

**Reproductive Health and
the Millennium Development Goals:
The Missing Link**

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In the 1990s, development experts in international organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental, moved steadily toward a consensus that women would have to play a central role in society if debilitating poverty and all its attendant deprivations were to be significantly reduced in many struggling nations. Evidence was accumulating on the value of investing in women first, and much of this analysis informed a series of breakthrough international conferences on social issues held under the auspices of the United Nations.

Two meetings in particular were assumed by many to have changed forever the terms of discussion on issues of sustainable development: the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, and the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing the following year. In both, a large majority of nations agreed that without the most basic rights for women within the family and society -- most of all the right to decide, jointly or alone if necessary, on the number of children they were prepared to bear, or that their health could sustain -- meaningful and rapid strides in public health, education, the protection of the environment and economic development would lag at best and be impossible at worst. It was also being recognized widely that without a significant expansion in many developing countries of sexual rights for women -- popularly described as the right to say 'No' to unwanted, forced or unprotected sex -- the lethal march of HIV-AIDS across Africa and Asia could not be thwarted.

Yet by 2000, when the General Assembly adopted with much fanfare the Millennium Declaration and, a year later, the Millennium Development Goals, a roadmap for world development by 2015, an explicit commitment to the reproductive rights of women was nowhere to be found, only a vaguer promise of gender equality was there. When specific indicators for judging how the world could measure its progress toward those goals, explicit sexual rights were again missing.

How did it happen? And why?

Conversations with people who were in key positions during the drafting of these documents and with others who lobbied with increasing trepidation and incredulity from outside to save the advances made in Cairo and Beijing, lead to the conclusion that several factors came together in the debate over how to sustain the commitment to women's reproductive rights in the face of opposition from governments around the world. Government delegations, embattled U.N. agency officials and influential actors within the United Nations Secretariat all played parts in the story.

Most tragic, perhaps, was the strong opposition from nations within the G-77, the loosely organized association of developing nations that include some of these most needy states. Opposition from the G-77, which was internally split on the issue but opted for a consensus that would not offend its most conservative members, became a pivotal factor in preventing the Secretariat from attempting to include at least some of the language of Cairo at every step of the millennium development process: the declaration, the goals and the “targets and indicators” devised to test the progress (or lack of it) in achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

It is hard to imagine that women in a majority of those G-77 countries, who have often been in the lead on many reproductive health issues, would have agreed with that collective G-77 stand if they had been seriously consulted by their governments. And it is indefensible that the United Nations Secretariat, committed as it was to a decade of pledges to women, allowed their interests to be so easily sidelined. During those same crucial months in 2000-2001, the World Bank was arguing vigorously for an unambiguous and explicit statement – indeed a separate goal – on sexual and reproductive rights, but it was unable to budge the U.N.

The drama is not over yet. In 2005, the General Assembly will again take up a study of the Millennium Development Goals, and while there are hopes of rectifying in some way the absence of women’s reproductive rights, few who follow this closely have high hopes of success, unless the G-77 – which can muster a majority in the General Assembly -- is persuaded to change its collective position opposing women’s reproductive rights and join European governments in pushing for the explicit linking of the Cairo action plan with the Millennium Development Goals. These two groups will have to do this in the face of strong opposition from the Bush Administration, which can be expected to exert enormous diplomatic and perhaps economic pressures – threatening loss of aid – on key G-77 countries.

Some background:

The Millennium Development Goals evolved through a series of steps taken first by the Secretariat and then by diplomats preparing the ground for adoption of the Millennium Declaration by the 2000 General Assembly. The process began with the publication of the Secretary General’s Millennium Development Report in early April 2000. It was titled *We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century*, and it was written under the leadership of John Gerard Ruggie, a former dean of

Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, who was Kofi Annan's very effective chief adviser for strategic planning from 1997 to 2001. Ruggie has since moved to the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard.

Ambassador Gert Rosenthal of Guatemala takes up the story from there. He was one of two experienced diplomats asked by Theo-Ben Gurirab of Namibia, the General Assembly president for the year that preceded the Millennium Assembly, to take the lead in drafting a Millennium Declaration that all nations could support in the fall of 2000.

