

III.5

**Reproductive choices**

→ 2 points available

- 4 \* Access, conditions and quality of reproductive health services
- 5 \* Adequate education, information and counselling concerning reproductive choices
- 6 \* Shared responsibility by couple, family, community, state, with women's autonomy at the center
- \* Restoring the dignity of parenthood

repro. rights 2.

repro. health 3

envelope

### III.7 EMPOWERING WOMEN

One century of struggles  
Persistent violation of human rights  
A new potential for transformation  
In the forefront of the political agenda



Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

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#### One Century of Struggle

A major civilization transformation has been taking place through the twentieth century. The transformation concerns women, has been achieved by their struggles, but will eventually change the conditions of both men and women.

We are caught in the many conflicts that the end of Cold War has accentuated. We are aware of the violence inflicted on women by such armed conflicts. Equally, together with the growing economic success of a handful of countries, we see the growing marginalization of entire regions and the widening inequalities within countries. The hegemonic system born in the industrialized countries and now spread all over the world demonstrates its obvious shortcomings.

While these tragic and stormy events absorb most public attention and preoccupy the media, a social revolution of far reaching consequences is taking place with much less fanfare - whose impact on national and international political and social styles will be fundamental in nature.

The revolution is manifest in **the visibility of women in all spheres of social life and the profound meaning of such a move.** From the shadow world of history into decisive actions to maintain human life and society; from a subordinated status into full dignity as human beings; from the absence, in statistics, of women working in agriculture or in family enterprises into recognized pillars of development - women have invaded all social and public arenas of the world.

The UN Conferences of the last twenty years have made women visible in the international scene. Three World Conferences on Women during the International Women's Decade exposed an unknown dimension of development, namely the marginalisation and continued discrimination against and deprivation of the majority of women all over the world. Besides the Women's Conferences, other Conferences also made women's roles visible to the international community for the first time in recent years. Rural women's contribution to agrarian economies was discovered and acknowledged by the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (1979). Famines in Africa raised questions within donor agencies: had the famines something to do with the neglect of women's roles as the primary food producers in that continent<sup>1</sup>? The initiation of the debate on women's 'role' had taken place in the first Conference on Population and Development, (Bucharest, 1974). That itself was an advance in visibility of women's roles other than the reproductive one. In the twenty years between the first and the third Conference on Population and Development more and more complex dimensions of women's roles became visible.



Women became increasingly a great part of the labour force with such an importance that President Nixon in the budget of 1971 has included as one of four chapters 'the economic role of women'. Women have also had access (though still very limited) to elected political functions which broke a taboo persistent since the beginning of democracy. Their participation in cultural life became a massive fact with outstanding names in all fields and all nations. Throughout all these and many other aspects of their presence, women have enlarged their role in the sphere of the private by being massively present in the public sphere.

The events that took place daily at the Planet Femina tent in the Rio Summit, became central in the many happenings of that important meeting. Vienna echoed, "Women's rights are human rights." In Cairo, thousands of women were able to give strength to the newly accepted concept of reproductive rights, thus opening the way for new breakthroughs and for an intense process of re-thinking of the place of rights in the overall process of development. The official text in Cairo referred abundantly to women's reproductive rights; the official text in Copenhagen made women's empowerment a part of basic commitment of some 120 heads of government and state.

Women were used to token references to their roles in the UN International Development Strategies. As information mounted, so did the shopping list of remedial, corrective measures - from an initial call to "women's participation", the official texts became more direct about women in development. Women gained momentum and appeared visibly in the international scene.

Moreover, women were attempting everywhere to give their contribution to the very diversified tasks needed for development. But their conceptual analysis could not keep pace with the explosion of information in other areas of the world concerns. It was too diverse, too scattered and perceived generally by the development community as well as by the political establishment as too "culture-specific" and idealistic. Hence, critiques by women North and South of the development paradigm were not taken in the mainstream.

In spite of the shortcomings, the visibility of women did take place. This, in itself, is a major achievement. In the world culture in which we live, individual existence in socio-political terms depends on how visible we have become. Most cultures tend to make women invisible.

