

# Women's Health Agenda for the 1990s

by La Rainne Abad-Sarmiento

In 1983, 99 percent of all the women who died from pregnancy or childbirth lived in the third world. Speaking at the 18th International Health Conference of the National Council for International Health (NCIH) held in Arlington, Virginia, USA, last June 23-26, Egyptian physician Mahmud Fathalla of the World Health Organization (WHO) discussed the reality of maternal deaths worldwide, underlining that "the tragedy is not simply a health problem in the third world. It is a social tragedy, and it is a manifestation of social injustice."

At the conference's opening session, the Brazilian feminist Carmen Barroso outlined a women's health agenda for the 1990s. She described the "sense of out-

rage" she feels at the high rates of needless sickness and death among women worldwide. She looked at the political and historical context: women's concerns about the conservative policies that made the 1980s a lost decade for the third world; the effects of the Gulf War on women's health; the elite control of wealth within nations; and the austerity policies of the international lending and aid institutions that often cause the governments of debtor nations to reduce social services in order to repay their debts. Describing the net transfer of billions of dollars from the third to the first world, she echoed the sentiments of third-world participants as she told the largely U.S. audience, "We the population of the third world are the real donors."

Barroso also spoke of the "signs of hope" she sees for the coming decade. To transform women's health, we must change power relationships, which means "the transformation of different kinds of hierarchies that prevail such as class, gender, race." In the agenda she set forth, sexuality has to play a central role. "For so long," she stressed, "sexuality has been trivialized, women had little information about their own bodies and their sexuality." The subordination of women determines how we see ourselves and our capabilities, though. Therefore, said Barroso, "we must create strategies to preserve self-esteem and recreate our energies for changes."



Isis' La Rainne Abad-Sarmiento (left) and Amparo Claro (right) flank Brazilian feminist Carmen Barroso (middle)

## !! Isis International Receives Service Award !!

Isis International received the "International Service Award for an Organization" during the NCIH's 20th Anniversary awards night. The award was in recognition of the effectivity of the Women's Health Journal, Isis' bilingual (Spanish/English) publication on women and health. Amparo Claro from the Isis Internacional office in Santiago, Chile was on hand to receive the award. Congratulations, sisters!