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WOMEN, POPULATION AND THE FUTURE

by

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I would like to talk about two subjects which are receiving more and more attention and which will likely be the major issues of international focus in the 21st century. They are women and population.

This is International Women's Year. The fact that the United Nations, with the support of its member countries, promoted a year especially for women reflects international recognition that women face special problems and have received less than fair and equal treatment in a world where men predominate in politics, economics and the family. I was lucky enough to be an official adviser to the U.S. delegation to the International Women's Year conference in Mexico in June. The press and publicity on the conference was very negative in the U.S.; I think unfairly. The conference was initially expected to solve the problems of half of humanity in two weeks. However, what it hoped to do, and what it did, was to heighten awareness to problems of women worldwide and to focus official attention on the problems of women. It also led to communications between women leaders around the globe, and a greater understanding of their common problems, as well as a sense of determination, founded on unity, to do something about them.

The conference signified much more to women from countries where politics, laws and traditions are strongly prejudiced against women than to us. After all, women in the U.S., although all our battles have not yet been won, are well off compared to women in the developing countries.

I travel two or three times a year to Asia and Latin America. The daily pattern of women in the developing countries has changed very little for centuries. For instance, the average woman in South Asia or Africa

rises at 5 a.m. every morning and goes to the fields within an hour with a baby on her back. There she plants, ploughs and farms for most of the rest of the day. Returning home, she picks up firewood on her way and once home, pounds grain, walks a mile to fetch water, and cooks the family meal. She goes to bed at 9 p.m. after a fifteen hour non-stop working day. She does not know this is Women's Year and has been unaffected by it. She has never learned to read and write, was married off by her father at age fourteen, will have eleven pregnancies, six surviving children, and she may live to be fifty. She has had no access to family planning services and does not understand the reproductive process. Her property and money, if she has any, belong to her husband. She has few, if any, rights. This woman bears the heavy home and work responsibilities of her family and has far less chance for education and advancement than her husband or brother. I was recently in Bangladesh where the literacy rate for women is only 2%, while for men it is almost 20%. And the women are kept closely in the home. They are not even allowed to worship in the mosques where only men are deemed worthy to pray.

In a community in Africa where AID provided development support, the women so cherished the short time during the day when they could leave the burdens of home and work to walk to the distant water well and talk with other women, that they destroyed the modern water pumps installed near their huts. The development team thought the pumps would be more efficient and save time, but they did not realize that the trips to the well fulfilled a valuable social need. It also provided a needed workbreak, because their husbands would give them other chores if they were not going to the well.

One of the main reasons that women in the developing world have such low status is their continuous childbearing and childrearing. A woman who starts bearing children at fourteen begins a vicious cycle of poverty, dependence and childbearing. Large families also mean not enough to eat for the numerous children, and if there is only food enough for one it is given to the oldest boy.

As to population, there are now four billion people in the world. In 1830 there were one billion. The current number will double by the year 2025 - that is only fifty years - to eight billion, if we continue to grow at the present rate, and the greatest growth will continue to be in the poor, developing countries, which cannot even sustain their current populations.

This means that early in the 21st century, if present growth continues, there will be double the present number of people in the world to feed, house, educate and employ. While 30% of the world population today live in the developed world of Europe, the U.S., and Japan, by the beginning of the 21st century the poor nations will have burgeoned so that only 15% of the people in the world will be from the advantaged, developed countries. Historically, growing population and lack of food and other resources will bring about famine, disease and war. As is true in hardship, women and children will suffer most. It will be impossible for the U.S. and other rich countries to survive in comfort in isolation. International tensions will make our future insecure and stability threatened.

The only solution is to try to avoid these disastrous consequences with efforts now. The Agency for International Development, which directs the U.S. foreign assistance program in the State Department, has concerted

programs throughout the developing world to provide family planning education and services. Where these services are available, women and couples use them. The fact that women want less children is clearly demonstrated by the alarmingly high number of illegal abortions in the poor countries. In many Latin American hospitals, for example, one out of every two beds in the maternity ward is occupied by a woman suffering complications from an illegal abortion.

It is clear from our experience in the United States and other countries that fewer births and decreased population growth not only mean economic development but also a better status for women. Women are better off when they marry later and have babies later. That way they can take advantage of education and employment opportunities and have some economic independence should they so desire. They also are better off with two children than with eight. Their health is improved with fewer children properly spaced, and they are free to spend some time outside their homes.

In recognition of the close inter-relationship between family planning and the status of women, AID has programs worldwide working with women's groups in family planning, job training and education. I visited a program we support where we provide funds through one of our grantees to the Nepal Women's Organization. This organization teaches women to read and write, teaches them handicrafts so that they can earn incomes, and gives them family planning education and services. In Sri Lanka we have a program with the YWCA which combines job training and family planning. These are examples of AID's efforts to provide family planning and other assistance to improve women's status.

Women are half of humanity. Their role in life should be recognized as much more than merely procreative. They are productive members of society who, when given a chance, can be valuable and essential to the economic, social, and political progress of nations. They deserve the right to freely choose whether and when to have a child, and to have other options open to them than childbearing and second-class citizenship. Women in the United States can provide leadership and support to ensure that women around the world are treated with respect and dignity, and that the 21st century brings peace and equality --- the symbols of Women's Year --- to women everywhere.