

The Millennium Development Goals And Reproductive Health: Moving Beyond the UN

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on women's rights and poverty reduction*

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At the 2005 World Summit, the UN Stands Still

When scores of world leaders – the largest such gathering in history -- convened in New York in September 2005 to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the United Nations (UN) and mark the first five years of the global war on poverty launched by the Millennium Declaration of 2000, another profoundly important but unheralded milestone slipped by. The World Summit, and the agenda for the future agreed to by about 150 leaders who were there, essentially marked the end of an era of social activism at the UN.

From the 1992 Rio conference on the environment through huge official and unofficial gatherings in and around UN conferences on human rights in Vienna in 1993, population in Cairo in 1994, equitable economies at the Copenhagen “social summit” of 1995 and women’s rights at the Fourth World Conference on Women the same year, a momentum for change lifted and energized the system. It was an exhilarating, reinvigorating time for UN agencies and the burgeoning crop of new nongovernmental organizations in many countries, not a few created because of the UN conferences. At what was a dizzying speed for the UN, new human frontiers were established, in particular for the rights of women. Around the developing world, women began to measure their progress against action plans that had become universal catchwords. “Cairo” and “Beijing” were more than just places.

Then, in the early years of the new millennium, all the activity began to wind down, even as a slow-motion backlash was gathering a momentum of its own, threatening to reverse the agreements of the 1990s or sabotage their intentions. By 2005, challenges to the gains women had made were emerging from numerous directions – from conservative quarters in the United States, from reactionary militants in parts of the Islamic world, and from religious revivalisms or nationalisms in diverse other cultures not often thought of as intolerant. (Think of the horrific, targeted abuse of Muslim women by Hindu fanatics in the Indian state of Gujarat in 2002.) In the Vatican, a conservative pope was followed by another traditionalist in social outlook. No fifth world conference on women was seriously considered for 2005, ending a tradition; no formal ten-year review of the Cairo Conference on Population and Development took place the year before.

By the time world leaders reached agreement on the September 2005 summit's much-negotiated final outcome statement, there was no more movement forward on social issues, only reaffirmation, often guarded, of such accords as those of the Cairo and Beijing conferences. There were pledges to implement the Millennium Development Goals – an eight-point plan to reduce poverty and disease significantly by 2015¹ – but without strengthening or even affirming women's reproductive rights.

Yet at the same time, development experts and grassroots nongovernmental organizations were growing only more convinced by mounting evidence that world poverty will not go away unless there is the political will to deliver on promises of greater rights for women in their personal lives, their homes, and their communities. Without those rights, half the population cannot play its optimal role in the global war on poverty and ill-health.

This theme runs like an endless thread through all facets of development, and is not news to desperate people who live in areas of crisis, where the marginalization and victimization of women is in plain view, as are the results of neglect. But in recent UN debates, most government leaders, from both developing and rich countries, seem to give only token attention to the societal consequences of female disadvantage.

On the ground, there is more realism, and more action. Africans have already moved beyond the UN General Assembly consensus in recognizing the strategic necessity of rights for women. African NGOs, with the support of some governments, have drawn the connection quite clearly between powerless women and impeded development as well as the spread of HIV/AIDS. In Namibia, the Women's Leadership Center recently called for making the eradication of gender inequality the main strategy in the fight against the pandemic.² In the Republic of Congo, authorities have discovered that providing reproductive health services is not enough if women stay away because of intimidation – a discovery that eluded the World Summit. “A woman should be able to go to a health center to get birth control without fearing reprisals from her family,” said Richard Dackam-Ngatchou, the United Nations Population Fund representative in Brazzaville, the Congo capital, late in 2005 as he welcomed the government's introduction of a national plan to combat maternal mortality.³ In southern Africa, campaigning by

¹ The Millennium Development Goals, complete with their targets and indicators for measuring progress, can be found at http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mi/mi_goals.asp

² Kakololo, Emma. “Gender Policy Key to Fighting HIV/AIDS,” *New Era*, Namibia, October 19, 2005

³ Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), November 22, 2005.

nongovernmental organizations was a major factor in the entry into force in 2005 of the continent-wide Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, which offers broad personal protection and the right to reproductive choices (including termination of pregnancy) to women in those countries that have ratified it.

Africans working in development are not alone in recognizing that the success of most of the eight Millennium Development Goals, drawn from the Millennium Declaration of 2000, depends in large measure on strengthening the link between the progress of nations and women's reproductive health and rights. Latin Americans and Asians have also been active outside the confines of the UN.

The world's population, now at 6.5 billion, is expected to rise to 9.1 billion by 2050, according to the UN's population division, using a medium variant projection, meaning that the figure could be lower or higher. Of those 9.1 billion people, 7.8 billion will be living in poor countries.⁴ This projection, however, assumes continually declining fertility rates in the poorest nations, which at present is not a given, so that numbers are more likely to be higher rather than lower. "Particularly rapid growth is expected in the group of 50 countries classified as the least developed," the population division says.⁵ When linking fertility to development, the population division points out that research done in the 1990s has shown that changes in age distribution – fewer people under age 15 – can among other things accelerate economic growth and reduce poverty⁶ at least in the short term (though not in all countries) by, in effect, creating a bulge in the adult working population, especially when women are freed for economic activity. The equality and empowerment of women become keys to sustainable development.⁷

Given the right to decide or at least share equally in decisions about how their bodies are used, women can lower fertility significantly in the poorest societies, raise healthier children, and contribute more to the economy from the grassroots upward. UN departments and agencies have amassed ample examples to prove this. Joseph Chamie, until recently Director of the UN Population Division, has said repeatedly that given the chance and the means, women will of their own desire and volition "talk fertility down" and with that reduce pressures on the family and the environment.

⁴*Population Challenges and Development Goals*, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. New York, 2005, page 5.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*, page 39

⁷ *ibid*, page 45

The 2005 World Summit did endorse equal *access* to reproductive health care, but stopped short of demanding the *right* or freedom to use those services, which many women are denied around the world. It is a subtle distinction perhaps lost on women in better situations, but critical to many disadvantaged women in developing countries (and, for that matter, to Americans fighting protects a woman's right to abortion). In negotiations leading to the summit, Canada proposed adding the word *rights* to the relevant provision about reproductive health, but could not get wide enough support for the change, and the proposal died. Canada has long used the terminology "sexual and reproductive health and rights" in official government policy statements on foreign aid. The Canadian ambassador to the UN, Allan Rock, a former health minister, also repeats that formulation in speeches, and another prominent Canadian, Stephen Lewis, the secretary general's envoy on HIV/AIDS in Africa, has made the importance of women's rights a central theme in his reports. For them, this is not a semantic quibble but an essential element in defining the prerequisites for development. In the non-government sector, Action Canada for Population and Development has produced *Notes for Sexual Rights and Reproductive Rights Advocates* linked to the overall issue of UN reform.⁸

Zonny Woods, Senior Advisor for International Policy at the New York-based International Women's Health Coalition said that although the Canadian delegation got support from the Netherlands, Panama and Sweden, many other delegations were too preoccupied with the geopolitical and UN reform issues on the summit's huge agenda.⁹ Canada itself was working hard on framing proposals for a new international Peace building Commission and on getting agreement for the evolving concept called "the responsibility to protect," which puts the onus for ending mass crimes against civilians on their governments and allows for international intervention if they do not end abuses – a radical departure for the UN where national sovereignty has been sacrosanct.

