Reflections on Cairo: Empowerment Rhetoric - but who will pay the price?

by

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There were many who felt that a trip to the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo would not bring big surprises as the Programme of Action had already been finalised in three 'Prepcom' meetings held between March 1991 and April 1994 as well as the Rio summit of 1992. Miracles could hardly be expected as in the document only passages in brackets were still to be discussed. Amongst them were statements on abortion, sexual and reproductive health and safe motherhood which, quite predictably, had been opposed by the Holy See. The document itself - in spite of some laudable parts like condemning female genital mutilation - exudes a sense of panic that the 'population bomb' is about to explode and that population control rather than development (or structural global inequalities) needs to be accorded top priority. The new twist is that in contrast to previous population conferences in Bucharest (1974) and Mexico (1984) women are explicitly named as key players whose 'reproductive rights' and 'empowerment' will guarantee the successful slowing down of the world's population.

However, as had become evident in the four years prior to the ICPD, women did not travel on one single road to Cairo. Members of global networks such as DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health Network, the International Women's Health Coalition, FINRRAGE (Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Enineering) and UBINIG (the Bangladesh based Policy Research for Development Alternative), to name just a few, held conferences where they strategised how best, and in what ways, women might take part in the lead up to Cairo and the conference itself. Divisions became soon obvious. In May 1993, at the second Prep.Com. Meeting 'The Women's Declaration on Population Policies' was launched by a group called Women's Voices '94 Alliance. The document advocated a feminist population policy: a philosophical and political stance many of us found - and find - fundamentally incompatible. What was intriguing was how widely this declararation was circulated for signatures and how it was followed by a meeting in July 1993 in Mexico organised by the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health Network resulting in classy Conference Proceedings which were freely and in

multiple copies dispatched by air mail throughout the world.

If it hadn't been obvious till then the cat was out of the bag: 'someone' had a vested interest in financially supporting these groups including bringing participants from around the globe to this and at least six other international meetings before Cairo. Not surprisingly, among the supporters range the Ford Foundation and the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), the Mac Arthur Foundation who in 1988 established the Population Program, The World Bank, the Population Council, USAID and SIDA, the Swedish International Development Authority which also funded a glossy book Population Policies Reconsidered whose authors work for the International Women's Health Coalition (Gita Sen and Adrienne Germain) and the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies (Lincoln Chen).

UBINIG/FINRRAGE, the Research Foundation for Science and Ecology (India), Third World Network (Malaysia) and People's Health Network (India) also held a conference: 'People's Perspectives on '"Population" Symposium' in Bangladesh in December 1993. Many of the 62 participants from 23 countries (the majority from the South), had come under their own steam; the international funding bodies - with some notable exceptions - had been reluctant to fund the meeting. No glossy publication resulted but instead we wrote a joint statement 'The Declaration of Comilla' - a feminist critique of the logic of domination that underlies population control policies and clearly rejected any form of population control - feminist or otherwise. Instead of using the rhetoric of 'choice' and 'reproductive rights' we demanded an examination of the ideology 'bullets turned into contraceptives'. 'Population' we argued are not mere numbers that can be manipulated on paper; they are real live women and men whose very existence is questioned by western neocolonialism. For population control is not to be carried out indiscriminately; quite on the contrary: it is specific groups that are targeted - mainly the peoples of the 'South' (excluding the dominant western groups in Australia and Aotearoa) and anybody who is not part of the dominant groups in the 'North' (and Australia and Aotearoa).

Participants at Comilla rejected the premise that women's fertility is causally linked to environmental degradation, world hunger and poverty. Instead we demanded that the tables be turned, that the 80% overconsumption by the 20% in the west be challenged, that GATT (General Agreement on Tarifs and Trade) continue to be be exposed for its inherent racist policies which will open up the economies of the South, particularly their agricultural sector, to multinationals and to biotechnology, and that SAP (structural adjustment programmes), be dropped by donor countries. As the Declaration puts it (p. 7):

> In the name of structural adjustment programmes, the World Bank and

International Monetary Fund dictated prescriptions in which the third world countries have to sacrifice health and food subsidies. Their public health and welfare infrastructure are systematically dismantled and privatized. These reduced health delivery services are technologized and virtually reduced to instruments of population control. The poor, and particularly poor women, are the main victims of this global policy everywhere.

Migration was identified as another inhuman part of the New Economic World Order, whose emperors, not surprisingly, continue to wear the same clothes. 65% of migrants and 90% of refugees are women and children and their cruel sex trafficking is steadily raising and killing many through their infection by customers with AIDS. Population control for the 'South', immigration control for the 'North': both bode exceptionally bad for women's future.

Importantly, we argued that the means by which the population policies were to be carried out fundamentally threatened women's health and lives. Far from being reasonable methods of 'family planning' that allow women to decide on their numbers of children with user controlled contraceptivrs and back-up abortions, the move to provider rather than user controlled hormonal and immunological contraceptives such as injectables (Depo Provera), Implants (Norplant) and the contraceptive vaccines - one of which is currently on trial in India - were disempowering women in addition to being racist and eugenicist. Together with sterilization, chemical abortion (RU 486) and new reproductive technologies such as IVF they hold the potential for a global manipulation of the world's population: what women in which countries are allowed to have how many children, in what ways and when.

