

A Review of Theda Skocpol's *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*

Tony Fleming

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In her June 2004 *American Prospect* article "The Narrowing of Civic Life", Theda Skocpol, Professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard University, suggests that the qualitative civic nature of many American membership groups is being weakened by a dependence on professional management and large-scale funders. She makes this claim despite the last thirty years' apparent increase and influence of professionally run and foundation-funded advocacy groups' success in promoting racial and gender equality, environmental protection and other progressive causes. And she's right.

"Optimists correctly point out that public agendas have been enlarged by expert advocacy groups fighting for social rights and fresh understandings of the public interest," she writes. "Yet those who look on the upside fail to notice that more voices are not the same thing as increased democratic capacity." She further notes the disturbing reality that "the gains in voice and public leverage have mainly accrued to the top tiers of U.S. society; Americans who are not wealthy or well educated now have fewer associations representing their values and interests, and fewer opportunities for participation." This is especially incriminating for groups on the left, seeking to promote progressive values. The lack of "democratic depth," so to speak, has been cited as a characteristic difference between weak progressive activism and strongly held conservative sentiment where each occurs.

For the article, Skocpol draws on civic research conducted for her 2003 book, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, in which she contrasts civic associations in previous decades with contemporary "member-less" membership organizations, PACS, think tanks and foundations that dominate civil society today. She dispels myths that civic engagement in the earlier 20th century was limited to local business elites, males, or whites. She documents how prominent civic groups that involved women and minorities in influential roles were not uncommon. Skocpol examines the importance that cross-class involvement held for such groups, and reveals how the larger civic groups taught Americans democracy through their imitative federal organization. Those at the core of decision- and policymaking in such organizations were personally experienced in democracy in ways far removed from their contemporary national-elite counterparts.

"[M]en and women of various backgrounds could learn skills of expression and organization relevant to civic and political life more generally," she writes. "National leaders, invariably, knew what it was like to run local affairs and win the respect – and votes – of constituents. They were thoroughly grounded in the workings of a democratic civil society... Members counted; and leaders had to mobilize and interact with others from a wide range of backgrounds, or they were not successful. To get ahead within associations, ambitious men and women had to express and act on values and activities shared with people of diverse occupational backgrounds."

Skocpol is critical of recent scholarship and efforts – including Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* and Bill Galston's *A Nation of Spectators* – that suggest Americans' civic engagement once was or should return to a nation of local activists without embedded aspiration to national or global progressivism. While such local or neighborhood activism may inspire "warm and fuzzy feelings" in social capital activists, it will not produce a democratically engaged American citizenry on issues of national or global importance.

“America’s civic life has shifted from membership-mobilization to advocacy and management and from stress on shared values and goals to the pursuit of specialized interests... Improving local communities, and social life more generally, will not create sufficient democratic leverage to tackle problems that can only be addressed with concerted national commitment.”

The approach suggested in *Diminished Democracy* involves building broadly shared and cross-class values, linking local members with state, national and global centers of power and developing the skills and comportment that opens opportunities for members in political affairs.

Citizens for Global Solutions advances an openly ambitious political agenda as a national organization. Its transformation from an often sidelined membership organization was driven by a comparison

with the type of contemporary advocacy group that Skocpol suggests suffers from a reliance on professional management but little democratic depth. This is not to suggest that its predecessor organizations, the World Federalist Association or Campaign for UN Reform, excelled at mobilizing civic engagement; they suffered from their own design flaws in terms of Diminished Democracy’s critique of contemporary membership groups.

In contrast, Skocpol cites the AFL-CIO, the Christian Coalition, the AARP and the Children’s Defense Fund as examples of organizations that have combined modern organizational tactics with a commitment to classic American civic engagement. These groups are rediscovering the value of local chapters and dues-paying members – in combination with professional managers and foundation grants – in creating sustainable political leverage.

“[I]t seems so much easier to open central offices with media people, lobbyists, and computerized mailing lists. But...[s]ustained infrastructure building – provided it is not just local but translocal – can generate greater influence than centralized efforts focused on Washington, DC, or ephemeral plays for attention in the national media... The hallmark of such approaches is leadership training and steady recruitment through an outward-radiating network of contacts. In turn, leader-organizers have to be given an ongoing stake in the associational effort through shared and representative decision making.”

Assessing Citizens for Global Solutions’ investment in translocal civic education would be a fruitful exercise as it approaches its third year of operation. Particularly in light of the pending 2006 congressional elections, it would reinforce the organization’s commitment to *citizens* as well as global *solutions*.



UN DPI/NGO
Conference, September 2005
(UN Photo)

Resources

COSMOPOLITANISM-YI-FU TUAN

For another consideration of the theme of cosmopolitanism, World Federalist Institute Steering Committee member Dr Joseph Schwartzberg recommends the work of his colleague, “humanist geographer” Yi-fu Tuan, especially *Cosmos and Hearth: A Cosmopolite’s Viewpoint* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999). The publisher says that the book explores “cosmos” and “hearth” as “two scales that anchor what it means to be fully human. ... Tuan proposes a revised conception of culture, one thoroughly grounded in one’s own society but also embracing curiosity about the world. Optimistic and deeply human, this important volume lays out a path to being ‘at home in the cosmos’.” *Reader’s Review* says it is “full of stimulating ideas about our global future”.

In his Haskins Lecture to the American Council of Learned Societies (1998), Yi-fu Tuan spoke of the influences of “different civilizations” on his unsettled early life “in the midst of war and poverty”, spurring a lifelong “search for what Good means to different peoples in the facts of human geography. Good, I was to find out, means at bottom nurturance and stability. Nature provides nurturance, though rather meagerly; and it provides stability, though not one that is utterly reliable. Culture is how humans, by imagination and skill, escape into more predictable, responsive, and flattering worlds of their own making. These worlds are immensely varied. On the material plane, they range from grass hut to skyscraper, village to metropolis; on the mental plane, from magical beliefs to great systems of religion and metaphysics. They are all, in different ways, aspirations to the Good.” He observed that “three intractable problems arise out of this human venture, darkening it.” One, he said, is “violence and destructiveness”, since “on a material plane, nothing is ever built without prior destruction—a fact too soon forgotten ... The second problem is that the ability to destroy and build presupposes power, and power is morally suspect and can all too

easily become monstrous”, hampering civilized life with social inequality. And third, “even if we put aside violence and the abuses of power” in order to consider our best accomplishments, “many of these can seem curiously unreal”.