"I think on this attempt to really push more on the sexual rights agenda, they did not have a great deal of support from others," Woods said of the Canadian delegation. "The agenda was so huge -- it started off as a development summit and ended up with so many other issues that it was hard for countries that really wanted to negotiate on so many other fronts to really stay on track or committed or hold the line on other issues that may not be so popular or

⁸ www.acpd.ca

⁹ interview with the author, December 2005

have too much support.” She said that Canada has consistently been willing to stand alone and fight for sexual rights when other nations prefer to avoid the inevitable controversy that arises when the focus is on women.

Woods made another general observation: that the attitude of any country’s UN ambassador or other delegation leader in international negotiations is important in formulating global documents. Advocates of women’s rights in developing countries are often overlooked or rebuffed when delegations are named. A positive outcome, Woods said, “has to do with how far countries are willing to negotiate and go, but it also can be greatly influenced by whoever is holding the pen, whoever is putting the draft together.” She said that in the run-up to the 2005 summit, Panama’s ambassador, Ricardo Alberto Arias, working on human rights issues, met with advocates for women’s rights and tried to promote their goals, at least some of which were successfully reflected in the final document.

There are measurable economic effects of greater reproductive rights for women. By the late 1990s World Bank experts were estimating that a third of the rising prosperity in East Asia could be linked in some way to falling birth rates, reflecting a woman’s right to reproductive choices.¹⁰ The Bank recently warned the Philippines (an outlier in Southeast Asia with a still-high fertility rate and strong opposition to family planning by the Catholic Church) that population growth was “an obstacle and a hindrance to development.”¹¹

Back at the UN, member countries working through the General Assembly had shifted their attention by 2005 away from social change to the structural issues of reforming and strengthening the UN itself. These necessary political tasks also addressed by the World Summit—creating a new Human Rights Council and Peace building Commission, improving management and oversight in the Secretariat, making the Security Council more reflective of the world and finding new triggers for intervention against those who would perpetrate mass crimes or engage in terrorism – will be the main preoccupations of governments for months if not years to come. Developing countries do, of course, continue to press for more focus on poverty reduction, but often seek solutions almost exclusively in higher levels of foreign aid or trade and

¹⁰ Bloom, D, Williamson, J.G., “Demographic Transitions and Economic Miracles in Emerging Asia,” *World Bank Economic Review* 1998, 12:419-455. This study is cited widely by UN agencies, including the World Health Organization and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

¹¹ *Business World*, Manila, October 14, 2005.

debt concessions rather than in changing attitudes toward women and girls and expanding their rights. Both need to be on the agenda.

For advocates of reproductive rights for women, it is now safe to say that the UN General Assembly as a club of nations has run its course as a major actor, a fact reflected in the refusal of members to reject changes in the Millennium Development Goals that were advocated by a groups as diverse as a handful of governments like Canada and several European nations, to national women's organizations of all kinds, to the International Planned Parenthood Federation, to the World Bank. Efforts by these actors to strengthen women's reproductive rights were largely sidetracked well before the 2005 World Summit, when it was clear that neither the majority of member nations in the General Assembly nor officials in the Secretariat were willing to reopen the question of whether there were gaps in the goals. [crossette 2] Even the European Union, in publishing its collective list of priorities for the summit, devoted little attention to development beyond commitments to increased aid, and did not mention women at all.¹²

But in negotiations on the summit document, said Zonny Woods of the International Women's Health Coalition, European Union delegates did have instructions to promote the rights of women from the separate Council of Europe, which deals with civil and human rights and individual European nations were active in backing the Canadians. A network of European NGOs for sexual and reproductive health and rights tracks developments on a website, www.eurongos.org, that contains links to relevant documents, publications and programs monitoring global action on gender and the Millennium Development Goals.

The EU has also been alert to all opportunities to add a gender perspective to other UN documents, and its priorities list for the summit did place a strong emphasis on a better human rights apparatus generally at the UN, which could be used to promote a range of women's rights and gender equality. Unfortunately, by the end of 2005, hopes for a new and effective Human Rights Council were rapidly diminishing under pressure in the General Assembly, where some of the same countries that helped to discredit the Human Rights Commission were opposing a stronger and more accountable Council.

Real progress toward freeing hundreds of millions of the world's poorest women from the biological and cultural disadvantages that keep them from developing fully – unwanted

¹² ¹² EU Priorities for the 60th General Assembly, July 22, 2005. http://europa-eu-un.org/articles/en/article_4599_en.htm

pregnancies, high maternal mortality, domestic violence and vulnerability to HIV-AIDS – will have to come from outside the UN system. Or, at the very least, outsiders will have to bolster those parts of the United Nations that are willing to act on the reproductive rights agenda.

The UN has many faces. Relevant, often nearly autonomous, professionalized UN agencies, with their unique global reach and universal recognition, can continue to play a strong role in the coming years. In those agencies there is a stronger commitment to women's rights than in the UN secretariat or the General Assembly, where the influence of politicians is stronger than that of development experts. It is worth remembering that the secretariat is really no more than an international civil service taking orders from the General Assembly or the Security Council. Both of those bodies are comprised entirely of representatives of national governments who report only to capitals. The Secretariat proposes policies and writes reports, but is not an operational body when it comes to social issues. Those jobs are in the purview of the peripheral agencies and programs.

Agencies and programs such as Unifem, the development fund for women; the Population Fund (UNFPA); the World Health Organization, and Unicef – some with decision-making boards of their own, though drawn from member governments -- have already gone beyond the limited confines of the Millennium Development Goals in field work and in reporting and advising on development. Such agencies are well placed to help nations working on concrete new post-summit policies to look outside the goals for guidance and new ideas. UN agencies also have a wealth of data at their disposal, much of it readily available online to anyone with Internet access and the command of an international language.

Nongovernmental organizations in every region have learned to use knowledge networks effectively, often more effectively than government ministries, which talk more in international meetings about digital divides and cyber-disadvantages than about the wealth of material available for research and action that is already accessible, if it is allowed to flow unhindered. Budget demands are not insurmountable. The hundreds of billions of dollars siphoned off in corruption in recent decades could have put a lot of computers in schools.

Transparency International, a Berlin-based coalition of anti-corruption organizations around the world, recently published a report¹³ on the high levels of bribery attached to trying to

¹³ *Stealing the Future*, Transparency International, Berlin 2005. www.transparency.org

place and keep a child in school – a prohibitive situation for poor parents and an indication of one of the hurdles to meeting the Millennium goal of universal education. The report is based on a survey carried out by 10 Transparency chapters in Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. It finds that parents are asked for illegal payments to enroll children, get books, improve grades or even have pupils be taught at all. In that environment, there is little hope that the disadvantaged and politically or economically powerless will find state-run schools equipped to deal with a digital age. But education is not the only corruptible public service. In 2005, Transparency commissioned the Gallup organization to take a poll of nearly 55,000 people in 69 countries and the result was a widespread perception that corruption is a subject of great concern across diverse nations, with more than half those responding in 13 countries (including India, Israel, Nigeria and Venezuela) saying that illegal activity is getting worse and that often even basic health care for children requires “a hand under the table.”¹⁴

