

# 1993 Presidential Address

## Women Are Organizing: Environmental and Population Policies Will Never Be the Same

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It is time to celebrate a year of major victories. We joined activists in coalitions and contributed to placing health care reform on the national agenda. Furthermore, to an unprecedented extent and for the first time during my American Public Health Association (APHA) membership, public health is also on the front of the national agenda. We celebrate major breakthroughs in policies on the environment and public health that several presidential appointments have heralded. We particularly celebrate the appointment of Dr Jocelyn Elders, a courageous spokesperson for public health.

Yet we sense a great urgency about the health of our environment. Aware that our and the earth's health are inseparable, we are deeply concerned about the effect environmental degradation will have on us all. We meet to resolve some controversies on causes and effects and to share public health strategies for the promotion and preservation of healthier neighborhoods, communities, nations, and planet. Among controversial issues, few arouse our passions as much as that of global population.

The most alarmist among us share the views voiced by population control proponents who call overpopulation our number one environmental problem, attributing to it much damage, "from global warming to rain forest destruction, famine, and air and water pollution."<sup>1</sup> The bumper sticker from one population group is a good example of their thinking: "#1 Pollution Solution: Birth Control."<sup>2</sup>

Proponents of a more balanced view focus on poorly planned industrial expansion and rapacious harvesting of natural resources as principle causes of environmental damage. We need look no further than Montana to find rapacious harvesting! One lumber company has in 1 decade created and abandoned a wasteland.

Those holding a balanced view also point to poverty and the inequitable distribution of resources as posing the greatest threats to health, environment, and social and political stability. Again, we do not need to leave our cities or our poorer rural areas to find supporting evidence for that argument. For population stabilization at sustainable numbers throughout the world, proponents of balanced approaches argue that we must first alter consumption patterns and contribute to the economic development of all. As we in the United States are among the 22% of the world's population that consumes 70% of the resources,<sup>3</sup> we have little moral ground on which to counter their arguments.

My views are closest to the latter. I also hold a firm belief that women's participation and full partnership in discussions on population, development, and the environment are crucial, not just to achieving a clearer understanding of interrelationships, but to crafting policies and programs that will work. A review of family planning history shows how vital women's participation is to successful policies and programs.

In the United States, there have been overt population activities by government and private groups since the turn of the century. Originally based on neo-Malthusian premises and eugenicist ideology,

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these activities included immigration restriction laws, eugenics statutes in 30 states permitting sterilizations of the "unfit" (which included people with disabilities), and programs to promote contraceptive use among poor women.<sup>4</sup>

Following the Second World War and the revulsion against fascist ideology, eugenic sterilizations were largely discontinued and the statutes repealed. Still, neo-Malthusian ideology was pervasive into the 1970s. Forced sterilizations still occurred. The women sterilized were mostly of low income, African American, Native American, and Latina. In the 1960s, the US government developed a policy regarding international population assistance. The impetus for this assistance was, sadly, not rooted in health policy centered on women's rights; it was merely a misguided attempt to bolster national security during the Cold War. By the end of the 1970s, the movement for reproductive rights had grown sufficiently strong to support women's self-determination in contraception and abortion. Women's experiences with family planning and other reproductive health services varied according to class and race. Justly, some women still have a lingering suspicion that not all health professionals are there purely to serve women's health needs. Some professionals may also be attempting to implement a social agenda.

During this period of change, women in many parts of the world, eager for control of their fertility, participated in internationally funded and sponsored family planning programs. In spite of the programs' weaknesses and excesses, they are said to be responsible for saving an estimated 1 million women's lives over the past 25 years.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1980s, the United States withdrew from the international population and family planning arena. Many APHA resolutions calling for restoration of funding for the United Nations Fund for Population Activities and other international programs attest to our support for family planning. Women and advocates for choice suffered a particularly heavy defeat in Mexico City when the United States embraced a policy restricting international aid to countries that maintained abortion rights. Worldwide, that cruel restriction has undoubtedly caused the deaths of tens of thousands of women each year. The World Health Organization estimates that 500 000 women die annually from pregnancy-related causes; between 100 000 to 200 000

of these deaths are estimated to be due to unsafe, usually illegal abortions.<sup>6</sup>

Women were not passively standing by during the 12 years of our government's restrictive policies. On the contrary, it seems to me that the ingenuity of women in grassroots community organizations was the main factor enabling the continuation of reproductive health services to women. Just as at home our Title X and other privately funded family planning providers have ingeniously managed to stay afloat and serve women, programs abroad have continued because of women's effective work. Many of the leaders of nongovernmental community-based organizations are seasoned participants after decades of struggles. Skilled in organizing, they are now turning to influencing policies and programs. Unwilling to continue becoming sick and dying of sexually transmitted diseases, septic abortions, cervical and breast cancer, poorly attended childbirth, genital mutilation, and violence at the hands of men, women are gathering together.

Organizing in villages, towns, cities, and the halls of international conferences, women are gaining a voice and an increasing influence. Displeased with being excluded from decisions on economic development, women are struggling to gain economic participation. Discontented with the great divides among government representatives, women are taking the lead in many nongovernmental organizations and are establishing common ground with other women across national and other boundaries.

