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Women's Issues Recognized at Cairo

The U.N. International Conference on Population and Development

Reportage by Sarah G. Epstein

This past September in Cairo, I waited in line six hours for my press pass at the main building of the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (UNICPD). When I finally faced the intake worker at a computer, I was suddenly nervous that my invitation from the Managing Editor, Stephen Fay, to be a Special Correspondent for the *Brattleboro* (VT) *Reformer* had not been stored with the requests from some estimated 4,000 other news journals. Fortunately, all was in order and within a few moments I was photographed and had my pass laminated in a plastic card suspended on a necklace chain. I anticipated almost two weeks of decision making that could change women's lives for the better everywhere.

Security throughout Cairo was obvious and tight, especially at the huge Conference Center facilities where I had picked up my credentials. Days before the opening, Muslim extremists threatened to disrupt the UNICPD. Among their objections to the final draft for the Plan of Action to be presented to the conferees was language they felt condoned and promoted homosexuality. Some members of the Population Institute group, a non-governmental charitable organization for which I was a delegate, decided not to go to Cairo at the last minute, unwilling to run the risk. All of us were genuinely concerned.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak stationed soldiers, police and plain-clothes officers everywhere. When I first arrived at my hotel, I had to have a personal check and baggage search. At the Conference Center itself, either to enter the official delegates hall or the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) forum in the building next door, passes and purses were inspected several times. I was glad for the caution.

As I mingled with the vast crowds at the opening session on September 5, 1994, I felt the thrill I have when waiting for the opera curtain to rise. Around me were people in colorful dress and faces of all shades.

From the press balcony I could see delegates from about 180 countries. Scattered among them were officials in Arab headdresses, Nigerian robes, Japanese kimonos, African prints, Indian saris, and Sikh turbans, and I heard echoes of many languages. Women

delegates were numerous.

The scene in Cairo was very different from the UN population and development conference held in Mexico City in 1984, where all but a handful of official delegates were men. At the opening ceremony of the meeting of ten years ago, I was distressed to see a dozen male delegates and speakers on the platform, but not one woman! Shocking at an international conference dealing with family planning. Under the Reagan Administration, "population" was termed a "neutral" factor by the United States delegation, headed by a Catholic former US senator from New York state, James Buckley. Immediately after that conference, all US funding for the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and the UN Fund for Population Assistance (UNFPA) was terminated by Reagan's presidential edict.

In contrast, at Cairo three of the main opening ceremony speakers were women. The Secretary General of the entire conference was Dr. Nafis Sadik, who is also head of the UNFPA. She concluded her remarks by saying, "We cannot solve the environmental crisis without solving the population crisis ... notably absent from this critical dialogue are the ordinary women and men in whose names resolutions will be hammered out. What do they want and need?"

Benazir Bhutto, Prime Minister of Pakistan, had special symbolic significance, coming from a conservative Muslim country. She spoke vigorously for family planning and the need to increase education and economic opportunities for women. She was frank in saying that the religious views in her country did not permit legal abortion.

Gro Harlem Brundtland, Prime Minister of Norway, received a standing ovation from many listeners. She put the need to promote family planning choices in the context of democracy and morality. Without saying so directly, she effectively challenged persistent papal attempts to claim moral infallibility in opposing contraception and abortion, and the Vatican's claim that the only true definition of "family" is a married man and woman and their natural and legally adopted children.

Some Muslim conservatives joined Vatican opposition to the UN ICPD document at first, but I suspect that they would split on how exactly to define the family unit since their laws allow a man up to four wives.

New at this year's UN ICPD was the documented emphasis throughout the Plan of Action on the need to empower women. In the developing world, girls receive less education than boys and poorer health care. Women are often restricted by laws governing property, inheritance, and marriage and divorce rights. Women have difficulty borrowing money, obtaining training, entering professions, serving in government, or being hired in traditional male arenas. Also at this UN ICPD, concerns about the environment and development were linked to population growth. At the 1992 UN Conference on Development and the Environment in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, those opposed to reproductive health choices blocked consideration of the effect of population growth on the environment.

