

From Rio to Johannesburg

What's Good for Women is Good for the World *by Danielle Nierenberg, Worldwatch Institute*

WORLD SUMMIT POLICY BRIEFS



Throughout the 1990s, several major United Nations conferences stressed the importance of including women in sustainable development. But despite these commitments on paper, there has been far too

little action. True and meaningful equity between women and men will take much more than inserting a paragraph here and there in the documents issued at a United Nations convention or in national laws. Gender myopia—or blindness to women's issues—still distorts environmental, economic, and health policies.

Today, a full decade after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, governments, development agencies, and even some NGOs remain resolutely patriarchal. Despite the widespread belief that women "have come a long way" in achieving improved social and economic status, they continue to face many of the same obstacles they did ten years ago. And in some cases, these problems have become even more formidable.

At the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, women came together as never before and presented their vision of a world in which all women are educated, free from violence, and able to make their own reproductive choices. As a result of this mobilization, the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21 called for women's full participation in sustainable development and improvement in their status in all levels of

Worldwatch Institute + GLOBE International
www.worldwatch.org www.globeinternational.org

society.

The work that began at the Earth Summit did not end in Rio. Because of the efforts made by women's NGOs there, women's health and human rights have made their way into the international agenda. Rio's Agenda 21 set the stage for the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, Egypt in 1994. The Cairo Programme of Action reaffirmed women's rights and their equal participation in all spheres of society as a prerequisite for better human development.

The declarations and promises made at these conferences were important first steps to improving women's lives, but much remains to be done. Consider the following statistics reported by the United Nations and other health and environment organizations:

- More than 350 million women worldwide lack any access to family planning services.
- Over 500,000 women die each year from complications during pregnancy and childbirth.
- Population growth is still rapid in the world's 48 least developed nations—roughly 80 million people are added to the planet each year. Many of them are born in places where lack of infrastructure and public services shorten the lives of both the young and old.
- The largest generation of young people in human history—1.7 billion people aged 10 to 24—are about to enter their reproductive years. This wave of youth is occurring at the same time that international funding, especially from the United States, for family planning and contraceptives has been cut. As a result, many of the world's young are left without guidance and the tools to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies, violent relationships, and sexually transmitted diseases.
- In most of the developing world, the majority of new



HIV/AIDS infections occur in young people, with young women especially vulnerable. In sub-Saharan Africa, where AIDS is spreading faster than anywhere else on the planet, women account for 55 percent of all new cases of HIV. Most of these women lack the sexual autonomy to refuse sex or to demand that their "part-

ners" use condoms.

- Gender based violence takes many forms and plagues girls and women throughout their lives. One in three women worldwide has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. An estimated sixty million girls are considered "missing" in China and India because of sex-selective abortions, female infanticide, and neglect. More than 2 million women undergo female genital mutilation each year, which leads to a lifetime of suffering and psychological trauma.
- Despite advances in education for both girls and boys, two thirds of the world's 876 million illiterate people are female. In 22 African and nine Asian nations, school enrollment for girls is less than 80 percent that for boys, and only about half of girls in the least developed nations stay in school after grade 4.
- In most parts of the world, single-mother households are home to a disproportionate number of the children living in poverty.
- Globally women earn on average two thirds to three fourths as much as men for the same work. In addition, women perform most of the invisible work—house-keeping, cooking, collecting firewood and water, child-care, gardening—that sustains households from day to day. Most official economic accounting measures do not account for the value of invisible work. If these services were "counted," they would be valued at about one-third of the world's economic production.
- Women are vastly underrepresented in all levels of government and in international institutions. In 2000, women held only 14 percent of seats in parliaments worldwide. At the United Nations, women made up only 21 percent of senior management in 1999.

South Africa is an opportunity for world leaders to eliminate these inequities by recognizing that what is good for women is good for the world. In addition to enhancing human rights, improving women's lives has a whole range of side benefits—from lower population growth and reduced child mortality to better management of natural resources and healthier economies. For real change on gender and population to take place, nations should take the following steps:

- Meet or beat the goals set out at Cairo and remove barriers to comprehensive and reproductive health care at the national level. At Cairo, governments agreed to spend \$17 billion a year (in 1993 dollars) by 2000 to achieve universal access to basic reproductive health services for all by 2015. Ironically, the world's poorest nations are closer to meeting the goals of Cairo than the world's wealthy countries—spending close to 70 percent of their committed levels. Wealthy nations, in contrast, have yet to reach even 40 percent of their Cairo commitment.
- Lobby the United States to remove the barriers to funding for international family planning. The global gag rule, which prohibits U.S. funding to international agencies that even talk about abortion with their clients, should be immediately rescinded by President

One in three women worldwide has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. An estimated sixty million girls are considered "missing" in China and India because of sex-selective abortions, female infanticide, and neglect. More than 2 million women undergo female genital mutilation each year, which leads to a lifetime of suffering and psychological trauma.

promise of \$34 million in funding for the United Nations Population Fund.

Ironically, the world's poorest nations are closer to meeting the goals of Cairo than the world's wealthy countries—spending close to 70 percent of their committed levels. Wealthy nations, in contrast, have yet to reach even 40 percent of their Cairo commitment.

- Increase the number of women holding public office. The Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) and other groups have called for 50/50 representation at all levels—from local village councils to the highest offices in national parliaments. In South Africa—

where a quota system was initiated in 2000—women are steadily making their way into seats in the National Assembly and now hold 8 of the 29 cabinet positions.

- Remove obstacles that prevent girls from going to and staying in school. Study after study shows that girls with more years of education not only have fewer children, but their health and the health of the children they do have is much better. In Egypt, only 5 percent of women who stayed in school past the primary level had children while still in their teens, while over half of women without schooling became teenage mothers.

- Educate men and boys about the importance of gender equity and shared responsibility. Stereotypes and cultural expectations about masculinity prevent many men from taking responsibility for reproductive health and childcare. Some feel threatened by women's independence and express their manhood through violence

or withholding money from their families. As men's roles change, the effort to include them in family planning and reproductive health is gaining momentum. In Nicaragua, workshops for unlearning machismo and improving communication skills have led to less domestic violence. And in Mali, male volunteers have been trained to provide information about reproductive health and family planning and distribute contraceptives.

- Increase youth awareness about reproductive health issues, including HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. In places like Uganda and Senegal, government commitment to AIDS education at both the national and village level has helped bring the epidemic in those nations under control. In Mexico, peer counseling programs allow young people to talk to and be educated by their peers about sexual health, improving communication between generations about sexuality and family planning.

- Enact and enforce strong laws that protect women from violence. Many national laws entrap women in violent relationships or make it impossible to prosecute men for beatings, rape, and other forms of abuse. Some countries—Mexico and the Philippines, for instance—have revised their rape laws, making the act a "crime against one's freedom." In Belize and Malaysia, laws and penal codes have been reformed to criminalize domestic violence.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Worldwatch Institute
1776 Massachusetts Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20003
Telephone: (202) 452-1999
Fax: (202) 296-7365
E-mail: worldsummit@worldwatch.org
Web: www.worldwatch.org