

Reassert U.S. Leadership on Women's Health and Human Rights

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This article is part of *Restoring American Leadership: 13 Cooperative Steps to Advance Global Progress*, a joint publication of the Open Society Institute and the Security and Peace Institute. The complete report is available online at www.soros.org and www.securitypeace.org.

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Summary

There is a broad global consensus that improving the health and human rights of women is a critical priority. Improving women's health will mean more than enhancing the lives of individuals. Effective new women's health initiatives will make a significant contribution to alleviating poverty, promoting global economic progress, and ensuring international stability.

In its second term, the Bush administration has an opportunity to play a leadership role in accelerating global cooperation on women's health and human rights, especially in slowing the advance of HIV/AIDS.

President Bush should:

- ▶ *Galvanize global support for the UNAIDS "ABC-Plus" approach to combating the HIV/AIDS pandemic and support the work of the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS.*
- ▶ *Order the State Department to form a bipartisan, expert team to review the controversy surrounding the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) with the aim of restoring United States funding for UNFPA.*
- ▶ *Sign the World Leaders Statement in Support of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and fully fund the United States' financial commitments established at the ICPD for fiscal 2006.*
- ▶ *Provide \$10 million to support the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Trust Fund in Support of Actions to Eliminate Violence Against Women, and the World Health Organization's multicountry study on violence against women.*

- ▶ *Reaffirm the commitment of the United States to women's health and human rights at key international conferences scheduled for 2005.*

Background

Over the past four decades, investments aimed at improving health worldwide have been highly successful, particularly with regard to health issues involving women and children. Globally, life expectancy has increased by 50 percent and infant mortality has declined, though the HIV/AIDS epidemic has reversed positive trends in the most-affected countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Delivery of reproductive health services has contributed to the positive global trend. Over a 30-year period, contraceptive use has increased worldwide from 10 percent of couples to 60 percent. The average number of children born to women in developing countries has declined from six to three. These gains have resulted, in part, from persistent efforts by the United States, which has developed bilateral and multilateral assistance programs, and from effective implementation of global policy agreements.

In 2004, the world marked the 10th anniversary of the bedrock global agreement for women's health and human rights: the Programme of Action from the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo. The ICPD agreement was adopted by 179 nations, and the United States played a leadership role. The ICPD's "rights-based" reproductive-health approach fundamentally revised existing international population policies and redirected resource flows. Instead of focusing primarily on delivery of contraceptive services, the Programme of Action takes a broader view, focusing on health, human rights, equality in education, economic opportunity, and social participation for women.

Unfortunately, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has become increasingly "feminized" and is threatening to reverse some of the improvements posted in women's health over the past 40 years. In 1997, women accounted for 41 percent of the people living with HIV/AIDS; today, about half of the 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS are women. Half of all new infections occur among young adults (ages 15 to 24). Further, 75 percent of young people living with HIV/AIDS in the heavily affected countries of sub-Saharan Africa are female. In sub-Saharan Africa, 60 percent of people living with HIV/AIDS are women, and in many countries the prevalence among girls is 4-7 times higher than among boys. In addition, women face the anguish of mother-to-child transmission of the virus.

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Violence against women is a health issue of epidemic proportions, one that the Bush administration has identified as an important priority. Approximately one in every three of the world’s women will suffer some kind of violence in her lifetime, including rape, beating, and trafficking into domestic or sexual servitude, or harmful practices such as female genital cutting and acid burning. Violence also increases maternal and child mortality. The World Bank estimates that violence against women kills and harms as many women of reproductive age as cancer and exacts a greater toll on women than traffic accidents and malaria combined. The UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) is in a unique position to support regional and multinational responses to the problem of violence against women. In addition, UNIFEM has the ability to speak directly with governments and with local communities and grassroots women’s organizations.

The Bush Administration’s First Term

The Bush administration has been active in efforts that affect women’s health and human rights, including initiatives related to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, UNFPA funding, the ICPD, and key international policy dialogues.

