

The Cairo Agenda: A Road Map to Reach the Millennium Development Goals

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Ten years ago in Cairo, 179 nations forged a landmark agreement. They agreed that reproductive rights are human rights. And they acknowledged that, only by ensuring girls' and women's health and rights, will we be able to solve some of the world's most pressing problems: poverty, hunger, disease, gender inequality, environmental degradation, and political instability.

Six years after Cairo, fired with the hope and enthusiasm of a new millennium, world leaders met at the United Nations in New York and committed their countries to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. More than any other conference in the 1990s, Cairo provided the foundation for these broad and ambitious goals, and today, the most direct route to achieving them is full implementation of the Cairo agenda.

I was proud to be a member of the U.S. government delegation to Cairo. I now look back on that conference as evidence that we women are leaders in shaping strategies for solving the world's problems. It is also powerful evidence that our health and rights must be valued in themselves, not just as means to other ends. Since Cairo, we women have been recognized as effective partners, a vital political force, and dynamic, indispensable voices for economic and social justice.

As heady as those days in Cairo were, and as gratifying as it was to witness the leaders of the world support the MDGs, the real successes don't happen in conference hallways or UN assembly rooms. The thousands of women who made Cairo a success, who defined its principles and action plans, didn't just go home and feel satisfied. We went home and went to work.

Bene Madunagu and Grace Osakue, two of these thousands of remarkable women, founded Girls' Power Initiative – GPI – in Nigeria to build girls' confidence, knowledge, skills, and self-esteem. Working with parents and community leaders, and learning from the girls themselves, Bene and Grace have shown how to implement Cairo's path-breaking commitment to the world's girls and women. Watching GPI girls testify, debate, sing, laugh, listen, and support one another, I have been struck by the power and potential they represent for Nigeria—as they go, so will the country.

In fact, their example, and the example of others across Nigeria, have already dramatically influenced national policies. GPI and colleagues inspired a national sexuality education curriculum, adopted by the federal government in 2001. In supporting this curriculum, the government of Nigeria has been far more courageous than the current U.S. government. With

nearly 6 percent of persons 15 years and older living with HIV in Nigeria, the government knows that young people must have information and learn skills to protect themselves and each other.

The work in Nigeria is echoed around the world by thousands of others transforming the Cairo promise into reality.

In Turkey, IWHC's colleague, Women for Women's Human Rights, fought to ensure revisions in the civil and penal codes to protect women's rights in marriage, and recognize violence against women as a crime. Two weeks ago, they succeeded, as you probably noticed in the *New York Times*.

In Pakistan, the courageous NGO, Aahung, is teaching boys and girls about their health and basic rights—persuasively, tactfully, and with the support of parents and community leaders. By working in this way, Aahung is helping transform powerful traditions and practices that oppress girls and women.

In Brazil, our colleague Maria José Araújo, who founded one of the country's first comprehensive reproductive health clinics for women back in the 1980s, is now implementing national policies as head of the Women's Health Division in the Brazilian Ministry of Health.

We also have macro level evidence that investments in implementing Cairo move us strongly toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Compared to a decade ago, more girls are enrolled in secondary schools, more women are in the formal workforce, more women have access to contraception, and more women hold policy-making positions in government.

Have we made enough progress? No. What more do we need to do?

First, we need to stay on track—a decade is too short a time to achieve the Cairo agenda, and, indeed, we agreed in 1994 that it would take 20 years. We must keep women's and girls' health and rights at the center of policymaking in all sectors and all plans to achieve the MDGs. Sadly, the Indian government has recently reverted to the pre-Cairo population agenda that emphasized “numbers” and “control.” They recently reintroduced an incentive-based fertility control program, which, as history shows, foments resentment and fear among both women and men. And, in the end, fails to achieve the fertility reduction it aims for.

Contrast this with the extraordinary leadership and courage of Nestor Kirchner's government in Argentina. After years of state acquiescence to narrow interpretations of Roman Catholic Church doctrine, President Kirchner is forging an unprecedented national agenda of sexual and reproductive health policies to secure women's health and rights. Working in partnership with civil society and feminist leaders, he is making the Cairo vision, and the MDGs, a reality.

We know Cairo works, and we must use the momentum of organizations like the Girls' Power Initiative, and the support of leaders like Kirchner, to pave the way forward. The MDGs are the destinations; Cairo provides the road map. I want to end with three priorities for the next ten years.

First, sexual rights. Promoting gender equality and empowering women, Millennium Development Goal 3, is at the very heart of Cairo's agenda, and is required to achieve all of the MDGs. For women to exercise their human rights, achieve education and employment, be healthy, avoid HIV/AIDS, and participate politically in their countries—they must be able to decide if, when, and with whom they have sex and bear children. We must prioritize work to

protect these rights, and everyone's right to pursue a satisfying, healthful sexual life, free of violence, coercion, and discrimination.

Second, universal access to reproductive health—the cornerstone of the Cairo Agenda—is the only route to achieving Millennium Development Goals 4 and 5, improving maternal health and reducing child mortality. Goals 4 and 5 are intimately related, since it is estimated that as many as 95% of infants whose mothers die giving birth, also die within a year. Thanks to the Cairo Programme of Action, 90 percent of governments in the world are integrating family planning and safe motherhood into their primary health care systems. Inexcusably, however, over half a million women still die from pregnancy or childbirth every year—78,000 of them from complications of unsafe abortion—because we have not yet invested in the simple, low-cost services that save women's lives, namely access to skilled birth attendants and safe, legal abortion for all women.

My third priority is financial resources, and I will talk about this in the context of Goal 6, combating HIV/AIDS. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is increasingly feminized. Young women and girls account for 62 percent – well over half – of HIV-positive persons 15 to 24 years old worldwide, and a horrific 75 percent in highly affected African countries. We must help HIV/AIDS policymakers understand that HIV prevention for girls and women can only be accomplished by implementing the Cairo Programme of Action – that is, by achieving universal access to reproductive health services and to comprehensive sexuality education that promotes gender equality and human rights. The current HIV/AIDS model—focusing on commercial sex workers and on antiretroviral treatment—is far too narrow and the result is generalized, feminized epidemics. This model will not work in Nigeria and India – both on the edge of massive epidemics – because these countries and others have all the factors, and more, that lead to a feminized epidemic.

How do we achieve these priorities? We need partnerships among nations, international agencies, business, and nongovernmental organizations—Millennium Development Goal 8. Strong, progressive partnerships can mobilize the political will and resources needed to fully implement the Cairo Programme of Action. Yesterday morning, in a statement presented to the UN Deputy Secretary General, Louise Fréchette, an unprecedented coalition of over 300 world leaders – current and former heads of government, Nobel laureates, scientists, business leaders, health, human rights, and youth leaders, religious leaders, and others – called on the world to commit to implementing Cairo.

We also need investment in youth leadership. Repeatedly since Cairo, youth have mobilized to protect and promote the Cairo agenda because Cairo speaks to the realities of their lives. We must pay concerted, careful attention to the voices of the largest youth generation this world has ever seen. And we must support and engage their leadership—they are the most thoroughly acquainted with their own needs and challenges, and they have the energy to make policy and drive change.

Yes, we still face enormous challenges, but we know how to teach adolescents about their bodies, their rights, and their responsibilities. We can empower girls and women. We can support men and boys to respect girls' and women's rights. IWHC's worldwide colleagues and many others have shown us what works. We must continue to learn from them, and encourage governments to do likewise. We're well down the road, and together we will make the Cairo vision and the Millennium goals the world's realities. Thank you.