

Women will not be Coerced/ Policies Violate "right to fertility"

AS the Chorus to halt population growth in order to save the planet rose around them, women's groups put women's reproductive rights at the center of the population debate in the Earth Summit.

At a forum on population and the environment, on the weekend of June 6-7, June 1992, speakers said population policies violate women's "rights to their fertility" and how they choose to exercise this right. They said this is being done by institutions or structures that coerce women not to reproduce on the one hand and not to be sterilized, not to have abortions and not to use contraceptives on the other hand.

The women who raised the issue include presidents of women's groups in Latin America and the US. Population policies, they felt, must follow the basic principle that "no human being can be used as a means to someone else's ends." This means population policies that inform, educate and make it possible for women to make good choices and trust that they will act ethically in relation to their communities. •

Excerpts from "Women will not be Coerced, Policies violate 'right to Fertility'", by Eulalee Thompson and Bert Wilkinson. in *Terraviva*, The independent daily of the Earth Summit, Monday June 8, 1992. No. 5. pg.8.

Women At the Global Forum and in participating NGOs

Wangari Maathai, was chosen as the sole NGO representative at the Rio-92 Earth Summit. Maathai was elected unanimously by NGOs as the best expression of the path that the ecological movement will take after Rio-92.

Maathai is the founder of the Green Belt organization, a women's organization whose objectives include seeking solutions to desertification of Africa's water problems. She is also a member of the Executive Committee of the National Women's Council of Kenya. On the eve of the last preparatory meeting to the Earth Summit, last March, she was arrested and detained while participating with others in a strike to obtain the freedom of children, political prisoners and the tortured. She was freed in time to send a message on behalf of the Third World to the official delegations participating in the preparatory meeting.

At Rio she said that the unequal relations between the North and the South are reproduced in Third World countries and neither of the two inequalities can be corrected in isolation.





Frances Kissling is a practicing Catholic and militant feminist, who has worked for the women's health movement since 1970 heads the US non-governmental organization (NGO) "Catholics for the Right to Decide". She is active in all national and international efforts to improve the conditions of women. She is also founder and treasurer of the Women's Global Fund and the International Network of Feminists promoting reproductive health. In Rio, Kissling participated in the debate on population, Health and the environment policies of the "The Planeta Fermea". Kissling criticized Rome's attitude rejecting family planning and birth control for women.

"No woman should be forced into birth control, she said, but neither should it be denied".

Christina Vollmer, the Vatican representative, on the other hand, accused Kissling of being totally wrong on the Church. To Kissling's accusation that the Church is ambivalent about the population issue, Vollmer insisted that it has always maintained a position of absolute coherence. "The Church opposes the unnatural methods of contraception since they only harm women, children and couples. But it encourages couples to decide, freely and responsibly, how many children they will raise," she said in an exclusive interview to *Terraviva*, the daily of the Earth Summit (June 11, 1992).



Barbara Bramble, director of international programs for the National Wildlife Federation in Washington, DC is a member of the coordinating committee of the International NGO and Social Movement Forum - the group which produced and presented a series of seminars on alternative NGO treaties to the Earth Summit.

More than 2,000 persons signed up to work with the Forum and to draft more than 30 treaties on a variety of environment, development, and related issues. Under considerations were treaties on the search for alternatives, NGO global decision making, technology bank, the sharing of resources, a code of ethics, communication, trade, transnational corporations, and international debts, as well as alternative economic models, biodiversity, toxic and nuclear waste, climate, oceans, forests, energy, sustainable agriculture, food security, fresh water, fisheries, women and population, indigenous peoples, education, militarism and the environment, the urban question, racism, and children and adolescents. The treaties contained commitments to some means of implementing the principles.



Mabel Bianco, Argentinian militant feminist and member of the Foundation for Women's Studies and Research in her country, also raised the issue of freedom. She participated in the panel on "Ethics and Freedom of Choice" in the Planeta Fermea at the Global Forum and spoke on the theme of "Gender, Culture Religion and Society." What the panel analyzed was the situation of women as citizens vis-a-vis political systems, she said, there was a consensus that there is a need to create conditions for true democracy in which the rights of minorities are taken into account. On the gender problems under discussion in the panel was the need to develop a new ethic. Thus, the recuperation of values to confront the deterioration of socio-economic conditions which limit access to education, health and other basic services, and affect women's decisions in the area of reproductive rights. Bianco said that the capacity to take decisions regarding reproductive rights has to be backed by truly integrated health services.