It is always a difficult task at the United Nations to produce any document that gets unanimous backing. Richard Butler, a former Australian permanent representative and later executive chairman of the Iraqi weapons inspection commission, likes to tell the story of how it took weeks to win approval for a simple message of congratulations and recommitment to mark the United Nations' 50th anniversary in 1995. At the United Nations, all of this negotiating, or bickering and posturing, takes place behind the scenes. Ambassadors also quietly take their concerns to the Secretary General. Without a single public step, the word gets out.

Rosenthal said that Gurirab – “who had an authoritarian streak” – was determined to avoid an endless series of arid closed-door debates over the Millennium Declaration and wanted to hasten the task as much as possible, avoiding the all-too-typical quagmire on social issues. “I think if they would have created a preparatory committee, it might have gotten much messier,” Rosenthal said. “Delegations tinkered with it, but not very much.”¹

This more streamlined procedure also meant, however, that those delegations who would have fought hard to include reproductive rights and services had limited input. More important, nongovernmental organizations and even government experts were barred entirely from the process of drafting the declaration.

Drawing up a draft Millennium Declaration, which would call for real action stretching over 15 years, still required a lot of diplomatic skill, even without the preparatory process. Rosenthal said that the document was largely drawn from the Secretary General's report, which he generally approved of and which he acknowledged had been composed to skirt controversy. Rosenthal's partner in this job was Michael John Powles, the permanent representative of New Zealand at the United Nations. Both men have since left those posts.

¹ Interview with Gert Rosenthal, August 2004

“I had a hand in the first draft of the Millennium Declaration, and I worked with the concluding chapter of the document,” Rosenthal said in an interview. “The original source was the Secretariat document. Then, of course, there was negotiation. But if you go back to the original document, as far as I remember, there is no express recommendation on incorporating reproductive health. It is mentioned, but always indirectly.”

Rosenthal remembers correctly: reproductive health was missing. The Secretary General’s report, from which the declaration and the goals were drawn, does draw attention to “discrimination by race and gender.”² On education, it says: “About 60 percent of children not in school are girls. Female enrolment in rural areas remains shockingly low. Shortchanging girls is not only a matter of gender discrimination; it is *also bad economics and bad social policy*. [emphasis added] But no further elaboration is offered.

In a later passage in the report, the language stops short again of stating the obvious importance of women and the huge toll reproductive health failures take. “Lack of access to basic health care is one of the main reasons poor people stay poor,” the report says. “In Africa, the high burden of disease not only requires families to stretch their meager resources but also *locks them into a high-fertility, high-mortality poverty trap*.” [emphasis added]

In discussing the prevention of HIV-AIDS, the report recommends both male and female condoms, but only parenthetically.³ Greatly expanded sex education for the young is stressed. However, in recent international meetings some countries, including the United States, have sought to constrain that activity by insisting that that sex education focus on abstinence. The actual provision of contraceptives or other reproductive services to the young is not addressed.

The Secretary General’s report is most explicit in stating that “Women have become especially vulnerable to violence and sexual exploitation,” and it calls for a reassertion of “the centrality of international humanitarian and human rights law.” Those who want to read into that a more promising commitment to the sexual rights of women can turn to the 1979 *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination*

² *We the Peoples: The United Nations in the 21st Century*. United Nations Department of Public Information, 2000.

³ *Ibid*, page 27

Against Women, which is part of the international canon to which the Secretary General's report refers.

That convention clearly rules out any condition or action that “has the effect or purpose of nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil *or any other field.*” [emphasis added]

Relying on—or clinging to -- this second-hand assurance may be a stretch. The fact remains that there is no direct mention in the Secretary General's report of a woman's rights over her own reproductive life, and why that matters in the battle against poverty. That is the starting point for all that follows.

Rosenthal could not think of any other major issue pressed by interested groups that was sidelined this completely. Environmental demands, for example, were largely met, though environmental activists had no greater access to the drafting process than any other groups. There was an explicit reference to the U.N. Conference on the Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. One lobby was heard, however. African nations -- with the backing of Gurirab, a former foreign minister and later prime minister of Namibia – were successful in inserting a reference to that continent's special concerns. No other regional group was mentioned in this way.