The President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR): In 2003, the administration proposed and won congressional approval of a five-year, \$15-billion plan to help alleviate the impact of HIV/AIDS. This plan focuses on 15 key countries in Africa and the Caribbean as well as Vietnam. PEPFAR devotes substantial resources to HIV/AIDS treatment and includes funding for prevention efforts, one-third of which are earmarked for abstinence-until-marriage programs. In addition, the U.S. government supports HIV/AIDS efforts in many other countries through bilateral programs, particularly USAID, and through various multilateral agencies.

Withholding Funding from UNFPA: After initially funding, supporting, and requesting help from UNFPA in Afghanistan, the Bush administration abruptly cut off UNFPA funding in July 2002. The administration decided that UNFPA’s operations in China are violating the Kemp-Kasten amendment, which has, since 1985, prohibited funding for organizations that “support or participate in the management of a program of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization.” The administration’s decision was contrary to the recommendations of its own expert panel, which went to China to investigate UNFPA activities. This expert panel concluded that UNFPA does not “support or participate in the management of” coercive Chinese practices. Nevertheless, during fiscal years 2002, 2003, and 2004, the administration withheld contributions to UNFPA totalling \$93 million, which represent more than 10 percent of the agency’s budget.

Controversy over UNFPA has divided the Congress and distanced the United States from the rest of the world for many of the past 20 years. Opponents of UNFPA funding argue that the agency undermines human rights in China. Proponents argue that UNFPA is the primary voice in China advocating for voluntary family planning and against coercive practices. Both sides agree that China's approach violates international standards of human rights. But the current United States policy has not only failed to make a positive impact upon the situation in China; it has produced a negative impact elsewhere in the world. Specifically, the cutoff in United States funding has reduced the delivery of UNFPA services to impoverished people in the 140 other countries where the agency operates.

ICPD Implementation: During a series of intergovernmental meetings in 2004, the United States urged other governments to adopt language that would have weakened the ICPD Programme of Action. The United States cited concerns that the Programme of Action could be construed as an endorsement of abortion. In the end, the United States' proposals were not accepted, and the United States joined the consensus in reaffirming the ICPD in the UN General Assembly on October 14, 2004.

The administration, however, refused to sign the World Leaders Statement in Support of the ICPD, which reaffirms the agreed international framework for women's health and rights. More than 100 heads of state as well as Nobel laureates and distinguished leaders from business, religion, science, and development signed the statement.

The Bush administration said it had refused to sign the statement because it was concerned that the statement's reference to the concept of sexual rights had not been defined internationally and went beyond the ICPD agreement. The concept of sexual rights, however, has been sufficiently defined in the ICPD's Programme of Action and, more specifically, at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. The centerpiece of sexual rights is the right of an individual to consent in sexual relations, that is, the right of every individual not to be forced into sexual activity. The World Leaders Statement, therefore, is a reaffirmation of an international agreement the administration has said it supports.

Programs for advancing key aspects of the ICPD Programme of Action are funded through USAID's Global Health Division. Adjusted for inflation, funding for population and family-planning programs was stagnant over most of the Bush administration's first term. Similarly, maternal health funding remained constant over the administration's first-term, and child-survival funding increased only slightly.

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—PETER PIOT

UNAIDS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Toward a Better Policy on Women’s Health

There are several reasons why adjustments to United States policies can have a greater positive impact on women’s health and human rights worldwide.

First, experts in the reproductive-health, human-rights, and HIV/AIDS-prevention fields are realizing that halting the spread of HIV/AIDS to women and girls will require an approach that is broader than the epidemiological approaches attempted so far. Conventional epidemiological approaches, such as blood-safety programs and work with drug users, sex workers, and other core group transmitters, do not protect the vast majority of women and girls. For example, faithfully married women are vulnerable to philandering husbands, violence, and sexual coercion.

In his World AIDS Day message on December 1, 2004, UNAIDS Executive Director Peter Piot said that “prevention methods such as the ‘ABC’ approach—Abstinence, Be faithful, and use Condoms—are good but not enough to protect women where gender inequality is pervasive. We must ensure that women can choose marriage, decide when and with whom to have sex, and successfully negotiate condom use.”

Second, it is clear that the controversy in the United States over the UNFPA’s operations in China is a surmountable obstacle and that overcoming it will pay significant dividends in the 140 other countries where the UNFPA operates.