As women emerge as strong participants in the debates, they are defining new areas for action. In the United States, those women who for decades have led struggles for reproductive rights and choices are shaping a new national policy on population activities in the international arena. Bella Abzug, former congresswoman from New York and a co-chair of the Women's Environment and Development Organization, led the way by forming in Nairobi a committee of 55 women from 31 nations that became the International Policy Action Committee. Organizations such as the International Women's Health Coalition, the Women's Environment and Development Organization, and the recently formed Committee on Women, Population, and the Environment call for new approaches. The hallmark of their demands is respect for women's rights.

According to the Committee on Women, Population, and the Environ-

ment, war-making and arms production that "divert resources from human needs poison the natural environment and perpetuate the militarization of culture encouraging violence against women."<sup>7</sup> Further causes of environmental degradation include the displacement of small farmers and indigenous peoples by agribusiness, timber, mining, and energy corporations, often with encouragement and assistance from international financial institutions and with the complicity of national governments. Also contributing to such degradation is "the rapid urbanization and poverty resulting from migration from rural areas, and from the inadequate planning and resource allocation in towns and cities."<sup>7</sup>

The committee clearly states that reducing population growth rates will not solve these problems and in fact may retard their solutions. The committee holds that "blaming environmental degradation on population growth may lay the groundwork for the re-emergence and intensification of top-down, demographically-driven population policies and programs deeply disrespectful of women, particularly women of color, and their children."<sup>7</sup>

The committee points out that in southern countries—and to a lesser extent in the United States and other industrialized countries—family planning programs have all too often been oriented toward population control and not to women's reproductive health needs. As a result, abuses are frequent. These have included sterilizations performed and contraceptives dispensed without informed consent.

In the economic area, the Committee on Women, Population, and the Environment calls for "an end to structural adjustment programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and repressive governments that sacrifice human dignity and basic needs for food, health and education to debt repayment and free market male-dominated models of unsustainable development."<sup>7</sup>

Women's Voices 1994 is another group making a women's declaration on population policies in preparation for the upcoming World Conference on Population and Development that will take place in Cairo, Egypt, in September 1994. APHA endorsed their call for "just, humane and effective development policies based on principles of social justice" and population policies that address unequal distribution of material and social resources. The group also calls for change

in "ideologies, laws, and practices that deny women's basic human rights. . . . Women's empowerment is legitimate and critically important in its own right, not merely as a means to address population issues."<sup>8</sup>

Regarding the actions that should be accorded priority, *Women's Voices 1994* calls for an increase in the participation of women in all relevant agencies to 50% of decision-making positions; a fourfold increase in funding for women's programs; support of women's health movements by the allocation of 20% of available resources; and support for women's rights and health advocacy within indigenous groups to ensure accountability.

These declarations make substantial moves in articulating a woman-centered vision of population policies. Whether women's organizations emphasize health rights or economic rights, women agree on support for local, national, and international initiatives for democracy, equal justice, and human rights.

The work these groups have done has contributed to a dramatic breakthrough in the United States' policies. Partly in response to the groups' pressure, the US government is drafting a new policy on international population activities and appears open to women's perspectives. For the first time, government officials are engaging representatives from many sectors: foundations and other organizations involved in population and family planning, women's organizations working on reproductive health, and environmental groups. This is an encouraging direction and a firm departure from the past.

This year, I personally experienced just how effective women have become in shaping population policies when I participated in the Second Preparatory Conference for the 1994 Cairo World Conference, which was held at the United Nations in New York City. As I heard eloquent women present their views, I remembered the words of one of my favorite posters: "Sisterhood Is Blooming; Springtime Will Never Be the Same." I believe that, worldwide, women are speaking loudly and clearly, forcing a reframing of the discussion on population, development, and the environment. Now, population, development, and environmental policies will never be the same.

Dr Nafis Sadik, the UN conference's secretary general, called for "a new consensus document on the full integration of population concerns into economic and social activities and sustainable devel-

opment."<sup>9</sup> In doing so, she set a stage that supported a broader participation than in previous meetings. I was pleased to hear the representatives of the US delegation announce our new policies and to bask in the goodwill that their announcement engendered. US State Department Counselor Timothy E. Wirth, former senator from Colorado and a staunch advocate for the environment, received unprecedented applause from nongovernmental organization members and delegates when he announced that President Clinton was "deeply committed to moving population to the forefront of America's international priorities." The president, he assured the audience, "understands the cost of excessive population growth to the health of women, to the natural environment, and to our hopes for alleviating poverty. . . . We must recognize that advancing women's rights and health and promoting family planning are mutually reinforcing objectives. Even more fundamentally, all barriers which deprive women of equal opportunity must be removed."<sup>10</sup> When he spoke in strong support of abortion rights, women rose, enthusiastically applauding his words.