Thus the Millennium Declaration relied on the framework and language of the Secretary General's report, and could at best only allude to the commitments of the most relevant (to women) conferences of the 1990s. This opacity has, of course, allowed both the proponents and opponents of greater focus on women's reproductive health to fall back on the declaration, depending on their respective interpretations. There is wishful thinking on both sides. Bush administration officials point to the absences of women's rights; its opponents to the opening allowed for them.

Rosenthal is pessimistic about the latter claim. “The people who are going around saying that reproductive health is a commitment are looking at the part of the Millennium Declaration which [reiterates a commitment to] ‘all U.N. conferences.’” he said. “So they are saying, We reiterate Cairo.” That's the most that can be said, he added.

The declaration has only a few specific references to women. It says, for example: “Men and women have the right to live their lives and raise their children in dignity, free from hunger and from the fear of violence, oppression or injustice.” No mention here of

the freedom or wherewithal to regulate family size. The document also commits nations to “the equal rights and opportunities of women and men.”⁴

Later, it adds this commitment: “We also resolve: To promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable.” A reference is made to the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*.

It is perhaps not surprising that in 2003, when Secretary General Kofi Annan appraised the progress or lack of it being made on the Millennium Development Goals, he had to conclude that, “The best one can say is that there is increased global awareness of issues affecting women’s rights, although at the country level, there is little progress and in many cases even the rights that have been achieved are under threat.”

The eight Millennium Development Goals, which were drawn from the declaration, were published along with indicators and targets in August 2001. The goals were devised in a working committee drawn from a range of U.N. bodies, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, Unicef, the Population Fund and the World Health Organization, as well as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Rosenthal described the goals as a “grab bag” of ideas drawn from a host of U.N. sources as well as the Millennium Declaration itself.

Michael Doyle, a Princeton scholar who had by then taken Ruggie’s place on the Secretary General’s team, led the working committee during several months of discussions and negotiations, not only within the organization but also among government missions and other delegations in New York.

The goals and indicators again had no explicit commitment to women’s reproductive health. Doyle, who is now Harold Brown Professor of Law and International Affairs at Columbia University, said in an interview that his group, in refining the goals and indicators, had to start with the premise that “if it wasn’t in the declaration it couldn’t be in the goals.”⁵

But he agreed with others in the U.N. system who were most committed to the Cairo consensus – for example, the leaders of the Population Fund, Unicef or the World Health Organization -- that if the goals could not go beyond the declaration and be more specific than the declaration in reasserting the promises of Cairo, at least some changes in

⁴ United Nations Millennium Declaration, A/RES/55/2, 18 September 2000.

⁵ Interview November 10, 2004.

language in the goals might help. He said that he suggested changing the label “maternal health” in one of the goals to “reproductive health,” but was blocked by the G-77.

Jacqueline Sharpe, president of the Family Planning Association of Trinidad, who attended some of the meetings among G-77 delegations that accompanied various stages of the millennium development process, said in an interview that the G-77, which now numbers more than 130 members, has been deeply divided on issues involving women’s health and reproductive rights.⁶

Speaking on the margins of a symposium in Rio de Janeiro on the relationship between women’s reproductive health and the Millennium Development Goals, Sharpe said that on one end of the spectrum of opinion in the G-77 were countries such as Sudan and Libya, whose delegates were able to hold up action “till three o’clock in the morning” to prevent the forming of a consensus that they opposed. There was never a vote. On the other end of the spectrum were moderate Islamic nations such as Malaysia, plus a strong subgroup of Caribbean and Latin American delegations. In most of these meetings involving women’s health and reproductive rights, Sharpe said, there were only diplomats or government officials with no expertise in the issues being discussed. Inevitably, the G-77 would have to accept a consensus that could be backed by the most recalcitrant of its members.

Sharpe says that important lessons were learned about why the Millennium Development Goals emerged as they did, shorn of women’s rights. “We did not really pay the kind of attention we should have,” she said of nongovernmental organizations that were excluded from the discussion. “We need to get on official delegations,” she said, given that the exclusion of NGOs from the discussion is likely to continue.