In a profile of Yi-fu Tuan for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (“Lost in Place”, 16 March 2001), Peter Monaghan describes him as “particularly exercised about an academic climate in which, he believes, writing that states the obvious — about, for example, societal wrongs — is acclaimed while more subtle ideas are disparaged. He sees identity politics as a particularly aggravating expression of that, and believes that his own ethnicity is one reason he does not figure among all the academics who have some claim on people’s attention — the ‘public intellectuals’. ... Humanistic geography as a whole, however, has suffered from disparagement or neglect by cultural geography, its more-prominent successor. Cultural materialism, feminism, postcolonialism, and other modern schools of thought swept precursor humanistic approaches away in a wash of ‘cultural hegemony’, ‘power relations’, and ‘situated or relative truth’. For critics like Gillian Rose, the author of *Feminism and Geography: The Limits to Geographical Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), Mr. Tuan and other geographers of his generation are guilty of blindness to questions of gender” while making claims for humankind. “The newer approaches also tar humanistic geography’s claims on universal truths as elitist and reactionary. Little matter that the humanists, too, stressed the socially constructed nature of landscapes and other geographically mediated experiences. And Mr Tuan’s distaste for triumphalism does not always play well among colleagues, he says. In classes, too, ‘students expected me to denounce Western civilization. But I tend to muddy the picture by pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of all cultures’.”

WORLDPLACE

Minerva reader Jane Shevtsov’s ideas about “a worldplace perspective” appear in “The Local in the Global, the Global in the Local” <worldbeyondborders.org>.

TRANSNATIONAL TERROR

In *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*, Columbia University professor Mahmood Mamdani, an East African of Indian descent, asserts that political history is more important than other cultural factors in the currently preoccupying strife. He concludes, “Caught in a situation where both adversaries in the war on terror claim to be fighting terror with the weapons of terror, nothing less than a global movement for peace will save humanity. ... America cannot occupy the world. It has to learn to live in it.”



Recommending Mia Bloom’s *Dying To Kill* (Columbia University Press), *Minerva* reader Dr Marian Schmidt writes:

“Bloom is assistant professor of political science at the University of Cincinnati. She has a great deal to say about suicide bombers from a global standpoint. While such terrorism in many countries is similar in its desire for publicity, indoctrination of children, targeting of foreign occupiers, and attack against collaborators, its success depends greatly on public opinion on the local scene. It is multinational in the sense that there is a transnational contagion of its effects, as terrorist groups imitate each other and support each other with safe houses, training, and funding. The point is made that violence is often retaliatory, on both sides of a struggle, and so becomes a vicious circle, as in Israel where ‘for every one killed by Sharon’s policies, another two appear to take his (and potentially her) place’. The answer, Bloom says, is to ‘reduce the Palestinian motivations for suicide bombing rather than their capabilities to carry them out’. Other countries considered are Sri Lanka, Turkey, Chechnya, and the Japanese (in World War II).”



Roberta Arnold’s *The International Criminal Court as a new instrument for repressing terrorism* (New York: Transnational Publishers, 2004) recently was awarded the 2nd prize of the Francis Lieber Society, a subgroup of the American

Society of International Law. *International Humanitarian Law and the 21st Century's Conflicts: changes and challenges* (EDIS, 2005), edited by Roberta Arnold and Pierre-Antoine Hildbrand, includes a chapter by *Minerva* reader Noelle Quenivet, "The Applicability of International Humanitarian Law to Situations of a (Counter-)Terrorist Nature". It may be ordered directly from EDIS <IHL@editions-edis.ch>. Noelle Quenivet's PhD thesis, *Sexual Offences in Armed Conflict and international law*, is being put out by Transnational Publishers.

SUPRANATIONAL PROSECUTION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Supranational Criminal Prosecution of Sexual Violence: The ICC and the Practice of the ICTY and the ICTR (Volume 20, School of Human Rights Research, Intersentia <www.intersentia.be>, 2005), by Anne-Marie L.M. De Brouwer, "assesses the supranational criminal prosecution of sexual violence, notably whether supranational criminal law (sexual violence as genocide, a crime against humanity and a war crime) and supranational criminal procedure (protective and special measures for and participation of victims of sexual violence) are adequate from the perspective of victims of sexual violence. In addition, the legal consequences of the supranational criminal law system (sentencing and reparation) are examined with the situation of victims of sexual violence in mind. The adequacy of supranational criminal prosecution of sexual violence is examined primarily from the point of view of the International Criminal Court (ICC), the benchmark for supranational criminal prosecutions, with clear reference to the practice of the Yugoslav-Tribunal (ICTY) and the Rwanda-Tribunal (ICTR) in the field of sexual violence prosecutions. The study concludes with some recommendations for a more comprehensive framework of supranational criminal prosecution of sexual violence."

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

For an analysis of the Millennium Development Goals in relation to violence

against women — wrongly viewed by "many agencies, governments, and policy-makers ... as a relatively minor social problem", and a summary of several studies of the impact of this problem (including result of the wide-ranging WHO Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women released in November 2005), see "PUBLIC HEALTH: Violence Against Women", Claudia Garcia-Moreno, Lori Heise, Henrica A. F. M. Jansen, Mary Ellsberg, Charlotte Watts, *Science* 310(5752), 25 November 2005.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

On International Women's Day, 8 March 2006, Women's Edge Coalition announced its new website <www.womensedge.org>, where one "can read about Edge's history, partners and policy work, take action by writing ... Congress or local paper[s] about global women's issues ..., and join the Edge community to support ... economic opportunity for women worldwide." The Coalition also is launching "the Global Opportunity for Women Campaign, which will involve American women in a wider effort to make a real difference in the lives of poor women worldwide". Toward that end, Edge organized a meeting of leaders of coalition member organizations with Ambassador John Danilovich, new CEO of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) "to stress the importance of integrating women's priorities in all aspects of the work of the MCC ..., a relatively new US international assistance program [that] aims to help countries 'reduce poverty through economic growth'."

In honor of International Women's Day, Vital Voices <www.VitalVoices.org> released *Vital Voices: Women Changing Our World*, a publication (edited by Alyse Nelson Bloom and Vinca LaFleur) "highlighting the stories of twelve influential women from Asia to Latin America to Africa who are leading significant political, social and economic change. This collection of 'lessons without borders' personalizes the innovative efforts of these incredible women in their struggles to

promote civic and political engagement while fighting corruption and violence and strengthening the economy in their countries and beyond."