I was especially gratified to hear that President Clinton had reversed the Mexico City policy, lifting restrictions that prohibited some family planning organizations from receiving US funding because of abortion-related activities. Consequently, the differences between the UN and the Mexico City meetings were dramatic. The US delegation to the UN meeting included strong private-sector participation by organizations committed to family planning and population issues and by advocates for women's health and rights and for public health. Our delegates met daily to discuss strategy with US nongovernmental organizations that were not official delegates. These included many environmental groups and diverse women's organizations. A spirit of collaboration permeated the unofficial meetings.

Whether this new dialogue on population—both in the United States and abroad—leads to new levels of understanding, empathy, and acknowledgment of common cause is up to us. Only we can bridge the chasms of class, gender, nationality, race, and ethnicity that threaten to entrap us in accusations, counter arguments, and stalemates.

What must we do to gain the respect of all participants in this dialogue? How can we craft policies that will work? We need to start at home, guaranteeing reproductive and other health rights to all

women. We need to care as much about providing women with the means to protect themselves from infection with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) as we do about helping them avoid pregnancy. We must show respect for our children by contributing to their future and lifting them out of poverty. We need to invest in the creation of a nonmilitarized society and in the resolution of problems of racism, all forms of discrimination, and violence. Our credibility abroad is only possible if we have credibility at home. The Hyde Amendment, which excludes coverage for abortion services and contains other restrictions on reproductive choice, cannot coexist with an external position that makes the issue of safe abortions a major point for other countries.

Why is all the preceding fundamental to us as public health workers? Simply because we cannot succeed in improving and saving the environment without a coherent vision. To succeed at home as well as abroad, we need to make commitments to reject all coercion in family planning and contraception, whether it is the punitive use of Norplant or its use without adequate informed consent. The full range of funded reproductive services in health care reform must include safe abortion services. We must defend the right and access to reproductive health services and meet the unmet demands for family planning and sex education. We must work toward family policies that empower families and women and reverse the feminization of poverty. Women who define reproductive rights as the right to have children and nurture and shelter them must be supported. We must support the right of children to safe child care. Racism and class attitudes permeate our institutions, and we must work to eradicate them. Our insular, narrowly defined approach to our professional work must give way to a broader understanding of our role as collaborators with communities. We must unite with grassroots environmental movements and understand that, for communities of color, the main environmental issues may be violence in their neighborhoods, toxic dump sites next to their homes, or uranium mining in their sacred grounds. For other nations, the issues may be our deployment of nuclear weapons or our use of their territory as sites for our most toxic and unregulated industries.

We must recognize that alliances between environmental and population groups must not build on the old elitist

notion of the environment and must instead resuscitate the idea that "people pollute." The environment does not comprise only pristine forests, lakes and rivers; it also includes workplaces, communities, schools, and homes. We must find new ways of integrating issues, methods that recognize the centrality of people and their empowerment in the decision-making process.

We need to learn from women—not just from the content of what they want, but from their processes, how they organize and communicate with each other, how they effectively bridge gaps and differences among themselves, and how they transcend the historical rifts that have impeded international cooperation. The women's agenda is based on integration and humanism. Women bring a holistic view that emphasizes how poverty undermines people's rights. Women bring a humanistic view that has at its core respect for the individual woman, man, and child. Women bring a view that quality of life is the ultimate measure of our success. The women's agenda is for all of humanity.

### Epilogue

The International Conference on Population and Development will take place September 1994 in Cairo, Egypt. A great deal of excitement and no less of controversy marks the preparations. Since the date of the preceding address, a substantial number of international women's and other organizations have published their views in articles, declarations, and books. Many continue to strive for an integration of approaches.

The Third Preparatory Conference held this June in New York City achieved many advances in consensus while heightening several areas of disagreement. Without wishing to oversimplify, I will refer just to reproductive rights issues. But I do wish to underline that the upcoming conference will address many more subjects, such as international cooperation on

achieving sustainable economic development.

There seems to be less conflict than was expected between women's views and those of traditional population-focused organizations in regard to women's rights and fuller definitions of reproductive and sexual health. In fact, there is a wide range of consensus among nations on many issues, from gender equality to international cooperation.

In regard to women's rights, the major differences appear to be between the Holy See, allied with some other delegations from countries with strong religious influences in a government, and the more secular nations. Not surprisingly, there is strong disagreement on unsafe abortion as an important public health problem of major proportions and on how governments should address it. Other issues such as adolescents' rights to confidentiality, sexual education, and contraception seem as controversial on the international stage as they often are in our own communities. I was certainly impressed with the similarities between the discussions among the international delegates and our local debates.

Fortunately, it seems that the time is favorable for agreement among a majority of nations that population activities must be based on sound social and economic policies that foster health and security. There is growing recognition that social advances can only be accomplished by women's advances. For example, in its most recent annual report, *The Progress of Nations*, UNICEF supports women's education as the key to combating hunger, disease, and overpopulation. The report concludes that developing countries often perform as well or better than developed nations in providing citizens with social services.<sup>11</sup>

We look forward to Cairo as an opportunity to continue a fruitful dialogue among nations and nationals, one that will frame the issues that will arise over the next decade and provide a plan for achieving gender equity and equality, a fundamental need for humankind. □

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