This newly gained visibility of women shouldn't be veiled again. Here we need a 'trickle-down effect' which should be accelerated now. From the international scene to the most remote place in the planet, women have to become visible in their concerns for the future, in their rights, in their struggle for a better life for themselves and for others.

The spread of women's rights to vote across other countries since New Zealand first conceded it time in 1893 is a good analogy of the rhythm of changes that have taken place in women's rights. There is first a slow movement, followed by a rather quick acceleration and then a plateau is reached. Normally, by now all countries should have followed that obligation.

The plateau is, however, less understandable in the case of literacy of women or of the ILO Convention No. 100 - 'equal pay for equal work'.

It is the existence of such a plateau that is at stake now in all actions that are geared towards the empowerment of women. Women's struggles really gathered momentum with the social devastations of the industrial revolution, and the growth of women's education in all of Europe and North America. The movement had reached its plateau, and moved into the shadows.

Several factors have contributed to the changes occurred in recent decades. The independences of the second half of the century and the role played by the women in their accomplishment, the initiatives of the United Nations, particularly with the Year of Women in 1975, with the 1975-1985 decade of women, and the strategies agreed then, have strongly contributed to the establishment of national machineries for equality and to the awareness of a bias against women in all fields and, therefore, to the strengthening of the political will to overcome that bias.

With a few exceptions, the struggles of women had really remained middle class based in most countries. A broader ideology to achieve total equality and justice in the social and economic spheres, required a different kind of participation and consciousness, that had not been developed.

The new nation states incorporated social and economic equality in their constitutions. While they began the process of women becoming more "visible" in the educated professions, the service sector and the industrial work-force, the 'subordinated status' of the majority remained unchanged.

The second wave of feminism in the North from the 1960's onwards has been the outcome of large numbers of women in higher education, the 'sexual revolution' and a revolt against 'double standards' in social morality, and women's continued subordination in family and society. Initial demands emphasised social and sexual rights of individual women.

Two factors gave strength to its evolution. Women were questioning so much the conventional organisation of society, particularly in economy and politics, that, while feeling excluded from those fields, many women asked themselves if the needed change could be brought only by their co-option into the system. Due to the fragmented nature of the women's movement in the North, many women led the struggle on the basis of rights while others

concentrated their struggle on designing key-aspects of societal change.

The support found in the South reinforced some elements of the struggle character. The impact of accelerated industrialisation, urbanisation and population growth in the Third World on women was similar to those in industrialised countries in the 19th century. The level of consciousness, the emergence of successive generations of women at the forefront of knowledge, and the numbers with enough education to investigate the conditions, aspirations and perspectives of women among the labouring poor gave an impulse to the need for a change in societal patterns that had a great influence on the agenda of the women's movement.

The UN's Declaration of Elimination of Discrimination against Women, (1962??) and the call for national reports on the status of women precipitated the gathering of data in most countries of the North and South.

But the ideological transformation, and the emergence of new perspectives coming from women's organisations and groups, in the national as well as the world order as a whole, came from a fusion of changing consciousness and a struggle for solidarity across class, race, religion and nationality.

Other factors contributed to this process. First of all, the growth of women studies in many universities throughout the world has contributed to the shaping of a body of thought whose bearing on many diversified fields is undeniable.

Another factor is that in the last three decades, women were again active in struggles and work for democracy against oppressive regimes in Latin America, Africa, Asia. International development agencies, and national machineries for women created during the Decade needed ideas, information and allies to fulfil their mandates. Finally, networking with women actively organising in the field, or doing research for a deeper understanding, offered an answer. International and regional meetings expanded, cross-fertilization of ideas and personal friendships promoted genuine internationalism.

Women also learnt to use available force to pressurise governments and global leadership. Third World Economy Order to press women's rights within the development agenda. Two NAM Conferences (Baghdad 1979, Delhi, 1985) on Women Development forced reluctant governments to press some of the issues in the regional and world conferences of the Decade. In the parallel conferences of the NGO's - new alliances were formed, which did not always reflect the contours of global parties. By the 1980's, " a politically and ideologically less specific form of women's consciousness spread among the masses of the sex, far beyond anything achieved by the first wave of feminism. Women, as a group now became a major political force as they had not done before. By the early 1990's a striking divergence of political opinions between the sexes was



recorded in a number of countries by public opinion surveys. The signs of significant, even revolutionary changes in women's expectations about themselves and the world's expectations about their place in society are undeniable." All these facts have established women's rights in global consciousness. The women's movement has definitely heightened awareness among individuals, groups, and institutions.