Also launched on International Women's Day, the 2006 global project of the International Museum of Women, "Imagining Ourselves: A Global Generation of Women", consists of an online exhibition and global dialogue, an anthology of submissions from young women from 105 countries, and a series of global gatherings and celebrations around the world. Through June 30, the project can be viewed online at <www.imow.org>.

IWD & CEDAW

Modern Persian Poetry, by Mahmud Kianush, includes samples of the work of feminist poet Simin Behbahani, who, despite her advanced age and near blindness, was beaten with a baton and kicked repeatedly when violent action was taken by Iranian police, Revolutionary Guards, and others on 8 March to disperse about 1,000 women who had gathered peacefully in Tehran to commemorate International Women's Day. As reflected in the recent report of the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Yakin Ertuk, women in Iran are discriminated against in law; by discriminatory provisions in the Civil & Penal Code; and by flaws in the administration of justice. In the previous parliament, women pushing for reform of discriminatory law, introduced 33 bills, many of which — including a proposal to ratify the Women's Rights Convention (CEDAW) — were rejected by the Council of Guardians on grounds that they were incompatible with Shari'a law.

UNESCWA recently provided advisory and training services — with particular attention to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women — by Regional Advisor for Gender Issues Suheir Azzouni to Palestinian civil servants.

UNDP & LIBERIA

The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) presented its congratulations to Liberia's new President, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, at her official inauguration ceremony in Monrovia on 16 January 2006, pledging \$500,000 to support the Ministry of Gender & Development and women's organizations promoting gender equality and peace in the country. Vabah Gayflor, Minister of Gender & Development, acknowledged UNIFEM's long history of working with Liberian women: "They stood with us when we were mobilizing to support women's candidacy and leadership in the parliamentary and presidential elections." Following the inauguration ceremony, UNIFEM Executive Director Noeleen Heyzer met with the President, the Minister of Gender & Development, and over 200 women from all the counties of Liberia to discuss the development of "a national program to empower women". According to a press release (23 January), "UNIFEM will be mobilizing the UN system to respond to the priorities identified by the women's strategic action plan. UNIFEM, together with UNDP, will also soon conduct a gender assessment that will feed into UN development assistance frameworks."

The world is starting to grasp that there is no policy more effective in promoting development, health and education than the empowerment of women and girls, and no policy is more important in preventing conflict, or in achieving reconciliation after a conflict has ended.

- **Kofi Annan**

There are few subjects that match the social significance of women's education in the contemporary world.

- **Amartya Sen**,
Nobel Laureate in Economics,
South Hadley, Massachusetts, 2004

GLOBAL EDUCATION CAMPAIGN

Last April, during a Global Action Week to highlight governments' failure to educate millions of girls worldwide, campaigners from more than 100 countries marched in their capitals and met with elected officials to demand urgent action to meet the education targets set in the Millennium Development Goals, agreed upon by 191 countries, to end global poverty by 2015. For more information, visit the Global Campaign for Education <www.campaignforeducation.org>.

FIGURES

"This is Your Life (If You Are a Woman)", a chart presented by *The Independent* on 8 March, included, along with statistics on drastic income discrepancies between men & women, the following figures:

- 85 million girls are unable to attend school, compared with 45 million boys. In Chad, just 4% of girls go to school.
- 67% of all illiterate adults are women.
- 1% of the titled land in the world is owned by women.
- 70% of the 1.2 billion people living in poverty are women and children.
- 21% of the world's managers are female; ... in the EU, women comprise 3% of chief execs of major companies; ... in the US, 35% of lawyers are women but just 5% are partners in law firms.
- 62% of unpaid family workers are female.
- Women comprise 55% of the world's population aged over 60 years old and 65% of those aged over 80.
- 700,000,000 women are without adequate food, water, sanitation, health care or education (compared with 400,000,000 men).
- 1,440 women die each day during childbirth (a rate of one death every minute).
- 12 is the number of world leaders who are women (out of 191 members of the United Nations). ...



Noting the figures most recently published by the Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), experts meeting in New York in March for the 50th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women observed, as departing UN Deputy Secretary-General Louise Fréchette said, that "the world community still has far to go on actual representation of women at the highest levels of national and international leadership. That includes the United Nations itself" A UN-published report for International Women's Day came to the same conclusion about the slow rate of progress in most of the world.

The IPU found that the number of female members of parliament reached 16.1 percent in 2005. Europe's Nordic countries consistently have held the lead, with an average of 40 percent women legislators

as of October 2005, but, in most other countries that IPU Secretary General Anders B. Johnsson calls “the old democracies”, there is “very little debate, or real efforts being made to emulate the examples that now are being set by the developing countries” such as Rwanda, Burundi and Liberia, Johnsson told IPS correspondent Lisa Söderlindh at the UN (6 March). There have been gains in several Latin American countries as well, but the number of parliaments with no women at all actually increased during 2005.

On the IPU’s latest list of 187 countries ranked by the national percentage of women in their lower or single house of parliament, Rwanda was at the top, with 48.8 percent women in parliament, Canada came in at number 44 with 20.8 percent women, Britain was 50th, the United States was 69th, France was 85th and Italy was 89th. In the more than 10 years since the UN’s 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing agreed that women must account for a critical mass of at least 30 percent of parliamentarians, the total number of women in parliaments has grown by 50 percent, but only 20 countries have reached the target. “If we continue to progress at the same level, it will take us at least one or two generations before we are really reaching anything like parity,” Johnsson told IPS.

There is considerable debate about the extent to which quotas contribute to improvement. Söderlindh notes that, “of the 39 countries that held elections in 2005 for lower or single houses of parliament, 15 implemented special measures such as voluntary quotas (New Zealand, Norway, Poland and Portugal), legislated political party quotas (Argentina, Bolivia, Burundi, Honduras, Liberia and Venezuela) and reserved seats or mandates (Afghanistan and Tanzania)”. She quotes Swedish professor Drude Dahlerup, who led the first global study of gender quotas in politics: “Gender quotas are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for obtaining gender balance in parliament, but as long as discrimination of women and inequality persists, quotas [are necessary].” Dahlerup points out that in Rwanda, where 30 percent of the seats in parliament were set aside for female legislators in the 2003

elections, women went from less than 15 percent of legislators to nearly 49 percent -- outdoing even Sweden, where party quotas are voluntary, and where the struggle to reach the current total of more than 45 percent women in parliament took more than 50 years. Sweden’s minister for gender equity, Jens Orback, points out that developing and sustaining this level of participation also has required social service changes, so that people can have a family while working, and must engage men as well as women.