Even then, Sharpe said, there is no guarantee against political interference as countries make deals behind the scenes to exchange promises of support on various issues. Among most government priorities in the G-77, she said, women’s rights are not high. “Women’s bodies still get to be the pawns in the chess game,” she said. “They get traded away.”

What happened in the formal drafting of goals and targets is all the more surprising because only two years earlier, in 1999, member nations had reiterated their support for the conclusions of the 1994 Cairo conference in a five-year review. That review, in a special General Assembly session, benefited enormously from the work of

⁶ Interview, November 30, 2004

countless nongovernmental organizations and committed government delegations, said Stan Bernstein of the Population Fund.⁷ Ironically, however, the effort in 1999 left both NGOs and official delegations overconfident (and in some cases exhausted) and they did not shift the focus of their attention quickly or effectively enough to the Millennium process, said Bernstein, the senior researcher and editor of the UNFPA's annual *State of the World Population* report who has been the sexual and reproductive health advisor to the Millennium Project. "The Millennium summit process did not loom large enough on peoples' radar screens," he said.

Doyle said that when it was clear that he and others in the Secretariat who personally supported women's rights were not going to be able to rephrase the titles of the goals because of the G-77's opposition, the working group moved to the indicators and targets, hoping to save some of the Cairo program of action. One Cairo-linked goal that survived in the indicators was the proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel, which Unicef and the World Health Organization, among others, consider a basic measure of a woman's right to good reproductive care. But broad contraceptive use – indeed, birth control of any kind – is not an indicator.

Doyle said that there was some debate over how to deal with the provision of contraceptive services, condoms in particular. In the end, the condom prevalence rate (though only among married women and sex workers) is suggested as an indicator under the section devoted to HIV-AIDS. There is also a more general measure of contraceptive prevalence, but again only in the context of fighting AIDS.⁸

The rate of knowledge about HIV-AIDS among young people 15 to 24 years of age is also an indicator. But there is no mention of important reproductive health aims for the young articulated by agencies and programs such as the Population Fund, Unifem and Unicef, as well as many nongovernmental organizations. Under Carol Bellamy as executive director, Unicef, the children's fund, has stressed repeatedly that a lot of children are now sexually active and teenage pregnancy is a worldwide killer of girls. Trafficking in humans for the sex trade can involve children as young as six or seven.

Safe motherhood, yes. More female education, yes. More political participation for women at all levels, yes. Undefined "empowerment," yes. But nothing in the Millennium Development Goals about the fundamental physical hurdles women

⁷ Interview, December 17, 2004

⁸ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division. Millennium Indicators Database, Target 7.

encounter starting within the family, often the extended family, where cultural practices may treat the woman as the property of male relatives or where in-laws may assert control to the point of violence over a young wife brought into the household.

Under Goal 3, titled “Promote gender equality and empower women” the only measurements are in education and literacy. Nongovernmental organizations and U.N. agencies working, for example in India, argue that even educated, politically active women can have a very low personal status and virtually no rights in making reproductive decisions in a large majority of families. They also face widespread violence, much of it linked to personal relationships.

“Why reproductive health wasn’t put up as one of the seven domestic policy goals – I think the answer’s obvious,” said Rosenthal. “It’s a very contentious issue, just as it is domestically in this country [the United States]. A lot of Islamic countries and countries that are close to the Holy See prefer not to talk about the subject, in spite of the Cairo declaration.”

“I think the calculation of the Secretariat was, Let’s not sacrifice the greater coherence and get involved in these highly controversial topics.” Rosenthal said. Ruggie acknowledges that the Secretariat did not want to reopen “the mess” of Cairo.⁹ The 1994 conference was a heated one, with a large and vocal presence on the sidelines (and in some official delegations) of anti-abortion, anti-reproductive rights lobbies, some with Vatican support or the backing of very conservative Islamic governments. Debates were fierce. In the end, however, what emerged was a document that the vast majority of United Nations member countries signed. Nevertheless, the United Nations Secretariat, which had seen a backlash against the gains of Cairo developing not only among some developing nations but also in the Bush administration in Washington, was not willing to reopen all the 1994 debates. If there was no inclination to revive the “mess” of the Cairo process, there was equally no intention of allowing Cairo’s gains to be reversed, which a renewed debate would surely have facilitated.