A Shelf Full of Documents

The agreement signed at the World Summit – titled simply, with the UN’s tin ear for resonance, the “final outcome document”¹⁵ – was meant to cover issues articulated in an agenda-setting report in March 2005 by Secretary General Kofi Annan. His report, *In Larger Freedom*,¹⁶ drew on both the Millennium Development Goals (with the subsequent independent Millennium Project) and a study by a high-level international panel on “threats, challenges and change” titled *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*.¹⁷ His intention was to link the development aspects of the Millennium goals with the peace and security topics treated by the high-level panel – and both of those to the overarching issue of human rights. The three could not be separated, he said. By wrapping in the concerns of both rich and poor nations – UN reform and stronger world security measures for the rich, and anti-poverty and other development issues for the poor – the secretary general hoped to create a package that all could accept. In the final document’s 38 pages, there are sections on a full range of topics, including environment, trade, terrorism, economic policies, AIDS and other health problems, and the new

¹⁴ *Global Corruption Barometer*, Transparency International/Gallup International Voice of the People, Berlin, 2005

¹⁵ 2005 World Summit Outcome, September 15, 2005. United Nations document A/RES/60/1. www.un.org

¹⁶ Kofi Annan, *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All*. UN document A/59/2005. www.un.org

¹⁷ *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*. New York: UN, 2004. www.un.org

concept called the “responsibility to protect,” which opens the way to outside intervention in a country that does not stop genocide or other mass crimes against its citizens. References to women and children are scattered throughout, but to make it more palatable to conservative regimes, it is not strong on women’s rights. [see Crossette 2]

Although the 2005 World Summit did not find ways to enunciate more forcefully the importance of action on women’s rights, the leaders’ meeting did leave intact – to the surprise of some of the more pessimistic onlookers – important pledges on reproductive health and rights from the conference documents of the 1990s. The new document that emerged in September 2005 also contained support for a list of issues promoted by advocacy organizations and reflective of the recommendations of more than 250 independent international experts in the Millennium Project, whose multivolume compendium to the Millennium Development Goals was published eight months before leaders gathered in New York.¹⁸ The Millennium Project reports are on the whole unambiguous in promoting sexual and reproductive rights, and they are being quoted and used by the more active UN agencies not constrained by the parameters of the summit.

But first, with the summit consigned to history, the responsibility of moving ahead on development now shifts to national capitals, and more documents are on the way. Governments are now expected to formulate detailed poverty reduction plans aimed at meeting the targets of all the Millennium Development Goals. These are due by the end of 2006, probably to be published locally and also presented to the Economic and Social Council, though these details are still being worked out. Among the poorest nations, says Anwarul K. Chowdhury,¹⁹ a UN under secretary general who acts as the voice of the smallest, least developed and otherwise most vulnerable countries, national and international nongovernmental organizations, known collectively as “civil society,” will have to lead in putting pressure on governments to meet the planning deadline, and with sound, well formulated policies. And they should be made widely available. Some countries have been preparing preliminary progress reports for several years, and these form a basis for further discussion and policymaking.

The world has already missed, woefully, at least two important interim (and bellwether) targets. With 6 million children dying of hunger and malnutrition-related causes annually, the

¹⁸See www.unmillenniumproject.org for a list of reports produced by the study, a joint project of the United Nations and the Earth Institute at Columbia University.

¹⁹ Interview with the author, November 2005.

world is falling behind nutritional benchmarks for cutting poverty by half by 2015, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.²⁰ And in education, the interim goal of providing gender parity in primary and secondary schools by the end of 2005 has been missed. Unicef, the UN children's fund, said in November 2005 that 46 countries will have failed to get as many girls as boys into school by January 1, 2006, and cited cultural and attitudinal problems as one cause.²¹

Unicef leads the UN's Girls Education Initiative, which emphasized in a new report, *Gender Achievements and Prospects in Education*,²² that equality in education leads to gender equality in society. That may be unassailable in the long term, but in the short term, millions of girls and women seem to be caught in a vicious circle. Figures in the report show that regions where the status of women is often lowest are doing the worst job of getting girls into school. It is arguable that only a stronger concentration on rights can break that circle of discrimination.

There is no lack of material to work with in campaigns to expand and guarantee the rights of women in reproductive health, or to prove why this matters to development. The studies of the Millennium Project are readily available to all. But even the more opaque 2005 World Summit agreement can be used to press for rights not explicitly articulated in it. To understand how, it is useful to pull from its thirty-eight pages exactly what world leaders promised to do, and what civil society can now demand of them.

A Scorecard on the 2005 Summit

Two earlier reports in this series²³ explained how and why women's reproductive rights were left out of the Millennium Development Goals and why the topic was still too hot for many governments to handle in the months leading to the 2005 World Summit. The goals were drawn up in 2001 under the direction of UN Secretariat officials, not national delegations. This distinction had long been used by the Bush administration to distance Washington from the goals

²⁰ *The State of Food Insecurity in the World*, Food and Agriculture Organization, 2005. www.fao.org.

²¹ UN News, November 25, 2005.

²² *Gender Achievements and Prospects in Education: The Gap Report/Part One*, www.ungei.org/gap

²³ Crossette, *Reproductive Rights and the Millennium Development Goals: The Missing Link* (December 2004) and *Reproductive Health and the Millennium Development Goals: The 2005 World Summit* (August 2005), commissioned by the Population Program of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

– specifically from the concrete targets and indicators that accompany them²⁴ – because they were not explicit in the Millennium Declaration that governments drafted for the 2000 General Assembly session. This interpretation allowed Ambassador John R. Bolton, the United States envoy to the UN, to try to remove all references to the goals from the 2005 summit document only days before the agreement was supposed to have been finalized for heads of government to accept. It was a stunning move, and a potential summit-wrecker.

The move by the U.S. took place against a background of American decisions, in the White House and Congress, to undermine and sometimes savage reproductive health programs worldwide in the name of misplaced morality and in response to the hysteria of the anti-abortion lobby.²⁵ By tying crucial sexual health aid to demands for abstinence-only sex education and curtailing widespread distribution of lifesaving condoms the United States began to be seen in many UN eyes as a malevolent force. American contributions to the UN Population Fund have been cut off, depriving the world's lead reproductive agency of more than \$120 million to date.

The 2005 summit outcome document had been worked and reworked for months when Bolton arrived in New York in early August 2005, about six weeks before the leaders' meeting in mid-September. Demanding that the Millennium Development Goals be stripped from the final summit agreement was among several hundred text changes Bolton advocated in a "dear colleague" letter to other ambassadors at the end of August. But cutting the internationally recognized heart out of the development section -- as many other nations interpreted his attack on the goals -- was particularly inflammatory to not only developing countries but also American allies and friends in Europe and around the Pacific Rim, and neighbors in the Western Hemisphere.

Within days, the storm Bolton stirred up was calmed by his superiors in the State Department, in particular Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and references to the Millennium Development Goals remained in the summit outcome document. Moreover, when President George W. Bush addressed other world leaders in September, he specifically pledged American support for those goals. It was a major turnaround. "To spread the vision of hope," the President said, "the United States is determined to help nations that are struggling with poverty. We are committed to the Millennium Development Goals. This is an ambitious agenda that includes

²⁴ For a complete list of goals, targets and indicators, go to http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mi/mi_goals.asp

²⁵ Crossette. "Hurting the World's Poor in Morality's Name," *World Policy Journal*, Vol. XXI, No.4, Winter 2004-2005.

cutting poverty and hunger in half, ensuring that every boy and girl in the world has access to primary education, and halting the spread of AIDS – all by 2015.”²⁶

This distracting last-minute crisis obscured for a time a rather different but perhaps more practical approach taken by Bolton and the US delegation in other areas. Contrary to widely held expectations, Bolton did not challenge the summit’s support for the Cairo and Beijing declarations and action plans – although there had been consistently strong opposition on the Republican right to the sexual and reproductive rights those conferences advanced. Bolton did not take up the campaigns of religious and political conservatives who would have preferred that there be no mention of Cairo or Beijing, seeing in those documents an implicit defense of abortion. The U.S. delegation must have soon heard from those critics, however. Before the summit ended, Bolton had issued a public statement²⁷ insisting that the Cairo and Beijing documents “do not create any rights and cannot be interpreted to constitute support, endorsement or promotion of abortion.”

