

The International Conference on Population and Development

GAINS AND

The Manila based feminist health organization, Institute for Social Studies and Action (ISSA), has its' summary of the main gains and setbacks for women at the ICPD. What do you think?



Gains

- * The focal point of the text, 'empowerment of women', stayed at the center of the conference program. The program also urges prohibition of female genital mutilation, or female circumcision; and the condemnation of rape.
- * Reference to reproductive rights of 'couples and individuals' was retained; the text still refers to families 'in their various forms', compensating for the loss of the term 'other unions' however this was designed to prevent recognition of homosexual relationships.
- * Shift of policies and programs from family planning to comprehensive reproductive care, with an emphasis on: voluntary choice; prevention of unwanted pregnancy; universal access to safe, reliable family planning

services; incentive/disincentive systems to be discouraged; government and non-government relations encouraged; quality of care; breastfeeding; technology transfer and male responsibility.

For Dr Marilen Danguilan, international health consultant and women's health rights advocate, the change in framework to comprehensive reproductive care has implications for gender relations, for the catholic church, on government budget allocations, on information and education campaigns, research, and aspects of GATT.

- * Human sexuality and gender relations issues were controversial but positive changes were evident, e.g., framework of gender equity and responsible human sexuality, including male responsibility and protection for youth, women and children.

For Dr Danguilan, these have implications in terms of education becoming more gender-sensitive, and information campaigns too; establishment of services such as crisis centers and training of health care providers.

- * Gita Sen, co-founder of Development Alternatives For Women in a New Era (DAWN) and the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC), notes that there was a 'shift of focus of population and development activities to people-centered needs. There is a significant move away from scare tactics about population growth to a much clearer recognition of health and peoples' and individuals' needs as the central focus of the Program of Action'.
- * greater recognition and impact of women's organizations.
- * Won recognition of 'unsafe abortion' as a major public health concern and a commitment that governments would deal with medical complications arising from unsafe abortions.

But Rina Jimenez-David, who attended the ICPD and is a noted Philippine journalist and active member of the women's organization Pilipina, points out that the Vatican and its allies claimed success in defeating an initiative which would have affirmed 'a new internationally recognized right to abortion'. However, the Vatican did say it supports a 'concept of reproductive

SETBACKS

health as a holistic concept for the promotion of the health of men and women...' Rina says that she takes this as recognition by the Church of the health dimensions of family planning.

She stresses that the significant gains achieved in Cairo will be all for naught if the document does not result in policy shifts and is not translated into concrete action. For this reason, a new international coalition, called Women Watching ICPD has been formed to expose violations of the Cairo agreements and monitor how funding organizations like USAID and UNFPA 'allocate their resources in the post-Cairo climate'.

- * Adolescents have a right to receive appropriate information and services so legal, regulatory or social barriers to their receiving reproductive health information and care should be changed or challenged; their right to privacy, confidentiality and informed consent respected; and, there should be support mechanisms, i.e., training for parents and families, mass media, schools, peer groups etc; and reduction of adolescent pregnancies. These measures have particularly important implications for consent and age of maturity, and, potentially decreasing incest and rape.

However, the strengthening of parents rights and responsibilities on the issue of adolescent sexual health and guidance will affect how much adolescents can exercise any rights or considerations recognised at the conference.

Setbacks

- * A passage on sexual rights was removed because of pressure from interests saying this would promote promiscuity.
- * Reference to an 'alternative to early marriage' for young women was removed because some interests said it would encourage prostitution.
- * A call for 'equal' treatment in inheritance rights was changed to the vaguer term 'equitable'.
- * The addition of the clause saying implementation of the document should be 'consistent with full respect for the various religious, ethical values and cultural backgrounds' of nations while recognising difference, makes relative what, how and who will make decisions on implementation of the platform in each society, nowhere do women hold

an equal voice with men in decision-making, this makes possible gains for women very uncertain.

- * Kept out explicit reference to a right for migrant family reunification, the text instead refers to 'the vital importance' of family reunification and governments are to enact appropriate legislation to this effect. There are about 30 million migrant workers in the world today.
- * In a specially called Asian Women's Caucus, many women activists at the conference expressed their frustration and disappointment that the link between population and development was not fully explored, thus fundamental issues creating crucial problems for women, and for societies in the South, with regard to population and development, were not adequately addressed.

