

Reproductive Rights, Religion and Culture: Defending the Goals of the UN Conferences in the 1990s

**Delivered by Adrienne Germain
President, International Women's Health Coalition**



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Distinguished members of Parliament, Madame Chair, and participants, good morning, and warm thanks to the Forum and the national parliament of Turkey for inviting me to speak with you today. My topic is defending the goals of Cairo, Beijing, and other global conferences – particularly women's sexual and reproductive rights.

As UNFPA's Deputy Executive Director suggested yesterday, reproductive rights lie at the crossroads of religion, culture, and human rights. I was deeply engaged in governmental negotiations about this crossroads as an NGO member of the United States government delegations to the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and the five-year reviews at the end of the 1990s.

But my journey began 35 years ago in the villages and urban slums of Peru. My road led through the first World Population conference in Bucharest in 1974, the first world women's conference in Mexico in 1975, and all those that followed. It led to Bangladesh, where I lived for four years. Throughout my journey, I have learned about the realities of girls' and women's lives from women in dozens of countries. For the last 20 years, my organization, the International Women's Health Coalition, has worked to ensure that women – in their own countries and in the United Nations – can speak on their sexual and reproductive rights and health and be heard. Everywhere I go, I am inspired by women's courage, persistence and skills in the face of social and political opposition, and despite constraints imposed by cultures and traditions.

I have also seen governments come and go, and know, as you must, that defending the goals of the Cairo and Beijing conferences is a profoundly political process. It requires laws and budget allocations – the purview of all of you – and it requires broad social action. It requires, in my view, secularism in government and in national policies. By secularism, I mean conformity with international human rights. I mean also tolerance and humanism, which enable respect for diversity, including religious diversity, but do not condone violations of human rights. This rights-based approach is the agreement we reached in Cairo in 1994, and the world's nations have repeatedly reaffirmed since then.

I focus today on three main points that I hope will help all of us implement the spirit of that fundamental commitment to the human rights of women:

First, cultures, religions, and traditions are dynamic, not static. They are highly diverse in theory and in practice.

Second, the human rights of women are absolute. Violations of human rights cannot be justified or accepted on the grounds of culture, tradition, or religion. And governments are obligated to promote and protect the human rights of all.

Third, we have made, and will continue to make significant progress – women together with men, civil society activists, and parliamentarians, the world over. There is no going back, even today as we face a resurgence of all forms of fundamentalisms – religious, political, social, and cultural.

Let us look first at the diversity of leadership in the world.

Earlier this month, 200 Muslim leaders in the Philippines issued a fatwa to allow a Muslim couple to practice family planning without fear of censure. And a draft personal status code for the Muslim community allows abortion.

Yet, half a world away, in the Sudan, Islamic clerics have urged Muslims to continue the practice female genital mutilation – even though FGM is not sanctioned by Islam. It is a cultural practice occurring in communities of various religions beliefs across many countries.

In my own country, the United States, marked contrasts appear among religious leaders, and among social and political conservatives. An Episcopal minister, for example, recently promoted women’s right to make choices about their bodies, saying, “What shall a woman do with her body – her life? This freedom of choice is central to what it means to be a human being...”

Meanwhile, a prominent U.S. evangelical Christian leader, the Rev. Jerry Falwell, asserts that those who support reproductive rights are partly responsible for the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. In his view, “The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked.”

Every culture, every religion, includes conservatives and progressives, enlightened leaders and reactionaries, and a broad middle ground. One of our accomplishments and glories as human beings is the rich diversity of our histories, religions, and cultures within and across countries.

Furthermore, religions and cultures constantly adapt to new circumstances, new challenges, and new opportunities. They are constituted of vibrant believers, of individual people whose views change as they go through life, and as their societies cope with globalization, poverty, and the challenges of building democracy based on universal human rights.

Nonetheless, cultures and religions are often viewed by those outside them—academics, politicians, or the public—as monolithic, static entities. Too often, political and social, as well as religious, extremists encourage that view. They hearken back to a Golden Age of peace, glory, tranquility – an age that actually never existed.

Women also are diverse, reflecting the distinctive character of their upbringing, their cultures, and their faiths, as well as their opportunities, power, and social status. Within each country or culture or religion are profound differences between generations,

between those who are educated and those who are not, between those who are rich and those who are poor.

Across this diversity, all women share a common bond: Our fundamental and universal rights as human beings – and, I'm sad to say, endemic violations of those rights. We women, who speak different languages, practice different religions, and wear different garments, everywhere are acting to secure our human rights – increasingly with the support of families, communities, governments, and the UN.

Here in Turkey, a vibrant women's movement, more than 120 women's organizations, led a campaign to reform the civil code. Turkish law now recognizes full equality for women in marriage and women's inheritance and property rights.

Following that success, a Turkish NGO, Women for Women's Rights, initiated and coordinated a platform to reform the criminal code from a gender perspective. Their campaign has already persuaded the parliamentary sub-commission to accept most of their demands. If accepted by the full parliament, sexual offences that were regulated as "Crimes against society" in the Turkish penal code would be treated as crimes against the sexual integrity of individuals. Marital rape would be criminalized. Sexual harassment in the workplace would be recognized as an aggravating circumstance under the law. And discrimination based on sexual orientation would be prohibited.

