacted anti-LGBTQ+ laws and many have banned most abortions, those actions likely would not preclude the United States from being considered as a conference site.

In applying the proposed principles to Qatar, the authors said hosting the World Congress in that nation offsets epistemic injustices of not having previously conferenced in the Middle East or an Arab country. Siting the event in Qatar also gives credibility to points of view that emerge from that region, Jecker said, creating a better balance of voices in an organization that identifies itself as "international."

The conference host, the university's Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics at Hamid bin Khalifa University, is facilitating fully online participation to reduce the meeting's [carbon footprint](#),

expand access and reduce participants' cost. It is also offering simultaneous Arab-English translation at some sessions.

Jecker stressed that the IAB Congress affords ethicists a chance to engage with local people.

"We're partnering with the World Health Organization's regional office, and we've helped connect local women's groups in the area with the Feminist Approaches to Bioethics, which holds its World Congress back-to-back with ours. I'm hoping we will engage meaningfully across borders of culture and religion and race in ways that enhance mutual understanding," she said.

Jecker clarified that the ethics framework put forth in the paper does not represent the views of the IAB board or its members. "The authors are not looking for a rubber stamp of this position. We want to lead a wider conversation. As we move forward, we'll need to hear from people in different parts of the world."

More information: Nancy S. Jecker et al, Proposed Principles for International Bioethics Conferencing: Anti-Discriminatory, Global, and Inclusive, *The American Journal of Bioethics* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/15265161.2023.2232748](https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2023.2232748)

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