Since 2001, the Bush administration has been publicly and privately attempting to undermine the Cairo consensus within the United Nations system and outside it. But it must be remembered that in the late 1990s, and during the writing of the Millennium Declaration, the United States mission to the U.N., then under the Clinton administration, never intervened to save the gains of Cairo. By 2000, the Clinton administration, buffeted

⁹ Exchange of e-mails, August 2004.

by conservatives in Congress, had effectively stopped promoting women's rights at the United Nations.

Timothy E. Wirth, who with Vice President Al Gore had led the American delegation in Cairo in 1994 and fought effectively worldwide for women's reproductive rights, was gone from the administration. Wirth became president of the United Nations Foundation in 1997.

In an interview¹⁰ Wirth said that his vocal promotion of women's rights and other international social issues at the world conferences had become an annoyance to the Clinton Administration, which he thought was glad to see him go. Gore, meanwhile, was running for president in 2000 and knew that women's rights would be a political liability in the face of a strengthening right-wing, anti-abortion lobby among Republicans. Many in this lobby have sought to boil down reproductive rights to the single issue of abortion and they see this lurking behind every reference to such rights or choices.

Nafis Sadik, who chaired the 1994 Cairo conference with decisiveness and flair, was also missing from the mix. In December 2000 she stepped down as executive director of the United Nations Population Fund, and Thoraya Obaid, an American-educated Saudi woman, took her place. Despite some initial pressure from Arab nations, according to diplomats in New York, Obaid has proved to be as firm in her views about the centrality of reproductive health as Sadik, if less combative. In presentations around the world, Obaid has since argued repeatedly and dramatically that seven of the eight Millennium Development Goals cannot be achieved without a commitment to Cairo. But during that crucial transition year in 2000, several people involved in the changes at the agency said, the UNFPA was not in its strongest lobbying position.

Sadik faults the U.N. Secretariat in particular for its unwillingness to stand up for and carry on the campaign for what were longstanding public commitments to women's reproductive rights.¹¹ She attributes some of this to Ruggie's desire for concrete targets in his Millennium Development Goals.

"John Ruggie, when he first produced the draft, said he wanted goals that were quantifiable, and his view was that reproductive health could not be quantified in any way -- in the sense of reduction of maternal mortality by so much, and so on," she said in an interview. "He didn't know what the baseline [for reproductive rights] was and how

¹⁰ Interview with author for *The InterDependent*, publication of the United Nations Association of the United States of America, New York. Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring 2004.

¹¹ Interview August 2004

much it would have to increase.” But, she added, Ruggie and others in the U.N. did in fact agree that this topic should be factored into the indicators devised to measure progress, or lack of it, on the goals.

“A lot of NGOs wrote letters to Thoraya Obaid and a lot even called me,” said Sadik. Nongovernmental organizations, by then aware that their exclusion from the process of drawing up the Millennium Development Goals would have serious repercussions, were meeting with United Nations officials and diplomats from sympathetic countries to press their case for the inclusion of women’s rights, which seemed an obvious component of poverty reduction .

“In fact, I talked to the Secretary General, who asked me to talk to Michael Doyle,” Sadik said. “I talked with him [Doyle] and he said, Yes, yes, he would consider it,” Sadik said. “But with all the efforts of everyone, it didn’t get in because by now there was a feeling that the Bush administration was really opposed to reproductive health,” she said. Doyle agrees that even if the G-77 nations had not opposed a more liberal interpretation of the development goals and how to measure progress toward them, the Bush administration was waiting in the wings to block any reference to women’s rights or even to the use of the term “reproductive health,” which conservatives argued was a cloak for a “feminist agenda” that included the right to abortion.

But Doyle also defends the Secretariat and U.N. agencies, saying that there was no opposition to confirming the Cairo program, only a realization that in the climate of 2001 – with opposition to women’s rights more explicit in both the G-77 and Washington -- it would be politically impossible to win the support of the General Assembly.¹² This, despite the groundbreaking efforts of women from developing countries who at Cairo, Beijing and in all their work since, have pushed the boundaries of women’s rights significantly in diverse places such as Egypt, Brazil and across southern Africa. These women, however have been working for the most part through nongovernmental organizations, and they were kept out of the millennium process.