One puzzling step backwards that had taken place before Bolton’s arrival was the scaling back at least twice of a broad statement of support for women’s rights. In a July draft of the summit outcome document, the relevant provision read:

“We reaffirm that gender equality and the promotion and protection of the full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for women are essential to advance development, security and human rights.”

By early August, it had been fuzzed to:

“We reaffirm that gender equality and freedoms for all, in particular for women and children, are essential to advance development, peace and security. We are committed to creating a world fit for future generations, which takes into account the best interests of the child.”

When it was all over and the document went down in history, the pledge had been further de-womanized.²⁸

²⁶ “President Addresses United Nations High-Level Plenary Meeting,” www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/09

²⁷ Statement on Explanation of Position by Ambassador Bolton on the Outcome Document, in the UN General Assembly, September 16, 2005. <http://fpc.state.gov/fpc/53456.htm>

²⁸ 2005 World Summit Outcome, UN document A/RES/60/1, paragraph 12.

“We reaffirm that gender equality and the promotion and protection of the full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all are essential to advance development and peace and security. We are committed to creating a world fit for future generations, which takes into account the best interests of the child.”

The final rephrasing had had the ring of the “right to life” lobby, or would have gained its approval.

The shift in language and Bolton’s assurances did not dispel the gloom at the Friday Fax, the online newsletter of C-FAM, the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute in the United States, a small but influential organization with supporters in Congress that opposes abortion, gay rights and other sexual choices and has painted the UN as a promoter of all of these. In the wake of the summit, C-FAM began to warn that coming in 2006 will be a series of UN meetings that will seek “to force countries to legalize abortion, accept homosexual marriage, make the Gospel message on homosexuality a hate crime, and much else.”²⁹ The meetings in question are the regular sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women, the Human Rights Commission, the Commission on Population and Development and the Commission on Social Development. Anti-abortion activists plan to be there in force, renewing attacks on the gains of the 1990s.

Continuing controversy aside, the 2005 World Summit document contains strong assurances that women can use in holding governments accountable for their promises. In a section devoted to gender equality and the empowerment of women³⁰ -- where the lobbying of independent research organizations and women’s rights advocacy groups had a demonstrable impact -- world leaders agreed that:

“We remain convinced that progress for women is progress for all. We reaffirm that the full and effective implementation of the goals of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly [the 2000 Millennium summit] is an essential contribution to achieving the internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration, and we resolve to promote gender equality and eliminate pervasive gender discrimination by:

²⁹ “Gospel Message a UN Hate Crime?” www.c-fam.org, November 9, 2005.

³⁰ 2005 World Summit Outcome, September 15, 2005, United Nations document A/RES/60/1, pages 16-17.

- (a) *Eliminating gender inequalities in primary and secondary education by the earliest possible date and at all educational levels by 2015;*
- (b) *Guaranteeing the free and equal right of women to own and inherit property and ensuring secure tenure of property and housing by women;*
- (c) *Ensuring equal access to reproductive health;*
- (d) *Promoting women's equal access to labor markets, sustainable employment and adequate labor protection;*
- (e) *Ensuring equal access of women to productive assets and resources, including land, credit and technology;*
- (f) *Eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women and the girl child, including by ending impunity and by ensuring the protection of civilians, in particular women and the girl child, during and after armed conflicts in accordance with the obligation of States under international humanitarian law and international human rights law;*
- (g) *Promoting increased representation of women in Government decision-making bodies, including through ensuring their equal opportunity to participate fully in the political process.*

This section of the summit document goes on to make a blanket pledge to promote gender mainstreaming “in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic and social spheres.” It also promises to strengthen gender components in UN work – not a new promise, of course, and one not always honored. In a separate section later in the document³¹ leaders call for the integration of women’s perspectives in all issues of peace and security, in line with a Security Council resolution passed in October 2000 (Resolution 1325), and condemns sexual violence, abuse and exploitation during periods of armed conflict.

But once again, specific references to reproductive rights in the context of conflict and violence – which would cover the right, for example, to emergency contraception or an abortion after rape, including in refugee camps and settlements for displaced people -- are missing in this section, despite the willingness of several UN agencies including the Population Fund to provide

³¹ *Ibid.*, pages 26-27

more emergency reproductive services for women caught in conflict or in the havoc war brings to civilian life.

This is an area in need of wider attention since the rebuilding of societies destroyed by conflict would be hastened if women, already suffering many material and personal losses, can return to as normal a life as possible, without the additional psychological trauma caused by rape and unwanted pregnancy, whether through assault or even consensual sex where normal health and family planning services are not available. In debate over the formation of a new UN Peace building Commission, the European Union has asked that the needs and views of women be explicitly acknowledged in transitions between war and recovery.

Domestic violence as a reflector of inequality is not addressed in the summit document. And, in the section on HIV-AIDS, the accord does not mention women's reproductive rights or the importance of condom use (as noted in the Millennium Development Goals) but only repeats the call for universal access to reproductive health services, a very broad if not somewhat irrelevant provision when talking specifically of AIDS, where millions of women are innocent victims of the behavior (and lack of candor) of male partners or sex-industry clients who carry the virus, which only a condom can stop.

The document does, however, refer in the same section to the conclusions of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. That conference, which recognized the centrality of women in decisions about reproductive health and sexuality and affirmed their rights to reproductive choices, is a useful point of reference when nongovernmental organizations and UN agencies press governments to guarantee not just "access" to reproductive services or a vague "gender equality" but legally supported, enforceable rights.

An Agenda for 2006

There are two important tasks ahead in the next phase of the campaign for women's reproductive rights. One will be persuading governments to introduce as part of their anti-poverty strategies meaningful protections for women, including legal assistance when rights are denied. In too many places, a woman, particularly a poor woman, abused at home or prevented by force from seeking construction fears rape if she goes to a police station or a powerful politician for help in getting services or protection. Rights count for nothing in these situations.

The second task will be monitoring the progress of governments as they prepare their reports to the UN on how they intend to meet the Millennium Development Goals by the 2015 target date.