In face of these facts and of the progresses achieved as well as of the perspectives opened, the Commission thinks that we may be at the edge of a new wave which will bring forward the right and duty of women to bring into the organisation of society and economics the experience they bring along with their own culture. Therefore, all means should be deployed to support and to utilise the 'view of the world' the women's movement brings with it.

### **Persistent violation of human rights**

In spite of the increase of women's visibility in society and the steps taken internationally in asserting women's rights at all levels, the gap between agreed principles and practice is still appalling. Even principles agreed upon internationally and in national legislations are often not implemented.

At the core of human rights, the awareness of human dignity of all human beings has led to the acknowledgement of their fundamental equality. That universal equality constitutes the central institution of human rights<sup>2</sup>. Inequality is the negation of human rights. However, in many fields -- and particularly in what concerns women, it has become a practice to replace 'inequality' by the softer word of 'discrimination'. Somehow, discrimination disguises the bare fact that what is at stake is the denial of women as persons who should enjoy without any restrictions with all the rights enshrined in the national and international law.

In this field as elsewhere the question of enforcement is decisive.

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women has been dominated more by the diplomatic play of power politics than by the determination to achieve a coherent action to improve the status of women everywhere. Financial crisis within the UN system have affected women-orientated programmes adversely and reduced the dynamism of agencies like the UNIFEM, (UNDP), FAD and UNICEF. At the national levels, with a few exceptions, deepening of the economic crisis and the impact of adjustment, transition, globalisation and the absence of daring steps in the design of new policies have distinct negative impact on the respect and promotion of women's human rights.

All over the world, women are not enjoying basic human rights - and this is in spite of the undeniable tremendous progress of



this century. It is not anymore a question of isolated facts, only linked to particular situations of deprivations or of old traditions. Throughout the world, the same type of attitudes and structural injustice against women engenders sociological phenomena with, at the root, the same cause - no difference in the motivations that lead to rape, to sex-tourism, to genital mutilation, to female infanticide.

In all these circumstances violence stalks women's lives.

Within the family two thirds or more of married women suffer domestic violence in many countries - North or South, East or West. They may end in rape, murder or suicide.

But violence is spreading - to the work place, within other social spheres, to the public streets. Studies from New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States suggest that 1 out every 6 women is raped in her lifetime. Proposition of women killed or maimed by other types of violent crimes is on the increase throughout the world. but there are very few analyses, unlike the issue of domestic violence which was propelled by the women's movement. Since these killings indicate a distinct breakdown of social norms shared by most cultures- they deserve some critical cross cultural and inter disciplinary investigations.

Young girls, - almost still girl childs - and adolescents are among the groups whose rights are most violated. Recent studies<sup>3</sup> show that women are most vulnerable exactly at that age of their psychological development when they undergo a deep crisis as they confront their inner world with the demands of society and feel at a loss to combine both

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The Commission believes that a global action agenda for children and adolescents - with a special focus on girls is a critical need to redress many of the injustices of history and social evolution. Parts of the agenda exist in the CRC, in education, literacy and health. What is missing is the conceptual framework - to articulate their political urgency.

The recent UN Conferences from Rio to Beijing in the continuation of the statements already made in previous conferences and general assemblies did not fail in denouncing all forms of structural injustice against women because they are women. These is why the Commission considers that the most crying aspects of what has been usually called 'in a crude language' 'gap between law and practice' has to be denounced and acted upon as **massive violation of human rights**. This requires conceptual and institutional changes. (1)

Visibility of women has to lead to a situation that goes far beyond equality and opportunities with women. When other equalities are widening gender equality for all is a mirage. A few may climb the ladder of success, but the majority remain excluded. A situation of passively accepted subordination is unacceptable in

terms of rights and quality of life. There won't be any new world order if some 90 countries still have reservations about the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination against Women. If human rights are to become the basis of a new world order, this most flagrant violation has to be banned.