“This has been a year in which women have taken grassroots struggles and transformed them into something bigger by developing a very considered political strategy,” said Kavita Ramdas, president of the San Francisco-based Global Fund for Women, which provides grants to women’s rights groups around the world (AP, 3 January 2006). “Ten years ago, we would say we want laws to protect women. Now we are saying we also want women in there who are the lawmakers.”

While women are digesting the IPU statistics and celebrating novelties — Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a former finance minister, as the first elected female head of state in Africa, Michelle Bachelet, a former defense minister, as Chile’s first female president, Angela Merkel as Germany’s first female chancellor, Portia Simpson-Miller as the first woman prime minister of Jamaica, businesswomen Lama al-Sulaiman & Nashwa Taher as elected board members of the Trade & Industry Chamber in Jiddah, Saudi Arabia (after petitions objected to the Chamber’s initial rejection of their nominations), Kuwaiti women voting and running for office for the first time — many women attending the 50th session of the Commission on the Status of Women protested that the UN Secretary General’s latest reform proposals scarcely deal with continuing failure of the United Nations to model the gender equality it recommends to member states.

“This disparity between men and women at the UN is getting worse and we’re really at an all-time low,” said June Zeitlin, executive director of the Women’s Environment and Development Organization. “In 2006, this is just unacceptable in an

The women in parliament will be a voice for the half of this country who have been silent for so long.

- **Safia Siddiqi,**

recently elected member of the Afghanistan Parliament, where a quarter of the seats were reserved for women

There is good news in some countries emerging from conflict, where there is a window of opportunity to ensure that women are involved in the process of creating new policy frameworks, governing structures, and new democratic cultures. ... From the 1995 Beijing Women’s Conference where thousands of women demanded that governments recognize women’s rights as human rights to the election of the new woman president of Liberia, women’s progress has been increasingly on the public stage. This has led to real results in policies and resource allocation. But it has also led to a backlash. We have seen increased attempts to challenge women’s public roles and roll back women’s human rights overall.

- **Yolonda C. Richardson,**

President and CEO of the Center for Development and Population Activities, interviewed by *Perspectives* editor Zarrin Caldwell (OneWorld.net, 24 February 2006)

institution that's committed to gender equality and women's participation in decision-making."

For UN vacancy announcements, check with the Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women <www.un.org/womenwatch/osa-gi/fpcareer2.htm>.



NAMES

Louise Fréchette finished her eight-year term as Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations at the end of March. "It's not pleasant working for an organization that is blasted on the front page every day," Fréchette acknowledged to the London Free Press in Canada (1 April 2006). But one has to remember, she added, that "the political involvement, which has been quite critical ... co-exists with an increased demand for UN services, which to me signals a certain amount of confidence that in fact the organization is not only necessary and needed, but is capable." Fréchette is leaving the UN to lead a research project on nuclear energy and proliferation at the Centre for International Governance Innovation in Waterloo.



Radhika Coomaraswamy of Sri Lanka was appointed the Secretary General's Special Representative in children and Armed Conflict on 7 February 2006. She is a former Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.



Rosalyn Higgins of the United Kingdom was elected President of the International Court of Justice on 6 February 2006. A member of the Court since 1995, Judge Higgins is its first woman president. She also has served as a member of the United Nations Human Rights Committee.



On 26 January, during the resumed session of the 4th Assembly of States Parties to the Rome Statute of the ICC, all six ICC

judgeships were filled in the first round of voting by 100 States Parties; they include three women:

Akua KUENYEHIA of Ghana
Ekaterina TRENDAFILOVA of Bulgaria (newly elected)
Anita UŠACKA of Latvia

US MILITARY & ICC

A new Henry L. Stimson Center report by Victoria K. Holt and Elisabeth Dallas, "On Trial: The US Military and the International Criminal Court", argues that the US needs to engage with the International Criminal Court to protect the interests of its military service members. A year-long review of US military concerns regarding the Court found "high anxiety but little understanding among military personnel about how the ICC works and whether they could be investigated for their actions in the line of duty. Military experts & lawyers more familiar with the Court felt less apprehension [but] expressed concern" that the current posture of the US does not support its own interests. Consensus: "the US needs to move from studied distancing to constructive engagement with the Court" (<http://www.stimson.org>). The report is part of the Center's Future of Peace Operations program.

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATOR

Marilyn Felt, a designer of pedagogically innovative curricula in the fields of humanitarian law, social justice, and human development, with an emphasis on promotion of trans-cultural adaptability, died of cancer in early April. Her work with the Massachusetts-based Education Development Center on the Exploring Humanitarian Law project — a program of the International Committee of the Red Cross designed to be used in secondary schools worldwide — has been cited in *Minerva*. She also was part of an international task force working to establish a new subject area domain — Global Citizenship Education — in secondary schools around the world.

PEACEKEEPER SEX

In October, Prince Zeid Raad al-Hussein, Jordan's ambassador to the UN, lamented at a public briefing that his March report on sexual exploitation by peacekeepers had been ignored by influential member states even though it dealt with a situation that damages the institution's effectiveness and credibility.

An independent review published that month by Refugees International (RI) concurred that, although procedures to curb sexual abuses by peacekeepers have been developed, they are undermined by a pervasive culture. "A 'boys will be boys' attitude in peacekeeping missions breeds tolerance for exploiting and abusing local women," said the report. "This attitude is slowly changing, but the UN must go beyond strong rhetoric and ensure that the

resources needed to change this culture are available.”

The report, *Must Boys Be Boys?*, was prepared by Sarah Martin, who visited peacekeeping missions in Haiti and Liberia. In her executive summary, she wrote: “Since the bulk of personnel in peacekeeping missions are men, a hyper-masculine culture that encourages sexual exploitation and abuse and a tradition of silence have evolved within them.” At the October press briefing, Ms Martin said that guidelines adopted at headquarters are not being taken seriously in the field, and “until there is a better understanding of the zero-contact rule, peacekeepers will continue to think of it as a rule that makes no sense. Fear of punishment is not enough to ensure compliance.” Anna Shotten of the UN peacekeeping department admitted in the *Washington Post* (19 October) that, despite “tremendous progress” promulgating “the UN’s message of zero tolerance and zero impunity”, it still has not taken hold sufficiently.