Further monitoring would be needed to see how they follow through on those reports – a job for local nongovernmental organizations, many of which will need training and logistical help. A new publication from the London-based International Institute for Environment and Development, an independent research organization, emphasizes the importance of local monitoring. “There is a danger that too much attention will be given to building the data sets that monitor progress on meeting MDG targets nationally, and allow international comparisons, and too little to generating the information base needed to monitor progress in each locality in ways that also inform action on the ground and put pressure on local governments and other service providers in each locality to improve their performance.”³²

Unless new policies produce measurable change among the poor, national plans will be no more than fronts to make governments look good in the neighborhood or on world charts. Social Watch, an international monitoring network based at the Third World Institute in Montevideo, Uruguay, will be among nongovernmental groups watching the evolution of government policies and their applications on the ground, while continuing to promote discussions about national priorities through ad-hoc action groups.³³

At the international level, the World Bank has already introduced an annual Global Monitoring Report on the Millennium Development Goals.³⁴ It is true, as the International Institute for Environment and Development has noted, that initially most of the official discussion surrounding monitoring will be going on well above the heads of the people most affected by intractable poverty. In coming years, donor nations and development banks will want to see concrete, realistic plans for meeting the Millennium Development Goals, while developing nations will be anxious to see proof that donors will come through on pledges of aid needed to act on new policies. At the United Nations Population Fund -- known as UNFPA for the initials of its earlier name, the Fund for Population Activities – Stan Bernstein, who is largely responsible for the fund’s annual population reports and also served as the UN’s liaison with the

³² *How to Make Poverty History: The central role of local organizations in meeting the MDGs*. International Institute for Environment and Development, 2005. www.iied.org

³³ www.socialwatch.org

³⁴ *Global Monitoring Report 2005. Millennium Development Goals: From Consensus to Momentum*. www1.worldbank.org/devoutreach/may05/document.asp?id=304

independent panel of experts in the Millennium Project, says that work has already begun on these challenges.

“UNFPA is deeply involved in strategic planning right now,” Bernstein said of work on national plans.³⁵ “It’s been holding regional meetings with its country reps, there are other sort of global technical meetings that are about to get underway, and UNFPA is mobilizing to take the directive that came out of the summit and to translate it into active policy dialogue, to reorientation of country programs, to elevate the visibility, priority, and centrality of gender equality, reproductive health and population dynamics in the planning processes.”

“What’s the timetable as to when it’s going to happen? The summit outcome said that all countries should by 2006 – and I presume they meant by the end of 2006 – have an MDG-oriented development plan,” Bernstein said. “To me, the notion of all of the countries getting across the finish line by the end of December 2006 sounds like an enormous challenge. People will take different approaches. Some countries will look at their existing planning strategies and they will sort of structure their reports on their plan so that it is more in line with ongoing processes.” Others will be starting from scratch.

“UNFPA intends to play a very active role, both at national level and also through regional levels and whatever international processes emerge to see that women’s rights and reproductive health become integrated in these plans,” he said. “This is a challenge both for people dealing with women’s issues, women’s health issues, women’s reproductive health issues, to make sure that they are involved in the dialogues. The summit outcome really gives some very strong language that can be used in making the case. The key thing is going to be to make sure that the tools are in place, that the evidence-based arguments for strategic intervention are in place. I think we’ll start seeing a lot of activity on that front as the year goes on and these planning exercises get going.”

Critics of the UNFPA in and outside the UN system say they have reservations about the agency’s administrative capacity, both at headquarters and in the field, and therefore its ability to shape the policies of nations, especially those unwilling to listen. Yet UNFPA remains the one international population agency with an official status in the capitals of UN member nations, and therefore relations with relevant government ministries and departments. In some

³⁵ Interview with author, November 2005.

places, the working relationships are better than in others – not always predictably: Iran, for example, has been a UNFPA success story.

If nothing else, UNFPA (and other) UN agencies, can serve as a focal point for collecting information, sharing ideas and facilitating contacts with local officials – when and if the agency’s country representative sees his or her role as a catalytic one. Unicef also falls into this category and, as more attention is paid to the sexual health needs of adolescent girls, can provide useful links through its worldwide offices. In the nongovernmental sector, the International Planned Parenthood Federation has the widest network of voluntary agencies in its fold and is an excellent source for information and contacts in all regions.³⁶

The reports of the 250-plus independent experts working with Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University in the Millennium Project have already been translated from English into the five other official UN languages – Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian and Spanish, Bernstein said. Other translations into regional or national languages may follow. “Clearly, I think that as countries orient themselves to the task, these reports contain a wealth of information and recommendations,” Bernstein said. The reports also, as mentioned earlier, contain very pointed language on the centrality of reproductive rights.

Despite the ubiquity of the Internet, a significant number of countries do not have the experience or technical capacity to find and use the information --statistics, “best practices” and other accumulated practical material – to mesh with the political, cultural or religious realities at hand in framing policy decisions and workable action plans. The UN Development Program, which has shifted a lot of emphasis in recent years to “capacity building” in government, will help overcome some of these problems, Bernstein said. “Within UNDP there’s something called an ‘integrated service package’ that they are going to offer to perhaps as many as 60 countries to their planning exercises next year,” he said, adding that the number of countries needing help “gives you an idea that they recognize that you’re not going to get every country across the finish line by the end of 2006. But clearly next year a whole lot of countries are going to be initiating important strategic planning.”

In not a few developing countries, one of the most challenging tasks development experts face, particularly in the area of reproductive health, is raising enough national awareness of issues to draw the attention of politicians, who will in the end be responsible for reporting to

³⁶ www.ippf.org

the UN. In large parts of South Asia, for example, there is little public discourse on issues of sexual behavior: sympathetic or knowledgeable writing in the popular press about gay life is often nonexistent, and the deeper exploration of human relationships largely missing from newspaper columns, popular films and television programs.

Sometimes, there is a severe dearth of knowledge, matched by social taboos, that prevents public discussion. Local NGOs work hard to surmount these cultural barriers, arguing that the mounting AIDS crisis in the region as well as issues such as unwanted pregnancy and sexual violence demand public forums and inclusion in planning responses to the Millennium targets. Elsewhere, in Latin America and Africa, for example, I have seen efforts being made by some religious leaders to provide a “safe” and trusted platform for discussing often hidden social issues when governments and their media cannot or will not. Public debate will take time.

Bernstein and others in development areas of the UN’s work are positive about the support they find in the World Summit document. “There are portions of the summit report that are going to be more difficult to act on than others,” he said. Development turned out not to be one of the difficult issues, though the U.S. did grumble about how much space it took up in the leaders’ final statement. “What I found very encouraging was the degree of consensus that emerged around the development section,” Bernstein said. “There were all sorts of complications on the peace building section, on things that involve structural reform like the Human Rights Commission. Where you need to change or create entirely different institutions, it’s always a far more complex process. When you need to harness the existing institutions to get them to work together more effectively in terms of commonly agreed development goals, I think the task can proceed more quickly, and I think that’s the situation we find ourselves in.”

“Now the big question is: how are the promises that have been made and the priorities that have been, as it were, reset or adjusted in the 2005 World Summit, how are these going to be translated into the action plans?” Bernstein said, adding that governments will at the same time be demanding that allocations of promised aid be tracked. He noted that there has been discussion in the Economic and Social Council (Ecosoc), the UN members’ body responsible for development (now under the gun to begin to act more effectively) and in the Secretariat’s Department of Economic and Social Affairs, that a formal mechanism be created to keep track of

progress on the goals. There has been talk in the General Assembly of asking Ecosoc to build in consultations with institutions outside the UN system.

But so far there have been no proposals to find ways to tap into grassroots networks for the occasional reality check. Nongovernmental organizations could benefit from an international conference in two or three years to share their information and hold it up against national and international data that will be accumulating. In the current climate at the UN, however, international meetings of NGOs are seen as too costly and “messy,” and the Economic and Social Council, in whose area of activity this kind of check-up should fall, has been actively discouraging the growth of nongovernmental participation in international debate for nearly a decade, despite the advice to the contrary from Secretary General Kofi Annan.