### **A new potential for transformation**

At the Copenhagen Summit, women's rights as human rights and the central role of women in social development merged into the concept of women's empowerment.

Women have been proclaimed free and responsible in the very field from which, through centuries and millenia, patriarchy derived its domination. This in itself is a colossal revolution. It is a turning point in the understanding of women, in their dignity, as full human beings, not defined anymore by their capacity to procreate.

Outstanding authors have shown that "free and responsible decisions" are not made in a vacuum - they need a context of social, economic and cultural conditions in which freedom and responsibility acquire concrete meaning. Reproductive rights are not alien to social rights, they demand them, they cannot be respected without them.

Not only do they point out to the "social nature of rights" but they also acknowledge that rights take place in concrete contexts, where "human needs" provide the "substantive basis" of human rights.

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In this context, women's reproductive rights oblige national leadership, international organizations, to look towards the full implementation of an agenda of social rights.

It's because of this connection that we can speak here about 'women's empowerment'. This is based on the linkages between personal liberties (where no interference or coercion to affect the individual conscience is permissible) with social entitlements (which requires affirmative action and guarantees by public authorities and law).

Liberties and entitlements have to be reciprocal and responsible, to avoid destruction of the social base of such qualities. In essence, rights/ entitlements are relational, reflecting their social context. Unchartered, unlimited, individual liberty results in alienation and isolation of the individual from society. This was permitted in some old cultures - but the price was withdrawal from human society.

From their specific rights, particularly concerning reproduction, women want to have all their rights acknowledged and taken into account. The right to give a frame to all the efforts, to contribute to the shaping of life at all levels, in all



situations. Visibility then will operate at the level of new thinking, new actions, new policies. The desire, even the compulsion, to influence and change social life comes out of a sense of unrest and dissatisfaction with its quality.

There is no other way to understand and interpret the process of women's empowerment, a process by which women have become aware of their situation, have gained better information on its conditions and are struggling to change the power structures which oppress, but on which they are dependent. Experience as well as the psychological and sociological analysis of power show that no decision-making is fully possible at the most private level if it is not part of a chain of power-sharing. Already in 1985, the Non-aligned Movement's Document on Role of Women in Development described empowerment as a means to strengthen women's participation in all aspects of economic, social and political life.

Based on work and studies conducted in countries of all continents, having as a starting point the conscientisation process developed by Paulo Freire for totally different social groups, we affirm that empowerment is a process by which women gain from their experience the knowledge of the denial of their rights, develop a sense of solidarity and dynamism at all levels of life and undertake action in order to change their situation.

In the first stage women are comparing their lives with their rights. Poor women, across cultures, are not familiar with the language of rights, but of responsibilities to which they are socialised. Exposure to the concept of rights, and their legitimacy in a given context galvanises them into articulating, slowly and gradually, their suppressed feelings of injustice and unfairness of a social order that does not enable them to 'put things to right'.

Through such a process, women assume their own identity, value themselves, increase self-esteem and self-confidence and crossed the threshold of fear and feeling of powerlessness. Transition from the isolation of fear and powerlessness does not transform them into individualists because the needs of the collectives still remain their prior responsibilities. Starting from children, and the family, the responsibility embraces easily the local groups, workplaces, with which they can identify and which seems to require some good management.

At the second stage of the process of women's empowerment, the analysis of women's situation and of her practical needs do gradually uncover the structural questions of power by which her discriminated status is maintained.

If this stage is missed, women may benefit from different social aspects in their lives (e.g. better reproductive health services) without, in fact, moving forward in their empowerment.<sup>6</sup>

On the contrary, when the process is followed, women discover the deep roots of their discrimination and marginalisation. They are able to see that part of what happens to them is in fact, the outcome of structural domination and of ideological biases. They can then see that empowerment is incompatible with the downgrading of women expressed in so many different ways. Then they can act together.