Women for Women's Rights is also working across the Middle East and North America, with researchers and activists concerned with the core goals of the conferences at Cairo and Beijing – universal reproductive and sexual health, reproductive and sexual rights, women's empowerment, and gender equality. WWHR has advised Turkish government delegations to UN negotiations on women's rights, and those delegations played key roles to ensure that the human rights of Turkish women, of Muslim women, and of all women, were included in UN agreements to abolish early or forced marriage, female genital mutilation, marital rape, sexual coercion, denial of contraceptive choices, and restrictions on access to safe, legal abortion, and other violations of women's human rights.

Half a world away in Brazil, the three feminist health organizations that existed in the 1980s have blossomed into a national women's health and rights movement, including over 180 organizations in every Brazilian state. Their network has had a powerful influence on Brazil's national health policies and programs, which recognize reproductive and sexual health and rights, despite opposition from ultraconservative forces. Groups across Latin America, like many groups across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, faced with similar conservative opposition, have formed coalitions to promote access to emergency contraception, decriminalize abortion, and provide adolescents' access to health information and services.

In Southern Nigeria, where various cultural traditions and conservative forces impede gender equality, the Girls' Power Initiative is supporting thousands of girls in their struggle for political and social empowerment. Other groups assist boys and young men in learning to respect girls and to be responsible in their own sexual behavior. These groups have developed sexuality education curricula and teaching methods that promote gender equality and human rights. With their help, the national government has adopted a national sexuality education curriculum, and Southern states are implementing it with continuing NGO help. In Northern states, however, where sharia law prevails, the

curriculum has so far been rejected, less on religious grounds than as part of a wider longstanding political struggle over who will control the nation – the Muslim North or the Christian/animist South.

In Cameroun, a country of diverse cultures and many religions, a pioneering organization called ALVF is working to end pervasive violence against women. It offers women of all cultures and backgrounds the refuge, support, and information they need to confront violence in their lives. ALVF also works in the policy arena—educating the public, advising the government, and building coalitions to lobby for social changes to end violence against women.

In Pakistan, a dynamic young leader, Shazia Mohamed, is successfully addressing sexual health and rights in this very conservative society of diverse traditions and cultures. When her organization, Aahung, surveyed young people, their parents, and their teachers, staff members soon realized that girls could only protect their health if they had the rights, the knowledge, and the power to delay marriage, stay in school, and safeguard their bodies. Aahung has mobilized numerous other NGOs, community leaders, and families to help girls make these choices.

In Bangladesh, women’s groups, in cooperation with the government and other civil society organizations, designed a national health and population program, based on the Cairo principles, which has had dramatic impact. Since the program was instituted five years ago, the percentage of Bangladeshi women receiving prenatal care nearly doubled to almost 50 percent and the rate of women dying from complications of childbirth has fallen by almost 25 percent.

In Poland, where ultraconservatives oppose reproductive rights, Wanda Nowicka, the founder of ASTRA, the Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, comments, “We use international standards to show the Polish people what our government should be doing. Poland should be on board with human rights, with democracy, with gender equality.”

With women’s engagement, and often leadership and initiative, governments are moving forward. But much more is needed. We must not be deterred by the assertions of extreme conservatives that the women’s health and rights agreements made at Cairo and Beijing are against culture, religion, ethics, and morality. Nor should we be intimidated by those who warn of a “clash of civilizations.” A few years ago, the American historian Samuel Huntington wrote a book with that title. He prophesied that “the most persuasive, important and dangerous conflicts will [be]... between people belonging to different cultural entities...” Many people say that today’s widespread terrorism reflects a widening gap between Western democratic ideals on one side and fundamentalist religious beliefs and cultures on the other.

I see something quite different. There is a divide in the world. But it’s a women’s rights gap. And it’s a development and poverty gap. The gap is not driven by religion or culture, but by competition for political power and control of people and resources at all levels of society, from families to parliaments.

Women’s sexual and reproductive rights are at the center, both of the debate and the solutions. When you think about it, a central focus of today’s conservative extremists, in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere, is women’s human rights. Everywhere, extremists

seek to control women's sexuality and reproduction. The current refusal by the U.S. administration to fund UNFPA and the International Planned Parenthood Federation is just one example. Elsewhere, the unequal status of women leads to violations of their most fundamental right to life, a life free from endemic violence and sexual coercion. As a result, in Senegal, for example, at least 50% of women living with HIV/AIDS have no risk factors except their husbands. They are monogamous; their husbands are not.

Or, look at India. Until recently, some leaders believed that the country's cultural and religious traditions would protect the nation from HIV/AIDS, but they were disastrously wrong. India now has the second largest number of people living with HIV/AIDS in any one country, and HIV infection is most rapidly increasing among young married women with no extramarital sexual experience.

Although the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union are drastically different from Senegal and India, we see similar patterns of failure to protect women's rights and health. Sex trafficking, to name one, has become a widespread phenomenon. Our challenge – as civil society and government officials – is to stand up to extremists who, in the name of culture, or religion, or tradition, violate women's rights. When our voices are heard and women's rights to health and equality are fully protected, the people of every faith, every culture, and every nation thrive.

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Celebrating its 20th anniversary, the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC) is a nonprofit organization that seeks to promote the health and rights of women and girls worldwide. It provides technical and financial support to non-governmental organizations in selected countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, helping them to serve their communities and build networks for advocacy and change within and across borders. It mobilizes groups and individuals for participation in UN conferences and works with UN agencies to ensure that the needs of women and girls are represented in global health policies and initiatives. Finally, it seeks to inform public debate through multilingual publications, a web site, media involvement, and educational events.