In 2004, Annan created a panel on “United Nations-civil society relations” that was led by a former Brazilian president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso. That panel strongly recommended expanding and deepening relations with NGOs³⁷ It also urged the UN to look outward to “connect the global with the local” and build partnerships beyond those traditionally limited to links with governments in order to both enrich the work of the UN and make it better understood at the grass roots. But government representatives with sinecures in Ecosoc are often jealous and antagonistic when nongovernment actors gain ground. Many nongovernmental groups say that they have had to divert considerable energies in recent crucial years just to safeguard their access to the UN.

There are models to be studied for ways to draw nongovernmental groups, including many with wide and deep grassroots contacts, into the policymaking and monitoring processes in coming years without having to confront the increasingly closed UN system. Anwarul Chowdhury, the UN’s undersecretary general for least developed, land-locked, and small island nations (totaling about 90 countries, with some overlaps) says that some developing nations, including his own nation of Bangladesh, began years ago to put nongovernmental group representatives on national delegations to important international meetings. Neither military nor civilian government leaders stood in the way of evolving official cooperation with independent groups.

³⁷*Report of the Panel on United Nations-Civil Society Relations*, UN Document A/58/817, June 2004.
www.un.org/reform/panel.htm

“They became good partners,” Chowdhury said.³⁸ “In the area of population, civil society organizations were included in government advisory boards, they were included in government delegations. I remember in Cairo they were very much part of the government delegation. Many countries said, ‘Why can’t we do like Bangladesh?’” He added that successive Bangladeshi governments have also made nongovernmental organization representatives part of the official team judging the country’s progress in reports on the implementation of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

The relative rarity of this policy among developing nations has led time and time again to governments taking positions in international meetings that are out of line with, if not counter to, those of their own nongovernmental organizations actually working in the relevant field. This accounts for the very negative attitudes of developing nations in organizations such as the G-77 or the Nonaligned Movement on issues of reproductive health and women’s rights. Women and men working closest to the issue, including relevant government ministers, very seldom are at the table when a least-common-denominator consensus is sought, and the opposition of only a few countries can wipe gender off the agenda because it is too contentious an issue.

Gender is not the only issue that gets this treatment. During the 2005 World Summit, disarmament – in particular nuclear disarmament – disappeared from the final agenda when no consensus could be reached on how to address it. In that case, it was the United States and other nuclear powers that opposed the introduction of the topic. Concrete suggestions for reforming the Security Council were also eliminated when developing nations quarreled among themselves and could not agree on a common front.

Gender issues have in recent years attracted a strange coalition of opponents, notably some Islamic nations, the United States and the Vatican (represented at the UN because it holds physical territory in Rome). Sometimes pressure groups in individual nations or regions, or in international forums such as the G-77 developing nations strip women’s issues from agreements at an early stage, before high-level government officials weigh in. When I recently asked the foreign minister of an important developing country why the G-77 was so opposed to reproductive rights, he turned to an aide with a quizzical look and admitted he wasn’t up-to-date on the issue.

³⁸Interview with author, November 2005

Chowdhury says that one of his jobs is to build support for civil society organizations in poor countries, advising them not to wait for governments to act on issues of importance, especially to women. “We have to tell them: Build your own strength, do your own thing,” he said.³⁹ “The most effective impact is through the building of women’s coalitions. That is what I believe is necessary. Senegal has done very well in building coalitions of civil society groups. Lesotho has done very well. Mozambique has done very well in encouraging civil society to come up.”

At UNFPA, Bernstein said that donors and international development and lending organizations that have signed on to support the Millennium Development Goals are aware that what will be needed is “some specific and explicit planning mechanism from which governments will commit themselves to make the investments that are necessary for attaining the MDGs, and included in the MDGS are gender equality and improved maternal health -- not just reduced maternal mortality.” He said that donors will want to see their investments go into “the full range of issues – women’s issues, health issues, reproductive health issues included within that health system, strengthening improved data for development.”

Bernstein acknowledges that getting the attitude changes necessary to put a high priority on women’s rights as a development issue is not always easy. “When you talk about attitudes towards women, attitudes about families and the like, you’re touching on issues that really go to the core of people’s identity, and there can be resistances that there aren’t in some other areas,” he said.

“People are very comfortable in talking about substantial and necessary transformations of their economies – changing trade barriers, freeing constraints on business enterprises, a better international trading system, higher levels of investment and venture capital and the like,” he said. “All of these sorts of economic changes have implications for how people live their lives, for how they make their family decisions, for how they invest in the education of their children – and all of these have attitudinal ripple effects that can be really profound. Nobody says, ‘Oh, no, we shouldn’t change trading regimens because it’s going to make people change their attitudes about work and how hard they work and what kind of work they do.’”

A relatively new component in factoring women into developing that could have a positive impact on women’s rights is “gender budgeting.” This is not about budgets for women

³⁹ *ibid.*

but about community development planning that takes women into account when expenditures are allocated. By implication, gender budgeting is in part a monitoring process in that it is intended to keep women's needs in view and in the planning mix. As Noeleen Heyzer, executive director of Unifem, the UN's development fund for women,⁴⁰ has said on numerous occasions, if you are not a budget line, you are easily forgotten.

Unifem and United Nations Volunteers,⁴¹ the organization's equivalent of the U.S. Peace Corps, began a joint two-year program in Latin America in 2005 to train local officials in writing budgets inclusive of women's concerns and to advise women's organizations how to focus their efforts more effectively to have an impact on the development planning process. Unifem, which supports programs in "gender budgeting" in more than 30 countries, is also asking all national governments to produce by 2015 budgeting processes that are more responsive to women.

Colombia is among countries already committed to this approach. Since 1999, 30 percent of decision-making government posts have been reserved for women. At local levels, women are brought into city halls to add new ideas to civic administration. In southern Africa, the newsletter of Gender and Media in Southern Africa, whose website provides a comprehensive news service and opinion articles on a range of topics of interest to women everywhere, recently covered the subjects of legislation and budgeting during a chat session called "16 Days of Activism on Gender Violence."⁴²

Rethinking Strategies for the Years Ahead

Advocates for women's rights are not always in agreement on how wide to cast their nets for change in order to improve women's lives and enhance their contributions to development. Some organizations in both the industrial nations and the developing world have a list of priorities that includes ambitious plans for changing the international trading system, the policies of lending institutions, international migration agreements, universal labor standards and other regimes. For them, the emphasis is transnational, with the hope that down the line even the local rural poor will benefit. Other advocates want more discrete, focused programs that do not rely on

⁴⁰ www.unifem.org

⁴¹ www.unv.org

⁴² www.genderlinks.org.za

international movements and keep a distance from their own often corrupt or inefficient governments.

Some advocates would insist that campaigns for women's rights, particularly reproductive rights, may have to be more narrowly focused to avoid being diluted by other issues being handled by groups with different agendas. Other advocates for women disagree, saying that they gain strength from broad coalitions. One approach need not be followed to the exclusion of the other; they can run on parallel tracks. A focal point – a starting point – is often helpful, however, because it is more easily understood in the community and can begin a larger process. As Stan Bernstein says at UNFPA, the dynamics of change soon kick in. "When people know that they can exercise greater control over their lives, they start exercising greater control over all portions of their lives that mean something to them."