The RI report’s recommendations include increasing female representation among UN-deployed troops and in senior management positions, upgrading the status of the gender advisors now required on missions (although as of September only 10 of 17 missions had them full-time, according to the report), improving access to the UN complaint process and guaranteeing that complainants are protected, setting up an independent watchdog organization and mandatory training programs on gender issues, and conducting programs to “empower local women in post-combat areas”.

During a Security Council update on 23 February, Prince Zeid, a former military officer and civilian peacekeeper in Bosnia, again deplored the persistent “culture of dismissiveness” in field missions. Acknowledging that — since all previous reform recommendations are not yet implemented and a system to facilitate complaints is now in operation — a spike in allegations was “not entirely unexpected”, he said that “allegations being lodged against UN peacekeeping personnel remain high and unacceptable so”. Peacekeeping head Jean-Marie Guéhenno

said the UN has investigated allegations against 295 troops, police and other staff, 170 of whom have been sent home or dismissed, and is “making headway”. He said a program of assistance for abuse victim would be proposed soon. Meanwhile, legal experts still are trying to sort out the legal complexities of UN staff diplomatic immunity and unresolved enforcement issues among the UN, the governments contributing personnel to UN missions, and the countries where abuses occur, noted Prince Zeid. Both men reportedly made a plea for full UN funding for in-house investigators from the Office of Internal Oversight Services, which took control of all sexual abuse inquiries last May (Reuters).

The Department of Peacekeeping Operations held meetings in late March to find ways to increase women’s participation in peacekeeping, reported to be 27% (a recent increase) generally but only 1% in the military and 4% in the police units.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In November, INSTRAW <www.un-instraw.org> opened a new website section on “Gender, Governance and Women’s Political Participation”. WomenWatch is presenting a new online feature, “Women and Peace & Security - Implementation of Resolution 1325” <www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/wps/>.

RIGHTS

A Voice for Human Rights, edited by Essex University Professor Kevin Boyle, is an annotated collection of Mary Robinson’s speeches, given when she served as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The book also provides “the first in-depth account of the work of the Office of High Commissioner”. With a preface by Kofi Annan and an afterword by Louise Arbour, the current Human Rights Commissioner, the book “will be of interest to all concerned with international human rights, international relations, development, and politics”. It is available from the University of Pennsylvania Press <www.pennpress.org>.

The Future of Women’s Rights: Global Visions and Strategies, edited by Joanna Kerr (Association for Women’s Rights in Development, Canada), Ellen Sprenger (The Netherlands) and Alison Symington, was published by ZED Books in 2004.



For more information about *Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts* (Women Living Under Muslim Laws and Shirkat Gah, 2005), by Farida Shaheed with Aisha L.F. Shaheed, see <<http://www.wluml.org>>.

BIODIVERSITY & TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

After spending millions of dollars to overturn a patent by a US company for producing an insecticide from seeds of the neem tree, as used in India for thousands of years, India’s government is creating a 30-million-page database of “traditional knowledge” to “fend off entrepreneurs trying to patent the country’s ancient lore”, reported Gavin Rabinowitz (AP, 24 December 2005). The database project already has drawn interest of South Africa, Mongolia and others. A few years earlier, India also joined China, Brazil and nine others to begin pushing for international protections against “bio-prospectors”. The Traditional Knowledge Data Library (TKDL), reportedly plans “to make information available to patent offices around the world to ensure that traditional remedies are not presented as new discoveries. ‘If societies have been using it for centuries, why should it be patented?’ asked Shiv Basant, a senior official at the Health Ministry’s Department of Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy, India’s traditional health and medical disciplines.” A 2003 study by India’s National Institute for Science Communication & Information Resources estimated that “some 7,000 patents worldwide are based on Indian indigenous knowledge, far too many for India to challenge in expensive legal fights”. But officials hope the database will head off future battles, Ajay Dua of the Commerce Ministry’s Department of Industrial Policy & Promotion told Rabinowitz.

The Earth is the foundation of Indigenous Peoples; it is the seat of spirituality, the fountain from which our cultures and languages flourish. The Earth is our historian, the keeper of events, and the bones of our forefathers. ... It is the source of our independence, it is our Mother. We do not dominate her; we must harmonize with her.

- **Hayden Burgess**, native Hawaiian, quoted by Julian Burger, *The Gaia Atlas of First Peoples: A Future for the Indigenous World*, 1990

The indigenous peoples of the world retain our collective evolutionary experience and insights which have slipped our grasp. Yet these hold critical lessons for our future. Indigenous peoples are thus indispensable partners as we try to make a successful transition to a more secure and sustainable future on our precious planet.

- **Maurice Strong**, General Secretary of the United Nations Conference on Environment & Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992

Now I am calling on the NGOs to redouble their efforts because now the challenge is bigger. We have this wealth of documents, this wealth of decisions and the time has come to implement them. Of course the government has a role, but this is the responsibility of each and every citizen of the world to protect biodiversity.

- **Ahmed Djoghlaif**, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biodiversity (formerly of UNEP and the Global Environment Facility), at Curitiba Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2006

Indigenous activists from around the world went to Curitiba, Brazil, 20–31 March, for the eighth Conference of the (159) Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD-COP8), because one of the main points on the agenda was the right of indigenous peoples and local communities to “fair distribution” of the benefits derived from biodiversity used in foods and medicines and from other traditional knowledge, often patented without remuneration. According to Brazilian Environment Minister Marina Silva, presiding over COP8, this knowledge is “collective and difficult to attribute to one single community”, so remuneration must be through common funds destined for all of the communities that collectively hold the knowledge. She told a press briefing that the COP8 was not expected to approve an international regime of access to biodiversity and distribution of the benefits, but participants hoped to make “advances” in that direction. This will require a “pact for the implementation of the Convention”, with a “solid partnership” among the different sectors of society, facilitated technology transfer, and “ethical reflection” in order for the commitments assumed by the parties to be translated into action, said Silva.