At Population Action International in Washington, Sally Ethelston, a policy analyst, added that the nongovernmental organizations were themselves under pressure at the turn of this century in the U.N., where some nations in the Economic and Social Council, which oversees the accreditation of NGOs and where the G-77 also has a large

¹² Interview, November 2004

presence, had become alarmed at the exponential growth and influence of civil society organizations were trying to limit their participation and action.¹³

Sadik, a Pakistani physician who is now the Secretary General's envoy on AIDS in Asia, is blunt in her criticism of the Millennium Development Goals and of what she sees as a mentality that allowed so important an issue as women's reproductive health to be deliberately ignored in a campaign of such high importance to the U.N. She said that repeated calls for gender equality without reference to sexual health are meaningless.¹⁴

"The indicators for maternal mortality didn't have anything on reproductive health," she said. "A lot of the issues related to adolescents, to access to reproductive health, and women's rights to make decisions – all that is linked to with maternal mortality. Again, there is no indicator there."

"Then in the HIV-AIDS indicators, they have 'contraceptive prevalence levels' but not condom use," she said. "All other contraceptives don't prevent HIV infection."

"The reluctance to deal with reproductive health and contraception seems to have clouded the way in which indicators were developed for the goals," she said. "They are all seriously flawed."

"Gender is supposed to be mainstreamed in everything at the U.N.," Sadik added. "But when it comes to actually designing how to treat the main issues of women's empowerment and control, their reproductive decisions are totally ignored."

"Some of this is the fault of governments, but some is also the reluctance of some of the Secretariat," she said. "Many men deep down don't really want women to have control. I really start to believe that, because it's really quite strange the way people who you think have supported the idea reproductive rights for women find justification and excuses for not doing so."

Sadik's reference to the concern that HIV-AIDS cannot be tackled without giving women more power over the use of their bodies is widely shared in both public health and family planning organizations. Steven W. Sinding, director general of the International Planned Parenthood Federation in London, says that "it is essential that we unite the sexual and reproductive health movement with the movement fighting HIV-AIDS."¹⁵ Instead, these issues are drifting apart, he said.

¹³ Exchange of emails, November 2004

¹⁴ Sadik interview, August 2004

¹⁵ Steven W. Sinding: "Threats to Sexual and Reproductive Health Programs and Some Suggested Approaches to Address Them." Address delivered in Stockholm, February 12, 2003.

Speaking in February 2003 in Sweden to an international conference on how reproductive health is being dealt with in the agendas of donor nations, Sinding said: “Sexual and reproductive health and rights as a development theme has fallen away from the center of the international development agenda. At the same time, many governments and agencies are treating HIV-AIDS separately, as if it were not a sexual and reproductive health issue. I find this astounding!”

In November 2004, the International Planned Parenthood Federation joined with UNFPA, the Alan Guttmacher Institute and UNAIDS in publishing a report, “The Role of Reproductive Health Providers in Preventing HIV.” It called for the more extensive integration of health and family planning services.

Sinding is now also leading a campaign for the introduction of a ninth Millennium Development Goal to explicitly cover reproductive rights, and he is asking for support from organizations broadly involved in health and women’s issues as well as poverty reduction. This campaign could give new life to the World Bank’s earlier call for a separate reproductive rights goal that would reinstate the importance of the issue in U.N. thinking.

In a speech to Western Hemisphere experts in reproductive health in Rio de Janeiro in November, Sinding outlined how things had gone so badly wrong in the last few years and what must be done now:¹⁶ “We were told at the time [that the goals were being devised] ‘Don’t worry. Be patient. Things will be all right.’”

“Well, we were patient, we were polite – and things are not all right,” he said. “We are losing ground.” He cited a major 2004 speech to the General Assembly by Secretary General Kofi Annan, which had “not one single mention of reproductive health or reproductive rights.” Unlike Doyle and others who work with the Secretary General, Sinding now worries about Annan’s commitment. In Annan’s speech, Sinding said, “There was not one suggestion that the Secretary General thinks reproductive health is important.”

“If you’re not an MDG, you’re not on the agenda,” Sinding said. “If you’re not a line item, you’re out of the game.”