*on the forefront of political agenda*  
The process of empowerment cannot stop once rights are proclaimed. They have to be placed in the forefront of the political agenda. This, in itself, is a radical change. The women's movement is not likely to withdraw from the challenge it's facing now to lose its momentum or to be co-opted as a means to maintain the status quo. Women's empowerment is not a subordinate or instrumentalist goal of any policy.

There is obviously a danger that empowerment may be sloganised without being realised, as it has happened with other international accepted concepts like 'women's integration', 'women's participation' etc. There is even a greater danger that it may be completely devoid of its meaning.

Why are so many national and international authorities ready to agree that women's empowerment should be placed at the center of the development process?

The only plausible reason is a dawning recognition that women are becoming a political force at both international and national levels. Even the institutions and strategies often criticised by women groups are trying to initiate "genderisation" strategies, which generally translate into some "women-specific" projects for economic empowerment of poor women in developing countries - as a response to the mounting evidence of "feminisation of poverty" that women's increasing visibility has brought about.

But the women's movement is no longer prepared to accept mere concessions from global or national power structures. Women's organisations which used to view themselves as 'non-political' are now involved in analysing the global political economy, and prepared to identify, assess and contribute to the strategies geared to a sustainable improvement of the quality of life.

When we speak about empowerment we are not targeting some specific groups of poor women in very difficult situations. Of course, within our sense of equity if an effort has to be made such groups will have absolute priority. But they have to go hand in hand with efforts made at and by other groups in society. The women working in Administration, the women in liberal professions, the academia, as well as groups in different jobs and activities, have to be mobilized into processes of empowerment.

In society everybody is part of a structure, relate and depend upon other people. Even if small fractions in the whole of society are 'empowered' and gain a sense of action, but remain isolated, empowerment cannot happen. Moreover, it is not a 'protective



action' to women that should be reenacted. Cross-fertilizations among groups of different social classes are essential.

We are therefore appealing to a sense of solidarity among women that is historically new. For centuries women have helped each other. In this one century of institutional world changes, women have shown a tremendous capacity to work together. In order to meet the challenges of the decades ahead solidarity has to be built across the outcome of all empowerment processes.

The empowerment process can be considered as the access to collective identity and purpose of women in our time. Visible and empowered, women will have in their hands the fundamental tools to shape the much needed civilizational change.

If states and international agencies are consistent with their recurring stress on women's rights, then their priorities have to shift from one-sided, technocratic economic balance to the policies capable of enhancing the social opportunities for all women to exercise of such rights.

If states and international agencies understand what they are saying when they say women's empowerment, then economic policies must be shifted radically - credit to women's collective initiatives, change international lending conditions, establish priorities in national budgets, balance between international duties and answering the crying needs of people.

In the whole spectrum of power, women must also gain another status in decision-making positions of political power. They have come up, in most of their NGOs declarations, with an urgent sense that "more of the same won't do". They are saying: "We are the women who will transform the world"<sup>7</sup>.

The 'concern and outrage' is very specific against the 'current economic paradigm, the influence of the uncontrolled and unregulated 'market forces', and 'paramountly of profit maximisation without regard to human rights, environmental sustainability and equal access to resources'.

The third set of concerns centre around global justice, the escalation of conflict, violence and strife. Women's empowerment to become real, has to intervene actively to promote resolution of conflicts by negotiations and women's 'economic and political activism'<sup>8</sup>.

Finally, empowerment of women means, as we have indicated throughout this report, a totally new approach to the problem of population dynamics, a new view on population policies and necessary changes in the national structures and in the international agencies and institutions.

The national and international leaders have to take into account that the women's movement has moved out of its earlier concerns for women specific issues. It is a transition from the

politics of recommendations to the politics of participation and partnership - in the management of human society, particularly in what concerns the fate of the immediate future generations and their quality of life.

The very process of empowerment of women is going to change the way women themselves exercise power. For women, power is everywhere - from home to workplace to the Cabinet or Summit meetings. Power based on competition, on either/or, on domination over others produces the type of relationships and social conditions women reject.

Change will only take place if women, at all levels, fully aware of their rights and responsibilities, express their own convictions collectively. It will be a different voice, a voice that seeks to integrate not to exclude, that provokes convergence not separation, that places 'justice' in the hands of 'care'.

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