

ICPD + 10 Town Meeting
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This is a time of momentous challenges for women, communities, and nations. It is also an era of momentous possibilities around the globe. My organization, the International Women's Health Coalition, is committed to securing the health and rights of women and girls around the world. We support local organizations in selected countries of Africa, Latin America, and Asia. We work with governments, the UN, and other international agencies to ensure that global health policies honor women's health needs and human rights.

This year we are celebrating a landmark agreement for girls and women. A decade ago at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, 179 countries, including the United States, agreed that the world's most pressing challenges could be solved only by securing the rights and health of every girl and every woman.

They recognized that the best way to build families, communities, and nations was by investing in girls and women, including their reproductive health care and sexuality education.

Participants from all countries also recognized the high cost of continuing to deny women's most basic human rights. That cost is a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty, ill health, and social instability.

These were not utopian notions, motivated by idealism, although there was much idealism at the conference. The underlying premise was this: If a girl in Pittsburgh is educated well, if a girl in Rio is healthy and free from violence, if a girl in Lagos is aware of her rights as an individual— her choices and those of millions of others like her around the globe would lead to better lives and increased prosperity for us all.

By empowering girls, the rest would follow.

So 10 years later, what has happened to the commitments we made at Cairo?

First the good news. In the last two years, at regional meetings around the world, countries have again come together to reaffirm the Cairo plan of action.

We have made enormous strides—more women have access to contraceptives and more girls are in school—but much is left to be done. Now the question is: How do we do accomplish our agreed goals?

Women leaders and advocates for women's rights and health in every nation of the world are leading the way. Yet the US government has largely abandoned them. For decades, our country has been a beacon of hope and inspiration for the world's women, but anti-family planning extremists within the current Administration and Congress are trying to turn back the clock.

The current Administration has blocked funding for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which is the primary source of funds in 140 countries for maternal health programs and family planning services provided by government agencies and nonprofits. The money is urgently needed to prevent maternal deaths, provide family planning and reproductive health care, reduce recourse to abortion, and slow the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Today every seven minutes a woman dies in childbirth, while another 20 are injured giving birth. Most of these women are very poor and lack basic knowledge about preventing pregnancy or HIV/AIDS.

At a time when we as a nation are trying to encourage and strengthen democratic institutions around the world, the Administration has instituted a Global Gag Rule that forces organizations that receive US family planning funds to deny information to women about the option of legal abortion and forbids them from speaking out about the tens of thousands of women who die annually from unsafe abortions. If these groups accept US funds, they cannot tell women, even those who are intent on abortion, where they may obtain safe services.

The policy stifles free speech and prevents medical professionals from offering the full range of legal, medically proven options to women.

Anti family-planning extremists have declared a war on the inspirational goals of the women activists around the world that we work with every day. They have sided with the likes of Iran, Sudan, Syria, and even Saddam Hussein's Iraq to oppose the Cairo plan of action and the heroic women and young people who are making the goals of Cairo a reality. Let me mention a few.

Our colleagues in Nigeria are empowering girls and young women to stand up for their rights and resist female circumcision, and other harmful traditional practices. Our colleagues in Peru are training indigenous women to be health liaisons between their communities and the public health system. Our colleagues in Turkey are advocating for the reform of the Turkish penal code in order to make violence against women a crime.

These are not Republican issues or Democratic issues. These are fundamental human rights issues and basic public health issues. No matter which party wins the White House in November, the US needs to resume its longstanding leadership role on women and health to ensure that girls and women abroad will one day enjoy the same rights as we do here.

At a time of mounting HIV/AIDS transmission, comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive health services are especially critical. At the international AIDS conference in Bangkok last summer, several world leaders spoke out about the particular vulnerability of girls and women to the pandemic. They urged prioritizing prevention strategies to protect girls and women from contracting HIV/AIDS in disproportionate numbers. Already in sub-Saharan Africa 57% of those living with HIV/AIDS are girls and

women. Among young people with HIV living there, 75 % are young women. Imagine, 75%.

But extremists within the current Administration oppose comprehensive sexuality education and health services for girls and women...and men and boys.

The Administration is mainly funding groups that only teach abstinence unless married, groups that refuse to give young men and women comprehensive information on how to protect themselves. Ignorance is never an answer or the solution to a problem.

In its funding priorities, the Administration is abandoning a balanced treatment-and-prevention approach. Instead, it is pouring the majority of its funds into treatment. While it is essential that we support treatment, failure to simultaneously invest in effective prevention, including comprehensive sexuality education and health care services, is appallingly short-sighted.

My organization, the International Women's Health Coalition, works with women who live overseas. But the disregard for the health and fate of those women is echoed in the disregard for your rights and health, and mine. Here in the U.S., HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of death among African-American women between the ages 25 to 34. Where is the outrage?

The world today is home to the largest generation of young people ever—some 1.2 billion between the ages of 10 and 19. If these young people do not receive adequate reproductive and sexual health care services and information, if they do not have access to school or jobs, the cycle of unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion, ill health, HIV/AIDS, and poverty will continue.

In its funding priorities, the current U.S. Administration has abandoned the most vulnerable young people here and abroad. In countries where the U.S. provides a substantial amount of healthcare funds, practical and fundamental knowledge about sexual health and services are being denied. We must demand that our government change this policy.

Ten years ago the world recognized that each woman and each girl is important in her own right. It recognized that, when given the opportunity, each young woman holds the key to better health and a better life for herself, her family, and her world.

The knowledge of this critical fact is what has inspired men and women around the world to do the vital work that they do with girls and young women every day. It is what has inspired me – and IWHC – to work beside them. It is what inspires thousands of Americans like you to work with us and support us.

World leaders—including America's leaders—agreed to ICPD. We need to honor our agreements. As a nation, we need to once again be a beacon of hope and progress on these issues. Despite roadblocks by extremist groups who would divide us, despite a shortage of resources, we can all, together, Republicans and Democrats, make life-altering and life-affirming progress, step by step, one girl at a time. Our idealism and our determination will prevail.

Thank you.