In an interview after his speech, Sinding said that any strategy to get reproductive health back into United Nations focus before a summit session of the General Assembly

¹⁶ Address to the Symposium on the Millennium Development Goals and Sexual and Reproductive Health, November 30, 2004.

takes up a review of the Millennium Development Goals next September, must include getting the G-77 to take the lead in pressing for the inclusion of women's sexual health – not becoming an obstruction on this issue again. “The Europeans won't be tough without the G-77,” he said, questioning those who have hopes that European nations and others in their regional bloc at the United Nations will fight for inclusion of women's rights.

The first half of 2005 will be crucial to the fate of reproductive rights in relation to the Millennium Development Goals. Another important step in the millennium process is now imminent, and this more than likely will be the last chance to enshrine a commitment to the Cairo goals in the world's most ambitious anti-poverty program.

To recap: first there was the Secretary General's report, then the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals, with indicators to measure progress toward those goals. Altogether, eight broad goals, 18 more specific targets and 48 indicators have been devised.

Now, under Jeffrey Sachs, a special adviser to the secretary general and head of the Millennium Project at Columbia University, a study has been done on how to implement and finance the Millennium Development Goals. The Millennium Project, assisted by the United Nations Development Program and Stan Bernstein of UNFPA, has produced a collection of 10 task force reports written the under guidance of world experts, dealing with economic development, hunger, education and gender equality, child health and maternal health, HIV-AIDS and other medical issues, the environment, water and sanitation, slum life, open trading systems and scientific and technological innovation.

Sachs and relevant team members say that they will put the emphasis back on women and women's reproductive rights where these are essential factors. Allan Rosenfield, professor of obstetrics and gynecology and dean of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University said that he would not have joined the project under any other circumstances.

“When Kofi Annan asked Jeff Sachs to put together a team project, and asked me and a couple of people here to co-chair the maternal and child health task force, we immediately said, The only condition [under which] we'll do it is if we build

reproductive health back into it,” Rosenfield said. “Jeff said, Yes, I have a commitment from the SG that we can do that.”¹⁷

Rosenfield concurs with Nafis Sadik and others in saying that the preoccupation with education and economic change in the lives of women is fine, but not enough.

“There are cultural issues, and these vary from country to country,” he said. “There are countries where women, even though they are beginning to get educated, are still very restricted.” He said that he plans to include reproductive health rights in recommendations on reducing maternal mortality. The task force on education and gender – on the surface, an odd combination that could be seen to subsume sexual rights – is also committed to advancing the importance of reproductive health.

The reports of the Millennium Project, to be published on January 17, 2005, are being written away from the politics of the U.N., “without country meddling,” said Rosenfield, who attended the Cairo population conference and has watched the backlash developing among U.N. members since that event in 1994, even among those who signed on to the Cairo consensus. “But I don’t think we have the power to implement recommendations.”

Furthermore, a reading of the unpublished draft report on the Millennium Project website and public comments by project directors as well as U.N. and World Bank officials leave the clear impression that money – aid and investment – will be the dominant themes of the study, not social change. The rights of women are mentioned, as is good governance. But the recommendations may in the end be even less specific – certainly no more – than the U.N. documents that preceded them.

The Millennium Project reports will also go to a summit session of the General Assembly in September 2005 after a review by the Secretary General. Once again, the opinions and concerns of his staff will come into play, along with the intervention of national delegations. A full preparatory process is planned.

At the same time, the summit will also be looking at the report of the Secretary General’s commission on reform of the United Nations to meet new world challenges, and this report is almost certainly bound to attract greater attention. In a preliminary report to the General Assembly on November 1, 2004, previewing plans for the summit,

¹⁷ Interview with Allan Rosenfield, August 2004.

¹⁸Secretary General Annan said that it would be a meeting of “decisive importance.” He also said that a longer report reassessing the Millennium Declaration that he will present to member governments in March 2005 would put a major focus on issues of peace and security. In that framework, it is hard to see where women’s rights will get an airing, except possibly in a reiteration of the commitment not yet fulfilled to integrate more women into peacekeeping and peace-making.

Nongovernmental organizations will, again, not be invited to participate in any way at the September 2005 summit, the Secretary General said in his preliminary report, citing “security reasons and space limitations.” He suggested instead that the General Assembly “may wish to consider organizing hearings with civil society organizations, prior to the high-level meeting, in June 2005.”

