

Reactions

To The U.N. Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, September 5-13, 94)

Many, undoubtedly, continue to question why specific reference should be made to women, where problems of the environment and health are concerned, when the whole of humanity is in the same boat. Could it be because women's involvement in the policy-making process is weak. Or maybe because breast cancer is increasing at geometric rates all over the world and because cancer survivors, environmentalists, and a handful of researchers are pointing to environmental contaminants as the epidemic's central culprit!(1)

Confusion and conflict arise everytime focus is made on problems specific to women. It is only recently that all hell broke loose in Cairo when issues related to women's reproductive rights and their impact on humanity were raised. At the United Nations Conference on Population and Development (Cairo Sept. 5-13, 1994), Third World countries who suffer most from population growth, poverty and inadequate health care were caught up in the power play between religious and Western-based secular ideologies.

Here are excerpts of some on statistics on population and development, and cultural and national reactions to the issues that came out in Cairo.

Arab Reactions

Arab women describing themselves as the main victims of current family planning policies, defied their menfolk on Friday (September 9) with an appeal for better sex education, full equality and legal abortion for psychological reasons. The women asked Arab governments "to revise their legislation to ensure full equality between genders, with special regard to personal status and family laws, as well as laws regarding nationality."

Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Lebanon withdrew their delegation from the United Nations Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. This position upheld the claim that the draft of the "programme

of action" under discussion undermines family values and encourages promiscuity, and would therefore offend the religious clergy of the country.

Jordan: "We do not sanction using abortion as a means of family planning, but we allow it only in one case when the pregnant woman's life is threatened by the danger of death. Jordanian Labor Minister Khaled al-Ghzawi told Reuters. The Jordanian Government began a nation-wide birth spacing campaign last year to control indirectly its population, growing at an average of 3.4 percent a year, among the world's highest. (Rana Sabagh for Reuters, 1/9/94)

Syria said it would cooperate with the programme where it was in accord with national interests and religious beliefs.

Kuwait said its commitments depended on the programme not violating Islamic law.

International Reactions

Two of the three women who rule Muslim states, Khaleda Zia of Bangladesh and Tansu Ciller of Turkey, along with Queen Noor of Jordan, dropped out of the Conference as well. (Emily MacFarquhar, 'Population Wars' U.S. News & World Report, September 12, 1994.)

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Activists accused the U.N. Population Conference of neglecting the increasingly devastating effects AIDS was having on women around the world. HIV is spreading faster among women than men, and has infected more than 7 million women worldwide and estimates say 13 million may be infected by the year 2,000. (Mona Eltahawy for Reuters, 9/9/1994.)

If the non-binding programme succeeds (set by U. N. Population Fund), the United Nations says, the world population will rise to 7.27 billion in the year 2015, up from 5.67 billion today. If it fails, the world would reach up to 7.92 billion in the year 2015, and 12.5 billion in 2050. (Mona Eltahawy for Reuters, 13/9/1994.)

Joe Speidel, President of Population Action International, said family planning and related health care programme would cost around \$17 billion by the year 2000, of which donor countries must provide one third, or \$5.7 billion. Speidel recommended that the United States triples its donations by the year 2,000 to \$1.9 billion (a year) and Japan increase theirs to \$1.2 billion. Japan agreed earlier this year, to raise annual donations to population projects from \$40 million to \$400 million. (Dominic Evans for Reuters, 8/9/94)

Controversial Perspectives

It has become an article of faith that the Earth's population is about to surpass the planet's 'carrying capacity.' (Budiansky, Stephen. '10 Billion for Dinner, Please' U.S. News & World Report, September 12, 1994.)

OR

Recent scientific studies confirm that the earth's basic resources are vastly greater than what is needed to feed the 10 billion people that are almost certain to inhabit it in the middle of the next century. The real threat is not that the Earth will run out of land, topsoil or water but that nations will fail to pursue economic, trade and research policies that can increase the production of food, limit environmental damage and ensure that resources reach the people who need them. (Budiansky, Stephen. '10 Billion for Dinner, Please' U.S. News & World Report, September 12, 1994.)

Zimbabwe and India said the document must guarantee sexual and reproductive rights to individuals and not only couples in order to protect women from having little or no say in traditional marriages. (Philip Pulella for Reuters 9/9/94)

OR

A number of Islamic countries, including Egypt, Libya and several African Moslem nations, said they wanted the word 'couples', (Philip Pulella for Reuters 9/9/94)

The argument was that the term individual encourages homosexuality and other combinations, which Moslem critics consider immoral. The Vatican does not oppose the term individual but wants to make it clear that the term "other unions" should not constitute a reference to homosexuals. "Ideally, parents should be a woman and a man brought together by love in marriage and committed to support one another and their children," said a Vatican spokesman.

Politically correct terminology and key concepts.

- * Birth control
- ✓ Fertility regulation
- * Population control
- ✓ Family planning, Population strategies
- * Single-parent household
- ✓ Single-headed household
- * Illegal migrants
- ✓ Undocumented migrants

✓ "Reproductive health": a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being.

✓ "Sexual health": the integration of somatic, emotional, intellectual and social aspects of sexual being, in ways that are positively enriching."

The Abortion Debate

The revised text, part of the 113-page document charting the world's population strategy over the next 20 years.

"In no case should abortion be promoted as a method of family planning. All governments and relevant intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations are urged to strengthen their commitment to women's health, to deal with the health impact of unsafe abortion (see footnote) as a major public health concern and to reduce the recourse to abortion through expanded and improved family-planning services. Prevention of unwanted pregnancies must always be given the highest priority and all attempts should be made to eliminate the need for abortion. Women who have unwanted pregnancies should have ready access to reliable information and compassionate counseling. Any measures or changes related to abortion within the health system can only be determined at the national or local level according to the national legislative process. In circumstances in which abortion is not against the law, such abortion should be safe. In all cases women should have access to quality services for the management of complications arising from abortion. Post-abortion counseling, education and family planning services should be offered promptly which will also help avoid repeat abortions."

Footnote: "Unsafe abortion is defined as a procedure for terminating an unwanted pregnancy either by persons lacking the necessary skills or in an environment lacking the minimal medical standards or both (WHO)."

According to Nafis Sadik, Secretary-General of the U.N. Population Fund: the objective is to reduce the need for abortion, not to advocate or promote abortion.

The Vatican wants the section (on abortion) to say explicitly there is no international right to abortion. It also does not agree with a phrase which says abortion should be safe where it is legal. The Vatican says no abortion is safe because life is extinguished. (Philip Pullella for Reuters, 9/9/94)

The Vatican and many conservative Moslems have attacked the draft "programme of action" under discussion at the meeting, saying it undermines family values and encourages promiscuity. (Jonathan Wright for Reuters, 1/9/94)

Send your reactions and comments about any event or activity concerning women, especially Arab Women to:

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