From my own observations in years of reporting and traveling in developing nations where there are great gender disparities, a sense emerges that too scattershot a campaign on behalf of women allows authorities to select the easiest or most acceptable demands leaving the tough questions of women's rights in sexual relationships off the agenda, sometimes because cultural constraints make it too difficult to discuss sex instead of, for example, a bus service or a new water pump. But there is no doubt that focusing solely on rights is a challenge. Local politicians cannot appear and be photographed supporting an invisible good such as women's rights in the way they can garner attention by dedicating a building or paving a road. Sometimes there is open hostility to demands by women for better reproductive health, which can threaten political support among men for an official or a candidate running for office. Always, there is the excuse that reproductive health is too private a subject for public discourse. This situation has been writ large in recent meetings at the UN, where reproductive rights are a topic few governments want to discuss, so it is simpler to avoid controversy by evading such issues.

In a new UN climate less welcoming of social change, there may be a case for a return to supporting more aggressively in UN agencies and NGOs the revival and expansion of basic family planning programs as the starting point for many women in poor countries. Such programs, couched in terms of health rather than rights, often look less threatening to those in authority. This may look like a defeatist step backwards to some women's rights activists, particularly in richer countries where they do not experience the daily hurdles, risks and setbacks

that poor women face in other parts of the world. But there is no denying that a rights approach does not work everywhere – not yet.

Too much of an emphasis on rights *per se* in some settings can be dangerously counterproductive. Alison M. Jagger, professor of philosophy and women's studies at the University of Colorado, wrote recently in the journal *Ethics & International Affairs* about the complicated case of Amina Lawal, a woman convicted of adultery facing a sentence of stoning in Nigeria -- and the pleas of her lawyers to call off a high-pitched international campaign for petitions on her behalf. Such petitions, Jagger wrote, "often use sensational language to denounce some non-Western culture for its inhumane treatment of women and girls."⁴³ Jagger judges such reactions as "crucially incomplete" in cultural understanding of a distant situation.

The cultural dilemma is not new to women's studies or women's advocacy groups. The case of how to respond to female genital mutilation raised heated arguments a couple of decades ago between those who reacted with horror and wanted the practice stamped out and those who believed it was not the business of feminists to intrude into cultural practices. Equality Now, an American organization, helped frame a very successful compromise on FGM by advocating support for women's groups in the affected countries while letting those local activists – as angry as any Western feminist about the practice and, moreover, directly threatened by it -- frame the policies and lead the campaigns they saw most workable. As part of its supporting role, Equality Now publishes *Awaken*, a forum for exchange of information and strategies ideas, in four languages: English, French, Spanish and Arabic.⁴⁴

The increased attention to this issue brought about by local groups with background support from international organizations has helped to prepare the ground for more action by UN agencies. Unicef, which had been under pressure from American conservatives to stay out of rights-based issues and is now led by a Bush administration appointee, Ann Veneman, has nonetheless recently issued a bold report on FGM titled *Changing a Harmful Social Convention*,⁴⁵ which argues that though 3 million girls in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East are still subject to this debilitating and painful ritual, it could be eliminated within a generation. "Change will happen when communities – including girls, boys, men and women –

⁴³ Jagger, Alison M. "Saving Amina': Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue," *Ethics & International Affairs*, Vol.19, No. 3, New York: Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, 2005.

⁴⁴ www.equalitynow.org/english/campaigns/fgm/fgm-campaign_en.html

⁴⁵ *Changing a Harmful Social Convention: Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting*, Unicef Innocenti Research Center, 2005. www.unicef.org

are empowered by knowledge to make choices that are healthy and empowering to individuals and societies,” said Marta Santos Pais, director of the Unicef Innocenti Research Center in Italy.⁴⁶

The campaign against FGM, built on locally based and therefore culturally sensitive as well as realistic advocacy, has been able to overcome an initial North-South divide, and could serve as a model for tackling other issues. In the FGM campaign, not only Equality Now but also UN agencies and voluntary family planning organizations, some of them linked to the International Planned Parenthood Federation, were able to stand in the background and provide networks for the exchange of ideas and strategies, and organizational advice as needed.

One of the great strengths of this collective effort was its sharp, single-issue focus. To some degree, a similar critical mass has recently been coming together around the scourge of obstetric fistula. In Africa, Asia and Latin America, health providers would also like a movement to grow also around the preventable fatalities of eclampsia in pregnancy, beginning with an education campaign in poor countries about the risks and symptoms of high blood pressure.

On a more ambitious front, groups in the North and South could cooperate in a global campaign for more reproductive health services and supplies in the same way that organizations leading the fight against HIV/AIDS have narrowed in on demands for universal access to cheap or free anti-retrovirals. The two tracks – reproductive health supplies for women and drugs for HIV-positive people – could well come together, given the high and growing incidence of AIDS among women. The International Planned Parenthood Federation has advocated this partnership.

More traditional family planning organizations in many countries can be powerful agents for change in a new era in which women are more conscious of their own needs and rights and give a lot of thought to combating negative cultural attitudes or practices harmful to women and girls. At grassroots level, congenial family planning offices, however small, can provide a safe base for women and the confidence to move into other issues of concern to them. Independent family planning organizations such as Bemfam in Brazil or Mexfam in Mexico are good examples of operations that stretch the old-fashioned definitions of family planning to provide

⁴⁶ www.un.org/news November 25, 2005.

welcoming centers (some with coffee shops) offering multiple services, a range of contraceptive supplies and extensive advice on life-enhancing issues to women, men and teenagers.⁴⁷

In Africa, there is a special urgency propelling calls for reenergizing international family planning efforts and moving away from the thinking that regards birth control as a cultural infringement by outsiders or a lower priority now that fertility rates seem to be falling universally. In one of the most provocative articles to be published on this issue lately, John Cleland of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and Steven Sinding, director general of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, wrote in the British medical journal *The Lancet* in October 2005 that high birth rates in Africa – which continue to outpace the falling rates in most of Asia and Latin America -- impede development significantly, perhaps more than HIV/AIDS.⁴⁸ They conclude:

In the countries of southern and Eastern Africa that have very severe epidemics, AIDS is undoubtedly a major contributor to poverty. Many families are deprived of their breadwinner and mitigation of the consequences of this situation is rightly a humanitarian and economic priority.

In the face of the uncertain future trends in African HIV/AIDS epidemics, prudence also dictates that HIV prevention should remain a major public health priority throughout the region. But we believe that AIDS is not yet, as is so often claimed, the main threat to development in most countries. Continued high fertility rates and rapid population growth could prove to be more serious obstacles to poverty reduction than AIDS in most, though not all, African countries. Population growth also threatens food security in already malnourished states, makes long-term dependence on international assistance more likely, and increases the pressure for international migration.

In Asia, controversial as it may be to set aside moral and political judgments, it is nonetheless easy to glean from the Human Development Reports of the United Nations Development Program the very different social and developmental trajectories of India, with weak family planning policies and a low status of girls and women, and China, with a draconian (and rightly criticized) model of birth control that has nonetheless had the side effects of giving

⁴⁷ Bem-Estar Familiar do Brasil, www.bemfam.org.br. The Mexican Family Planning Association, www.mexfam.org.mx

⁴⁸ Cleland, John and Steven Sinding, "What Would Malthus Say About AIDS in Africa?" *The Lancet*, October 25, 2005. www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140673605676039/fulltext

women access to economic activity and improving household living standards. By many measures, from female literacy to the reach of the Internet, China is in the lead. The gap can only widen. India alone will account for nearly a quarter of the world's population growth in the first a half of this century, and many of those births will be in the poorest parts of the country where women struggle to be respected.