Negotiations for an international regime to regulate access and benefit-sharing (ABS) were criticized vigorously in accordance with differing conceptions of basic economic principles and premises of fairness. One proposal for sharing benefits by way of payments from companies’ profits from patents was rejected by an international network of movements of small farmers & peasants, Via Campesina, as a form of privatization of “priceless” knowledge and genetic resources instead of preservation of common heritage. While some activists & their organizations complained that such negotiations are a waste of time and merely result in treated forms of exploitation, representatives of the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity reportedly do not agree that the negotiations on ABS should be opposed, and have demanded to be allowed to take part in the discussions on fair distribution of benefits, since not negotiating would perpetuate plundering of “biodiversity and the knowledge we

possess”, said Florina López, a member of the Kuna indigenous community from Panama who heads a network of women’s groups, to IPS (28 March).

In Curitiba a Conservation of Biodiversity-Rich Sacred Natural Sites campaign was launched, with the backing of the UN Environment Program and 1992 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchu, who said: “Where indigenous peoples live is also where the greatest diversity of nature exists. The values on which we have built our complex systems are founded in the ethical, spiritual and sacred nature that links our peoples with the whole work of creation.”

Also at the Curitiba conference, Greenpeace called for an immediate UN moratorium on high seas bottom trawling in order to stop the destruction of deep-sea life until a global network of marine reserves has been established, covering 40% of the world’s oceans by 2012 (IPS, 21 March). Additional Greenpeace proposals: expanding protected areas along a fixed timeline; creating an international financing mechanism; establishing global goals for reducing the deforestation of primary forests; speeding up the adoption of an international regime for access to genetic resources and the sharing of their benefits; eradicating biopiracy; and demanding that governments assure the public nature of biodiversity by regulating commercial practices that threaten it.

The three basic goals of the Biological Diversity Convention — which was adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and led to a strategic plan for the world’s main ecosystems — are: conservation of biodiversity; sustainable use of its components; and access to and sharing of benefits arising from the commercial and other utilization of genetic resources in a fair and equitable manner.

CONVENTION ON THE PROTECTION & PROMOTION OF CULTURAL CONTENTS AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS

Toward the end of 2005, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organiza-

tion (UNESCO) voted, over US opposition, to adopt a long-gestated new treaty that supporters claimed would safeguard cultural rights worldwide by asserting the "sovereign right" of nations to elaborate policies they deem appropriate to protect the diversity of cultural expressions on their territory, especially those of minority groups. The US objected that the treaty could have a negative effect on ongoing negotiations at the World Trade Organization, where "cultural exceptions" are sought. "This convention invites abuse by enemies of democracy and free trade," said Secretary of State Rice.

Louise Oliver, US ambassador to UNESCO, contended that the measure was "too flawed, too prone to abuse for us to support" and could be used by dictators to control what their citizens read (Molly Moore, *Washington Post* Foreign Service, 21 October 2005). She told the *Financial Times* (20 October): "The foundation of cultural diversity is freedom. The main proponents of this convention seem more interested in control over international trade flows and the lives of their citizens than in promoting freedom and cultural diversity."

The European Union "agreed to disagree", and British Ambassador Timothy Craddock said, "It's clear, carefully balanced, and consistent with the principles of international law and fundamental human rights." In December Canada became the first ratifier. The Convention will enter into force 3 months after its ratification by 30 States Parties. An International Fund for Cultural Diversity will be established.

The Convention seeks to reaffirm the links between culture, development and dialogue and to create a platform for international cooperation, UNESCO said (UN News Centre, 23 December 2005). It also supports UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted in 2001, which recognized cultural diversity as "a source of exchange, innovation and creativity", a common heritage of humanity that "should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations" as "an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity".

CULTURAL POLICY

The International Network on Cultural Policy (INCP) is "an informal, international venue where national ministers responsible for culture can explore and exchange views on new and emerging cultural policy issues and develop strategies to promote cultural diversity. ... Among those issues, INCP members are discussing and examining how to address the many challenges and opportunities associated with the growing issues of cultural diversity and identity in an increasingly globalized world. Although globalization -- through the increasing mobility of people, trade liberalization, new communication technologies and industry consolidation -- offers great opportunities for cultural expression, it also poses fundamental challenges to governments, civil society and the private sector in nurturing this diversity. The policy challenge is to find the means by which to remain open to the best the world has to offer, while nurturing domestically rich and diverse cultural expression. INCP members are exploring how diversity can be integrated into a common approach to global development, including the challenges and opportunities of promoting and protecting cultural heritage for social and economic development."

KNOWLEDGE & HEALTH

Regarding the role of indigenous knowledge systems' managers, a report in the February 2006 issue of the World Bank's *Indigenous Knowledge Notes* emphasizes the influential role of grandmothers in many indigenous cultures, and suggests that they should be key actors in development programs aimed at promoting maternal and child health, citing the success of "grandmother-inclusive methodology", a five-step approach created by The Grandmother Project, a US-based NGO.



A new website on reproductive health and the Millennium Development Goals — www.srh-mdgs.org/ — was launched in August 2005.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social & Cultural Rights General Comment No. 14 on the right to the highest attainable standard of health is at <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/gencomm/escgencom14.htm>.

UNFPA FRIENDS

The potential impact of an individual activist and her networks is described in an intimate account of the inspiration and promotion of 34 Million Friends of the United Nations Population Fund, in a book by its cofounder, Jane Roberts, whose earlier report of her travels to Senegal and Mali on behalf of UNFPA appeared in *Minerva* #26 (September 2003). This book, *34 Million Friends of the Women of the World*, remarkably cheerful despite its topic of extensive suffering and neglect, is published by Ladybug Press (2005 www.ladybugbooks.com/34million.htm).

*If the world was taking care
of women, women would
take care of the world.*

- Jane Roberts,
34 Million Friends of UNFPA
29 September 2005

UNICEF ANNUAL REPORT

UNICEF's annual *State of the World's Children* report (December 2005), "Excluded and Invisible", warns that one-third of the estimated 150 million children born worldwide each year are not registered — and the number is growing. This makes it easy for their rights to be ignored, with trafficking and AIDS-related orphanhood prominent among the ways children "disappear" from community shelter.

UN CSW-50

The session of the Commission on the Status of Women that concluded on 10 March was disappointing to many NGO observers and did not issue the usual concluding statement.