As it was clear in the lead up to Cairo that these issues were not the ones that would be determining the agenda - neither governments' nor the majority of women's organisations' - UBINIG, AWHRC (the Philippine based Asian Women's Human Rights Council), the Indian People's Health Network, Arab Women's Organization, Women in Development in Europe and Terra Famina (Brazil) jointly organised an 'International Public Hearing on Crimes against Women Related to Population Policies' as part of the NGO Forum at Cairo. Women from around the world gave testimonies of their experiences with population programs followed by analyses of their stories by prominent jurors. In addition, we planned two other events, a workshop with participants from India, Brazil, Australia and the Philippines 'Peoples Perspectives on Population' and an international panel 'A Critical Outlook on Population Policy: Empowering Women for Women's Health'.

A UN conference is not for the fainthearted. Although perfectly organised with extraordinarily safety precautions due to threats by fundamentalists prior to the

conference to blow us all up because of the conference's perceived amoral agenda endorsing free sex, abortion and homosexuality, the mingling of thousands of people, roughly 3000 NGO delegates, an equal number of journalists and and about the same number again at the official ICPD conference, it was a bit like being a tiny wheel on a cart over whose direction one had, frustratingly, no control whatsoever. Or to put differently, the action had ended before it began. The NGO Forum lasted for a whole week with panels, workshops, discussions, press conferences every day from 9 am till 6. At the same time the ICPD delegates read their way through the Programme of Action, trying to come to consensus over the few bracketed passages, assisted by - in theory at least - briefings of NGOs.

From its very beginning the Cairo Conference was caught in the hysteria - I choose this word deliberately - of 'population' being the source of all and each evil. And population meant women - a person coming from March would not have guessed that men contribute anything whatsoever to wanted and unwanted pregnancies. At the ICPD a population clock ticked and showed how many children were born every hour and how people - likened to the nuclear threat! - will kill the planet. No mention was made of the fact that one child in the USA consumes 239 times as much as a child in Nepal. Nor was it pointed out that 56-57'000 people were supposedly born during the 9 days of the ICPD in Bangladesh, Brazil - and the USA. Multiplied by 239, it seems quite obvious who will use the brunt of the world's ressources - but this was not discussed. Instead, the media revelled in showing pictures of crowds from Dhaka in Bangladesh to point to the horror of 'population' in the Thirld World. Needless to say that similar pictures could be shown of Manhattan traffic during rush hours, where the much higher use of cars as compared to bicycle and rickshaw scooters results in much higher fuel consumption. But these connections weren't made. President Bush's statement at the UN Development Summit in Rio in 1992 'the US lifestyle is non-negotiable' remained largely unchallenged except perhaps with the twist, that increasingly undesirable populations in the US such as black teenagers - women again - need to have their fertility reduced: Norplant and sterilizations are the main means to achieve this end.

Unfortunately at Cairo, in spite of the heightened visibility of women it was discouraging to see that (neo-)colonialist attitudes about the malleability of an abstract mass labelled 'population' continue. No longer 'targets' of population control but - supposedly - key players to be 'empowered' and have their 'reproductive rights' guaranteed, since Cairo it can be said, sadly, that WOMEN 'want' population control policies - thus transforming the population controllers into knights in shining armours: they do it all 'for our own good'. Groups such as the International Women's Health Coalition, (IWHC), founded and funded by the Population Council heavily promoted the seductive 'Power

to Women' message.

Some of us didn't feel it was women who got the power. Rather, many angry women from the 'South' and some of us from the 'North' (including Australia) saw what was happening as selling out women on a massive scale but doing it under the guise 'women want it' by western or western-co-opted women who want it, and who endorse the policies of state and international population control agencies. Cairo was a completely US dominated and determined affair, quite sophisticated though with many NGOs participating which at a closer look revealed themselves as UN agencies funded by the USA. And they all had their share of co-opted women.

During four days of futile talks with the Holy See on abortion and reproductive rights, precious time was wasted, thereby preventing much needed discussions on structural inequalities, (mal)development and other of the global injustices mentioned earlier. Furthermore, the focus on reproduction cemented the view that women were simply 'mother machines': not general health, education, freedom from male violence and bodily integrity were seen as the crucial survival issues, but reproductive health. Public health expert Imrana Quadeer from India questioned the term:

> When I tell the women in my villages about the WHO definition of reproductive health, they laugh at me. They say, I will be well if you give me daily wages, water and subsistence.

And on the buzzword 'empowerment' Farida Akhter from Bangladesh commented

> We are not empowered to say that western countries should reduce their consumption and that we don't want the World Bank in Bangladesh. We are only 'empowered' to say that we will reduce the number of children we have. This is not empowerment. And the right to choose only means women's decision to reduce their fertility not the right to refuse harmful contraceptives.

The latter point became blatantly obvious at Cairo. The international press could only think in binaries; the 'goodies' - pro-women's empowerment groups - and the 'baddies' - the Holy See & Co who opposed women's reproductive autonomy. Those of us passionately defend women's decisionmaking but who raised questions about the harmfulness of the contraceptives and the racist and eugenicist nature of population policies by and large were seen as traitors to the cause - the good cause of power for women and of getting the ICPD to recommend $17 billion by the year 2000 to be spent on reproductive health.. Two thirds of this money will have to be paid by the developing countries themselves which will nicely increase their debt to the North. To quote an

angry Farida Akhter again, 'we have to pay to kill ourselves'. But questions were not to be asked - all was so 'empowering' that the details about contraceptives and their shoddy science - and the huge gains that multinational drug companies stand to make - were blatantly uninteresting and in fact an embarrassment.

Cairo leaves behind anger and astonishment but also a fierce determination to continue more than ever to mount a passionate non-aligned feminist resistance that exposes the old/'new' crimes committed against women by population control - now also supported by so-called feminist US groups and their international allies. The new 'powerspeak' sounds shrill, and the emperors - and empresses - still wear the same old clothes.