In Cairo, there was a new recognition of the key role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs); some 700 NGOs were represented there and generally acknowledged to be a vital part in forging the final outcome of the Plan of Action.

Each morning at the NGO Forum there were caucuses: one on women's issues, one on youth, and one on the environment. Attending delegates could choose from many planned workshops and presentations, such as one presented by the International Union of Scientists on the Study of Population, Environment and Security, or Pathfinder International's Advocacy for Youth where young people gathered from both developed and developing countries in a "Teen Theatre" where skits were acted out depicting social/sexual situations, to which the audience reacted, reflecting their differing cultural attitudes and needs in their responses.

There were groups focusing on migration, immigration and refugees, on religious and ethical concerns, on AIDS, on female circumcision, on sexually transmitted diseases, etc. In short, it proved a marvelous opportunity for delegates to network and many helpful links were forged for future cooperative efforts at problem solving. Often official delegations were lobbied as new strategies emerged.

One workshop title that particularly intrigued me was "Development of the Lives of Garbage Collectors at Mukattam and Environmental Improvement," presented by the Association of Garbage Collectors for Community Development.

Publicity and the Vatican

The media thrives on conflict. This ingredient was amply provided by the Vatican. Journalists were alerted by reports of conflicting goals and ideas from the three pre-conference meetings of official and NGO delegates who worked during the preceding months to hammer

out a Plan of Action of about 113 pages. This was not easy when the document had to be translated into English, Spanish, French, and Arabic, and perhaps more languages. Shades of meaning, cultural interpretation and religious points of view made progress slow.

However, a remarkable consensus was forged. Words, phrases or paragraphs were bracketed when a country delegation objected. The Vatican, for example, put brackets around "reproductive health care" and "safe motherhood" whenever these phrases appeared. To the Vatican the former could mean "birth control," and the latter could countenance abortions, in its view. At the opening of the UN ICPD session where the final wording would be decided, almost all brackets still in place were there due to the Vatican and other conservative religious delegates.

The final document was hammered out in public on the main floor under the able direction of Dr. Fred Sai, chair of the UN ICPD Main Committee and, since 1989, president of IPPF. The media correctly anticipated controversy as sensitive sections of the Plan were argued, as well as in the activities of the "right to life" and conservative religious groups at the NGO Forum. Indeed, where some NGOs had booths, "right to life" groups had posters of fetuses claimed to be aborted, and reams of literature. Frances Kissling, president of Catholics for a Free Choice (CFC), said that members of such groups were assigned to follow and stick with her and each of her associates, so when a member of the media asked her or a CFC delegate questions, the opponents could break in and immediately try to refute any statement.

The Vatican is the only religious group given permanent observer status at the UN due to its territorial enclave in Rome and the fact that some countries send ambassadors to the Vatican. With this advantageous status, the Vatican was able to hold up proceedings on the approval of those areas of the Plan of Action document dealing mainly with reproductive health, and did so for five whole days of the Conference. The coverage by the press naturally focused on this performance. The frustration of the official delegates was increasingly evidenced in the deliberations.

The allies the Vatican had won through lobbying before the beginning of the Conference fell away except for the tiny island of Malta. Perhaps realizing that "about 150 celibate old men in long dresses and slippers," as one reporter represented the Vatican in his story, was too revealing as an anti-woman stance, the Holy See finally agreed to sign the Plan of Action as long as their objections were printed in the final document.

Thus the log jam was broken and the Vatican declared "victory."

From the press balcony, I observed each spokesperson for a country delegation approve the total

document or approve it with stated reservations. When it came to the Vatican's turn Archbishop Martino stood up, listed the many sections to which his delegation objected, and said that "contraception, sterilization and abortion, and even the use of condoms to prevent the spread of HIV, should never be used." It reminded me of the US government when it declared victory and left Vietnam as rapidly as possible. The Holy See vanished from the conference scene, giving no further press conferences. My reading is that the Vatican did the UN ICPD a great favor by its stubborn stand, and groups that might have argued among themselves joined as a united front to move forward the issues important to women.