US SHADOW REPORT TO UN HRC

Available from the editor, courtesy of MassCEDAW's Laura Roskos: "Comments of the US NGO Gender Working Group Relating to the Second and Third Periodic Reports of the United States" to the UN Human Rights Committee under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, presented on 13 March by Professor Rhonda Copelon, Director, International Women's Human Rights Law Clinic, CUNY School of Law.

UN - ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

Because an environment of "mutual suspicion, fear and misunderstanding ... has been exploited by extremists throughout the world", the Secretary-General of the United Nations has launched an initiative, co-sponsored by the Prime Ministers of Spain and Turkey, for an Alliance of Civilizations. The initiative "responds to a broad consensus across nations, cultures and religions that all societies are interdependent, bound together in their development and security, and in their environmental, economic and financial well-being. The Alliance seeks to forge collective political will and to mobilize concerted action at the institutional and civil society levels to overcome the prejudice, misperceptions and polarization that militate against such a consensus. And it hopes to contribute to a coalescing global movement which, reflecting the will of the vast majority of people, rejects extremism in any society. ... Only a comprehensive coalition will be able to avert any further deterioration of relations between societies and nations, which could threaten international stability. The Alliance seeks to counter this trend by establishing a paradigm of mutual respect between civilizations and cultures."

CO-CHAIRS OF HIGH-LEVEL GROUP

1. Mr. Federico Mayor (Spain)
President, "Culture of Peace" Foundation; former Director-General, UNESCO
2. Prof. Mehmet Aydin (Turkey)
Minister of State; Professor of Theology

MIDDLE EAST MEMBERS

3. Seyed Mohamed Khatami (Iran)
Former President

4. Her Highness Sheikha Mozah (Qatar)
Consort of Emir of the State of Qatar;
Chair, Qatar Foundation for Education,
Science & Community Development

NORTH AFRICA MEMBERS

5. Dr. Mohamed Charfi (Tunisia)
Former Education Minister
6. Dr. Ismail Serageldin (Egypt)
President, Bibliotheca Alexandria
7. Mr. Andre Azoulay (Morocco)
Adviser to HM King Mohammed VI

WEST AFRICA MEMBER

8. Mr. Moustapha Niasse (Senegal)
Former Prime Minister

SOUTHERN AFRICA MEMBER

9. Archbishop Desmond Tutu (S Africa)
Archbishop of Cape Town

WEST EUROPE MEMBERS

10. Mr. Hubert Vedrine (France)
Former Minister for Foreign Affairs
11. Ms Karen Armstrong (UK)
Historian of Religion

EAST EUROPE MEMBER

12. Prof. Vitaly Naumkin
(Russian Federation)
President of the International Center
for Strategic and Political Studies;
Chair, Moscow State University

NORTH AMERICA MEMBERS

13. Prof. John Esposito (United States)
Founding Director, Center for Muslim-
Christian Understanding, Georgetown
University; Editor-in-Chief, *Oxford
Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*
14. Rabbi Arthur Schneier (USA)
President, Appeal of Conscience Founda-
tion; Senior Rabbi, Park East Synagogue

LATIN AMERICA MEMBERS

15. Mr. Enrique Iglesias (Uruguay)
Ibero-American Secretary-General; for-
mer President of Inter-American
Development Bank

SOUTH ASIA MEMBERS

16. Dr. Nafis Sadik (Pakistan)
Special Adviser to UN SG
17. Ms. Shobana Bhartia (India)
Managing Director, *Hindustan Times*

SOUTH-EAST ASIA MEMBER

18. Mr. Ali Alatas (Indonesia)
Former Foreign Minister

EAST ASIA MEMBER

19. To be nominated

After assessing "new & emerging threats to international peace and security, in particular the political, social and religious forces that foment extremism" and identifying "collective actions, at both the institutional and civil society levels" to deal with them, the High-level Group is supposed to consider practical strategies "to strengthen mutual understanding, respect and shared values among different peoples, cultures and civilizations; to counter the influence of groups fomenting extremism and the exclusion of others who do not share their worldviews; to counter the threat to world peace and stability posed by extremism; [and] to foster awareness in all societies that security is indivisible and is a vital need for all, and that global cooperation is an indispensable prerequisite for security, stability and development."

The High-level Group's analysis should include a program of action for States, international organizations and civil society "with practicable measures designed, inter alia:

- To emphasize the importance of mutual understanding, and to propose specific mechanisms by which it can be advanced, including but not limited to developing better international cooperation frameworks and using mass media ... to foster and frame public debates in constructive ways;

- To cultivate cooperation among current initiatives aimed at enabling those in the mainstream majority — who are overwhelmingly moderate and reject the views of extremists — to set the agenda;

- To establish partnerships that will help diverse societies to better understand their differences while emphasizing and acting on their commonalities;

- To propose measures through which education systems can foster knowledge and understanding of other cultures and religions;

- To reach out to the youth of the world, in order to instill the values of moderation and cooperation, and to promote appreciation of diversity;

- To ... present practical proposals for advancing mutual security."

Alliance of Civilizations High-level Group member **Karen Armstrong's** latest book, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of our Religious Traditions*, explores the Axial Age (900–200 BC, a time of “seminal change” when four still-influential philosophies took shape in four distinct cultures: Confucianism & Taoism in China, Hinduism & Buddhism in India, monotheism in the eastern Mediterranean region, and philosophical rationalism in Greece. “In every single case,” she says, “the catalyst of major religious change was revulsion from warfare and aggression.”

“Religion is hard.” Armstrong told a *Washington Post* interviewer (29 March 2006). “But then you begin to lose the hard edges of yourself and start to glimpse the other. All of the Axial Agers practiced what the Chinese called *jian ai* or concern for everybody. Not just for your own group, but for everybody. And if we don't do that, I don't see how we can save our planet.”

(See also Karen Armstrong in *Minerva* #20, June 2001.)

The High-level Group is expected to present its report in the second half of 2006 to the Secretary-General, who will determine, in consultation with the co-sponsors, “the appropriate way to present the program of action to the international community”, presumably with its implementation to be overseen by a smaller group of similar stature.