Third, experts agree that implementation of the ICPD would address many of the key socio-economic, political, and health factors that place women at risk of HIV infection. The comprehensive ICPD approach includes numerous priorities that the Bush administration has embraced. These priorities are political and economic. They focus on improving educational opportunities for women and girls, upholding universally recognized human rights, providing essential health services, and protecting the health of mothers and newborns. Moreover, the ICPD agenda will advance implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, which will be reviewed at a UN Summit in September 2005. By fulfilling its fiscal 2006 funding commitments established at the ICPD, the United States will demonstrate its support for improving the availability and quality of reproductive health care, reducing maternal mortality and morbidity, preventing feminization of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, closing the gender gap in basic and secondary education, and advancing women’s economic and social rights.

Fourth, three useful UN initiatives aimed at addressing violence against women on a global basis can have a significant impact on this crucial problem:

- ▶ UNIFEM provides financial support and technical assistance to innovative programs to secure women’s basic human rights and gender equality throughout more than 100 countries. UNIFEM has led efforts to protect women’s rights and expand their opportunities across the UN system.
- ▶ The Trust Fund in Support of Actions to Eliminate Violence Against Women was created by the UN General Assembly in 1996 to address violence against women. It is the only multilateral, grant-making mechanism that supports local, national, and regional efforts to combat violence against women.
- ▶ The WHO has undertaken a unique multicountry study on violence against women that not only is greatly expanding the database, but also has created valid and reliable research methodologies. The multicountry study at the WHO can be expanded to include other countries and to examine various forms of intervention, including their costs and efficacy.

Fifth, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) themselves offer a critical opportunity to advance the cause of women’s rights. In September 2005, the UN General Assembly Summit will review progress toward achievement of the MDGs, which include fundamentally the same goals as the ICPD agreement, as well as those of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. At the ten-year review of the Beijing agreement in March, over 100 governments unanimously adopted a political declaration which emphasized that “the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is essential to achieving” the MDGs.

President Bush should:

- ▶ *Galvanize global support for the UNAIDS “ABC-Plus” approach to combating the HIV/AIDS pandemic and support the work of the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS.* The administration should mobilize international support for a global effort to redefine the global HIV/AIDS policy paradigm in order to reduce feminization of the epidemic, sex discrimination in access to health services, and violations of HIV-positive women’s reproductive rights. As a first step, the administration should announce its support for the “ABC-Plus” approach articulated by UNAIDS and for the recommendations of the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS. The administration should provide additional financial support for the work of the Coalition. In its bilateral and multilateral assistance programs, the administration should work to develop approaches that effectively protect and serve women and girls outside core group transmitters.

- ▶ *Order the State Department to form a bipartisan, expert team to review the controversy surrounding the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) with the aim of restoring U.S. funding for UNFPA.* The review effort should seek to establish a policy that will achieve bipartisan support in the United States Congress as well as support internationally for concrete strategies to reduce coercive family planning practices in China and enable United States participation in UNFPA. The State Department should articulate specific steps that the administration will pursue, together with the international community, to reduce the incidence of coercive practices by the Chinese government in the arena of reproductive health and rights.
- ▶ *Sign the World Leaders Statement in Support of the International Conference on Population and Development and fully fund the U.S. commitments established at the ICPD for fiscal 2006.* Building on its reaffirmation of ICPD last October, the administration can send a signal to the international community by signing the World Leaders Statement in Support of the ICPD, which reaffirms the agreed international framework for women's health and rights. Likewise, the president should agree to fund the United States' share of resource commitments to the ICPD as his proposed budget moves forward.
- ▶ *Provide \$10 million to support UNIFEM, the Trust Fund in Support of Actions to Eliminate Violence Against Women, and the World Health Organization's multicountry study on violence against women.* The United States should commit at least an additional \$10 million to support these multilateral initiatives, distributed appropriately across the three. The United States currently provides only \$1 million to UNIFEM and contributes nothing to the Trust Fund.
- ▶ *Reaffirm the commitment of the United States to women's health and human rights at key international meetings scheduled for 2005.* Improving women's health and human rights—including a zero-tolerance policy for violence against women and support for equal economic and social opportunities for women—should be central components of the United States' efforts at these meetings. Leadership from the United States can make a major contribution to forward progress on saving women's lives, protecting families, and strengthening nations.