Women's Feature Service, an excellent source of news about women's rights in India and elsewhere, reported in a recent article⁴⁹ by Nitin Jugran Bahuguna, quoting the director of a local NGO, that "A majority of Indian women do not exercise any control over their reproductive functions and this is compounded by the fact that most women in India are not comfortable with their bodies." More than a quarter of Indian women want only one child, according to research by nongovernmental organizations. The fertility rate is three times that high.

The situation has led to the creation of a coalition of Indian reproductive health experts called Advocating Reproductive Choices. The new coalition, joining an increasingly noticeable trend, is aiming in its center in Delhi to include men and women in its outreach. It hopes to educate men in male responsibility in reproduction and offer them contraceptive advice also, particularly the use of condoms and non-scalpel vasectomy. Men and women are being brought together in many other societies in the hope that reproductive choices can become family choices. Family planning programs I have seen in such diverse places as Ghana, Mexico and Brazil create spaces where men can come for confidential advice and services.

In its *State of the World Population 2005* report, UNFPA has devoted a full chapter to the importance of "partnering with boys and men," an idea that seems to be a developing into a universal theme as both men and women accept that changing ways of thinking and patterns of behavior need the commitment of both sexes.. Men's organizations, however well intentioned, have not always had an easy time with outreach to women. The leader of a men's group against violence toward women in the Brazilian city of Recife told me that feminists seemed too often to regard all men as the enemy, though this attitude is less noticeable among younger people. UNFPA says: "Men themselves are increasingly challenging notions of 'masculinity' that restrict their humanity, limit their participation in the lives of their children and put themselves and their

⁴⁹ "India: Putting Off Pregnancy," Women's Feature Service, New Delhi, October 2005. www.wfs.org

partners at risk. Many want to become more supportive husbands and fathers, but need support to overcome deeply entrenched ideas about gender relations.”⁵⁰

Evidence is mounting in the World Health Organization and in numerous countries studying the phenomenon independently that women vulnerable to violent or domineering male partners are in greater danger of HIV infection. For them, changing male attitudes can be a matter of life and death. In South Africa, GEMSA (Gender and Media Southern Africa) marked Human Rights Day in 2005 by calling for a scorecard to measure progress on ending gender violence over the next year.⁵¹ Colleen Lowe Morna, the executive director of Genderlinks, the group’s website and news service, said in the news release announcing the scorecard campaign that there must be more emphasis on prevention of HIV/AIDS and more services to survivors of unwanted sex or sex crimes, including easier access to post-exposure medication that can act as an antidote to contracting the virus. Men in medicine, public services, the police and courts must be trained to be more sensitive to gender-based violence, she added. For these and many other reasons, the UNFPA concludes that “stronger efforts to involve men more fully in reproductive health, family life and gender equality are urgently needed.”

Around the world, women have proved in very different cultures that they, alone or with a partner, can move on from the secure and liberating base of family planning into whatever other areas of activity they may find appropriate to their time and place: employment, education, grassroots politics. Even some of the poorest, least educated women show great capacity for educational, social and political growth just as they exhibit the courage to seek family planning help as a first step. Their families are usually the first beneficiaries, but it does not stop there. When I once made a return visit to a very woman-friendly, totally nonpolitical (they said) reproductive health clinic in Bangladesh during an election and found it empty of staff and patients, a caretaker told me that everyone was out monitoring polling stations. I took that as a sign of the enormous success the clinic had in raising the consciousness of women to the world around them, more or less as an unexpected bonus of good health care delivered in an enabling environment.

Anwarul Chowdhury, a former ambassador of Bangladesh at the UN who now helps the poorest countries with development, sees more spontaneous women’s movements springing up

⁵⁰*State of the World Population 2005: The Promise of Equality*, United Nations Population Fund, 2005, page 4.
www.unfpa.org

⁵¹www.genderlinks.org.za, December 8, 2005

in numerous nations that he assists as an under secretary general. Women in his home country, Bangladesh, have made considerable strides in education (meeting the UN's 2005 target for gender parity in schools) and in reproductive health, working through a variety of national and international agencies. The country was among the first to take to microfinance in a big way through such institutions as the Grameen Bank and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee. Women have developed an understanding of their rights in many villages, even though life is still difficult and there are cultural constraints.

Chowdhury tells a true, illustrative story about a group of village women who decided several years ago to invest their small loans collectively in mulberry trees so that they could raise silkworms for an income. Just as the mulberries were beginning to mature, Islamic fundamentalists opposed to women's economic independence chopped all the trees to the ground. "The women were totally devastated," Chowdhury said. "They had waited for one year for these trees to grow." But after some thought, they exacted an unexpected revenge, he said. They organized to defeat local fundamentalist politicians. "In a few months time, there was this election, and all these women – uneducated – voted, and the fundamentalist party's strength in the parliament went down from 22 to 3," Chowdhury said. "It's unbelievable how this attack on them [as women] found retaliation through the vote."

Many women and men dedicated to enhancing the roles of women in development accept that there has to be a mix of social and economic factors: health care, education, access to credit, an enabling legal environment, freedom of political expression and others that may vary from person to person or place to place, or one stage of development to another. But looking around the world, one cannot discount the reality that the inability to control one's own body or to share equally in making reproductive decisions – often most acutely felt in the poorest countries where women's lives seem to count least – is often at the core of inequality. For many women reproductive rights become the first freedom, the first boost in human development.

The platform for action of the 1995 Beijing women's conference is unambiguous on this point. It says that "the neglect of women's reproductive rights severely limits their opportunities in public and private life, including opportunities for education and economic and political empowerment."⁵² Eurostep, a network of sixteen nongovernmental organizations in Europe,

⁵² Fourth World Conference on Women Platform for Action, paragraph 97.
www.un.org/womenswatch/daw/beijing/platform/health.htm

argued in a report released ahead of a review of the Beijing conference and the World Summit⁵³ that it is important to continue linking the Beijing pledges to the Millennium Development Goals. “As they each have a different focus -- the Beijing Platform for Action being firmly rooted in women’s rights while the Millennium Declaration specifically concentrates on eradicating poverty, there is considerable risk that these review processes will be irrevocably separated,” the report said. As we have seen, the Beijing results were not left out of the summit outcome document, but explicit commitment to the rights fostered by the women’s conference were downplayed. The danger of disaggregating Beijing and the Goals continues to be real.

In October 2005, the United Nations Population Fund’s annual *State of the World Population* report restated this underlying reality: “The ability to make free and informed choices in reproductive life, including those involving childbearing, underpins self-determination in all other areas of women’s lives.”⁵⁴ A year earlier, the Population Fund had found that 131 governments claimed to be adopting national policies or laws on women’s reproductive rights, but in many countries these steps had not actually been taken. To make the achievement of any of the Millennium Development Goals possible when more than half the people in the world are girls and women, national planners will have to do better at factoring in women’s rights and honoring the commitments made through the 1990s and at the 2005 World Summit.

Not since the 1960s, when the end of colonialism had begun to give birth to dozens of new nations, has there been as much high-level (even celebrity) attention to development, and so many pledges of increased aid. But what emerges from accumulating statistic and anecdotal evidence is that with so many nations still foundering after four or five decades of independence, new thinking is in order, and central to that will have to be a better analysis of the place of women in the future of the developing world . That can only help them.

end

⁵³ *Accountability Upside Down: Gender equality in a partnership for poverty eradication*. Brussels: Europstep, 2005 www.europstep.org

⁵⁴ *State of the World Population 2005: The Promise of Equality*, page 1.