EU-MEDITERRANEAN ANNA LINDH FOUNDATION

The Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures (ALF <www.euromedalex.org>), headquartered in Alexandria (Egypt) since April 2005, is the first common institution jointly established and financed by all 35 members of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership — the European Union and 10 countries of the southern Mediterranean region. Co-hosted by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and the Swedish Institute in Alexandria, it is named for assassinated Swedish foreign minister Anna Lindh, in recognition of her “advocacy for equal partnership and respect between North and South”. Coordinating its 35 national networks, the ALF promotes learning about cultural diversity, bringing “people and organizations from both shores of the Mediterranean closer to each other”. Its priorities are development of human resources, especially youth, and “promotion of tolerance among people by furthering exchanges between members of the diverse civil societies”. This is meant to go “beyond intellectual exchanges towards co-operation”. The ALF's founding principle: *Dialogue between cultures is essentially a dialogue between human beings, not between anonymous cultural entities. Present and future generations must, therefore, be given the instruments for dialogue. In the Euro-Mediterranean region, they need to be provided the opportunity to learn at least one foreign language, preferably more, and to acquire knowledge about all religions and cultural traditions that have shaped this region as crossroads of civilisations.*

In a favorable article about the Anna Lindh Foundation, *Egypt Today* (March 2006) quotes an advisory board member,

Dr Hoda Elsadda, a professor of English and comparative literature at Cairo University and member of the Egyptian National Council for Human Rights, as acknowledging that results of the foundation's work will not be “quick ones that can be measured quantitatively. Cultural changes in perceptions and attitudes are inevitably long-term projects that need time and sustained effort.” Meanwhile, “the foundation's role becomes even more important and vital in educating the general public and in spreading values and concepts that help erode and correct some of the misconceptions and stereotyping that add fuel to the political conflicts going on,” she says.

JUSTICE NETWORKS

The Women's Learning Partnership announces the launch of a new learning portal and eCommunity at <<http://learningpartnership.org>>. It includes: culture-specific training manuals in 14 languages; multimedia materials on leadership, political participation, women's human rights, and other topics; information on *Claiming Equal Citizenship: The Campaign for Arab Women's Right to Nationality*; informational resources for women's rights activists, particularly from Muslim-majority societies; and an events calendar.



In February a planning meeting launched a new social justice network — the Women Leaders Intercultural Forum (WLIF) — “dedicated to augmenting women's ability to increase the enjoyment of human security in their communities, their countries and across the world” by “promoting intercultural understanding”. WLIF is a joint project of Columbia University, Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative, Women's Learning Partnership, Council of Women World Leaders, Markkula Center for Ethics at Santa Clara University, and the United Nations Population Fund. WLIF “emphasizes the importance of intercultural, intergenerational dialogue and aims to mobilize women leaders at the highest levels in the fields of politics, economics, the arts, and the media to improve the status of women”.

A five-year program of annual meetings will begin on 24–26 September 2006 with an inaugural conference at Columbia University, where “women from the Muslim world, the Americas and Europe will join together to make progress on four themes central to women’s lives across the globe: violence against women, the economic empowerment of women, migration and women, and women’s relationship with culture”. Subsequently, women from all regions and cultures are expected to be represented, and “the topics chosen for discussion & action will shift as they reflect current events and the needs and interests of women everywhere”.

The Forum’s goals include: “strengthening and redefining women’s leadership to include the practice of open dialogue, learning and cooperation between women already in positions of power and the next generation of women leaders; exposing women of different nations, cultures, religions and age groups to each other to increase understanding and knowledge, and publicly demonstrate that women around the world have more in common than that which divides them”.

To bring about a truly secure world, we must adopt a new paradigm that shifts priority to the security of individuals and of communities—that is, to achieving human security. This will require a renewed commitment both to human rights and human development—and a shared sense of responsibility for all people, in all parts of the world.

- **Mary Robinson**,
President, Realizing Rights:
The Ethical Globalization Initiative

Letter to the editor:

The *Minerva* publication has been very kind in sharing information with its readers about 34 Million Friends of the UN Population Fund, our grassroots efforts asking 34 million Americans to chip in one dollar for the women of the world at <www.34millionfriends.org>.

But now I want to talk about some more serious issues. World population stood at about 3 billion in 1950, 6.5 billion today, and with the numbers of young people now on the planet, demographers predict a world population of close to 9 billion by the year 2050. More than ninety percent of the growth will come in the poorest countries. In my view, this will be a humanitarian disaster, put untold stress on the environment, and be a great threat to peace and stability with people fighting over resources, particularly water. Also human migration, both legal and illegal, will become even more contentious than it is now. What to do?

In 1994 at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, Egypt, 179 countries agreed on a Programme of Action which, over a 20-year period, was to make sure all children had a primary education and that maternal and infant mortality were substantially reduced. The key language of Cairo was that a human right was established “for couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing, and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health”. This was groundbreaking but unfortunately the financial commitments made were not fulfilled. The US ranks last in percentage granted versus commitment made, i.e. less than 50%. Not fulfilling the Cairo Consensus has harmed women and girls disproportionately. Little girls are not sent to school as are their male counterparts. Illiteracy goes with powerlessness. And when women are denied the ability to plan their families they can not participate in civil society and share in community decision-making.

The whole world recognizes that empowering women to is a key to a better life for all. That is why the Millennium Development Goals, adopted by the United Nations in 2000 to cut extreme poverty and hunger in half by 2015, put heavy emphasis on women’s empowerment. Unfortunately the MDGs did not reiterate the right to family planning and reproductive health, in large measure perhaps because of opposition by the Bush Administration. It has never stated that people have a right to family planning, and by its “abstinence only” policies and budget cutting for international family planning, and by defunding the UN Population Fund (which was supported by the governments of 171 countries last year) it has shown itself hostile to the rights of women to make choices for themselves.

On March 30, 2006, I was fortunate to participate on a panel with Jeffrey Sachs, the Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and Kofi Annan’s point man for the Millennium Development Goals. He said this about defunding UNFPA: “This is self-repeating misery... poverty is being reproduced and exacerbated across generations.”

In the long run, issues of population, development, and the rights of women are among the most important for future generations and for the planet. I urge people to read Jeffrey Sach’s book *The End of Poverty*. It is certainly attention-getting and points out clearly how, with a redirection of resources, the MDG’s could be achieved. In my view the MDGs have no chance of being achieved without full compliance with the Cairo Programme of Action. Women and girls are the key. Let us all dedicate ourselves to insisting that all women and girls everywhere have access to food, education, health, and full human rights.

Jane Roberts
Redlands, California, April 2006

Jane Roberts is co-founder of 34 Million Friends of the United Nations Population Fund <www.34millionfriends.org> and author of *34 Million Friends of the Women of the World* (see page 47).