What small commitment to women’s rights exists in other reports, such as that of the Millennium Project, could well be tempered or gone by then, if history is any guide. A range of population experts say that would be tantamount to forging ahead toward 2015, the target date for achieving the Millennium Development Goals, without the necessary understanding or acceptance of why persistent poverty exists in some places and not in others, depending on the status and roles of women. It is also questionable that there will be sufficient commitment to putting women’s reproductive rights into the goals, given that this would reopen debate on the Millennium Declaration. Governments could then go on ignoring the gender factor.

Ethelston, at Population Action International is nevertheless hopeful that the Millennium Project can make a difference, along with strong European voices for women’s rights in the special assembly session and events leading up to it. Ethelston said that the reason for this should be obvious: “You just can’t get to poverty reduction without passing through good reproductive health; the death and disability burden of poor reproductive health is so great in developing countries,” she said.

Ethelston added that also there is much more attention being paid to the Millennium Development Goals now than there was when they were being created in 2000, and this might draw attention to some deficiencies. Even the controversy surrounding the goals might help.

¹⁸“Modalities, format and organization of the high-level plenary meeting of the sixtieth session of the General Assembly”, Report of the Secretary General. A/59/545. November 1, 2004.

“At UNFPA, Bernstein said that over the last year there has been growing support for a stronger link between reproductive rights and development in developing countries themselves. He said that the early months of 2005, before the Secretary General’s March report and U.N. preparatory meetings in June, will be critical. The publication of the Millennium Project reports provides an opening for nongovernmental organizations everywhere to demand the building of the missing bridge between Cairo and the 2005 Millennium review summit in September. “Some issues don’t make it to the table unless civil society is involved,” he said.

At the World Bank, Zia Qureshi, the lead author of the Global Monitoring Report, tends to agree. In an online exchange¹⁹ in the fall of 2004, he said that “a fairly broad architecture of monitoring” has emerged in recent years “and within that the gender-related agenda is extremely important.” He does, however, echo much that is said by U.N. officials who prefer to talk about “gender inequalities” rather than women’s rights.

“Addressing gender disparities is important, beyond education, and in fact, it has implications for growth, it has implications for development more broadly,” he said. “So this is really a critical, central or cross-cutting element of development goals.”

It would seem imperative that the maximum effort is made to provide platforms for the women from developing nations, who can best make the case for a more realistic, less political consideration of the goals and indicators. Their voices are not being heard outside organizations that already support their aims and analyses. It is too easy for their own governments to ignore them.

With the reelection of President Bush, however, the United States could throw up even more formidable roadblocks to expanded international reassertion of women’s reproductive rights. Given that votes for what are perceived as “moral values” played a large part in Bush’s strong showing, those on the conservative right who would deny women rights to abortion or even emergency contraception or access to extensive family planning choices in poor countries can be expected to keep up or increase pressures for religiously inspired limits on American aid. They will also shape American behavior in international organizations.

Sinding of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, calls the Millennium Development Goals “dead letters” if the commitments of Cairo are not specifically

¹⁹ www.worldbank.com online discussion, October 26, 2004.

upheld.²⁰ Echoing Sadik’s sentiments, Sinding told a news conference in London in September 2004 that “mostly male delegates at the United Nations are apparently squeamish about sexuality.”

Doyle adds another important consideration. Without indicators that reflect the commitments of Cairo, there will be no universally agreed way to measure those pledges of better health care for women. It is indicative of the Secretariat’s wariness, despite good intentions, that there was no official “Cairo plus 10” meeting in 2004, as there have been other events to recap and review the progress that followed other major conferences. A group of nongovernmental organization, led by the International Planned Parenthood Federation, had to organize a meeting in London outside the United Nations framework.

The U.N. cannot run scared, Sadik said.²¹ “We have to uphold principles. These are recommendations that have been agreed by all governments, and we have got to support them and make sure that they’re implemented – and not run away from them.”

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²⁰ Countdown 2015: Statement by Steven W. Sinding, London, September 2, 2004. Also in interview with the author.

²¹ Interview, August 2004