Many official delegates and NGO groups expressed disappointment that more time had not been allotted to environmental, human rights, development and education concerns.

I perceived a general sense of unity among most delegations that everyone "North" and "South" belongs to one world. The world has serious problems and different religious and cultural approaches, but if the non-binding Plan of Action is followed, collaborative efforts can solve many of the problems.

Japan, Germany and the US pledged increased funds to meet family planning, development and education needs. The "North" recognized and admitted to its pollution and overconsumption as a cause of environmental degradation. The "South" admitted to the need to reduce further its birthrate (95 percent of population increase is now in developing countries) and to increase educational and employment opportunities for women.

The final Plan of Action addresses in detail these areas of concern and how to improve the situation during the next 20 years. It is estimated that it will eventually cost \$17 billion annually by the year 2000 to operate the program projected.

Developing countries will provide two-thirds of funding needed and the developed world one-third, or just under \$6 billion. Tim Wirth, under secretary for Global Affairs and head of the 43-person US delegation, declared at a news conference that the Plan of Action as finally adopted was better than the draft document presented at the outset of the Cairo meeting.

Women should be pleased that their general health and educational needs have been stressed, as a necessary foundation for lowering birthrates and improving the quality of their lives. Hopefully, with all-out effort, the world population, now at 5.67 billion, can be stabilized in 2025 at under 8 billion. If not slowed, the total population of our planet by 2050 could easily reach 13 billion or more.

People on the Move

One important NGO representative with whom I

spoke said that the burning issue over the 20-year life of this Plan will be the question of migration, both into the cities from rural areas and across national borders. Increasingly, citizens of the poor and unstable nations of the south will not only clash within their own borders but will push to enter the affluent nations of the northern hemisphere,

claiming family reunification, refugee or asylum status or simply the blatant right to go where they wish to live, regardless of the sovereign policies of the US and other developed nations.

Japan's racial purity views, Norway's strict migration laws, and the lack of need in the US for additional unskilled labor will be sorely tested in the two decades ahead. I think the US is already suffering from an "excess of altruism" and the frustration of continually providing food and medical aid and shelter to people in areas of war and starvation around the globe.

On the thorny matter of family reunification, many prescient observers in the West say that such reunification should be reversed by encouraging immigrants to return to their countries of origin rather than permitting their legions of relatives to join them in

their new country, thus overloading its facilities and resources. The UN estimates that there are about 125 million migrants in the world, including refugees, and that the number might more than double in the next 20 years.

Among other issues, one group of Arab NGO women complained that the abortion focus of the Cairo meeting shifted attention from what they thought should have been **the** vital issue for the UN ICPD — namely "development," particularly for women.

While this need is evident, if anyone agrees with the perpetual cornucopians, such as Julian Simon, that the world's economies and countries can **grow** their way to prosperity without severely limiting population, he or she should first study the implications of biodiversity, sustainable development, and in general about the natural resource limitation of this planet.

It is the world's poor women I thought about as I watched the approval of the final Plan of Action. Will the mother of six who sends her children daily to the garbage dump to scabble for rotting food or discarded rags and cardboard ever benefit from the promised better education and general health provisions,

including family planning and a safe abortion, if it is legal in her country? When her children reach their teens, will they find a job that will enable them to live in more than a makeshift shack without plumbing, and to form a family as defined by the Vatican?

All the haggling over wording and the fact that her future was being discussed at Cairo is completely unknown to this exhausted mother and the millions like her around the world. It is now up to the governments of the delegates and the attending NGOs to deliver the services and education needed, for in truth, the real results of the UN ICPD remain to be accomplished.

It is to be hoped that this woman and her many sisters and their children in this overcrowded world will indeed benefit. Those of us who attended this historic meeting in Cairo owe it to them and to our own children and grandchildren to provide and leave as an inheritance an ecologically sustainable and safe world where all humanity has a reasonable chance for a life of quality and equality. The UN ICPD has given us a hopeful start. ■