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A PLACE FOR STORY TELLING: THE CAIRO POPULATION CONFERENCE

Kathryn O'Connor

A delegation of Monash University medical students attended the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in September 1994. Kathryn O'Connor was part of this delegation. Here is her account of what occurred.

A young Asian-looking woman stood at the front of a crowded room. She spoke in a low voice that you almost had to strain to hear and explained that she was from Tibet. The story she told was of her experience of growing up, getting married and having children.

She was married at 22 and got pregnant soon after. She had the child but had to hide it until she obtained a permit from the government which usually takes four years. Through bribing government officials she was able to get one after about two years. During this time she conceived another child. Every single day of that pregnancy she would be called upon by the Family Planning workers who tried to convince her to have an abortion. They arranged for her to be fired from her job so that she could think about having an abortion. She was told that if she did have the child she would have to pay a fine, would only receive 30 per cent pay for the rest of her life and the child's name would not be registered. Finally she agreed to have the abortion which had to be done surgically because the pregnancy was so far gone.

The woman told her story plainly, matter-of-factly, as if there was nothing extraordinary about it. And there isn't. Not if you live in Tibet. But her audience was from all over the world, from Sweden and the Sudan and Mexico and Australia. To her listeners the story was incredible.

This story was told in a small room in the basement of a large sports stadium in Cairo, Egypt. In September last year this stadium was converted into a conference centre for the Non-Governmental Organisations' (NGO) Forum of the International Conference on Population and Development. I attended this conference as part of a delegation of Monash Medical Students: the Monash University Medics for Population Awareness (MUMPA). The conference was the third of

its kind and arose in response to growing concerns about global overpopulation and its many implications. The conference was organised in two sections: a formal, structured government meeting and a less formal non-government event.

THE GOVERNMENT CONFERENCE

The purpose of the Government Conference was to agree on a 'Plan of Action' for the future in the form of a document to be released after the meeting. The document had been through three preparatory meetings and was already quite a powerful statement about the future. For example, it set down in black and white that women have a right to an education, a right to reproductive health and safe motherhood and a right to be involved in policy and decision making, especially relating to sustainable development. The fact that these issues were highlighted in the document (much more than in previous ones) relates directly to the pressure which many women's groups have been putting on their governments for a long time. It was also aided by the replacement of the conservatives in America by a more liberal government for, as we saw every day in Cairo, the voice of the United States is heard in the world arena!

Ninety-five per cent of the document had been written and accepted by the 180 countries involved before the September conference. At Cairo, the job was to labour over words and sentences within the remaining five per cent, looking for language which would promote consensus on a series of contentious issues. Each country had its brief and its bargaining points. As an example, Australia fought hard to have the phrase 'Aboriginal people' changed to 'Aboriginal peoples'. Originally I thought this to be quite a pedantic matter but found that it has important implications in international law associated with the rights of 'Aboriginal

people' (with an 's'), rights which Australia wanted to support. These rights include the right to make land claims. Canada and other countries with large indigenous populations were unhappy about the 's' and, under pressure, Australia agreed to drop it. This is an example of one thing I really noticed in Cairo: the substantial importance attached to language at such conferences.

The final draft called for comprehensive government and private action on: gender equality; sustainable development; formulation and implementation of population policies; poverty; health; and education, especially the education of girls. Most countries signed. Those that did not were mainly Catholic countries such as Venezuela, the Philippines and the Holy See. These countries fought hard to have some of the language relating to contraception and abortion changed but were unsatisfied with the final version of the document. Despite the fact that most countries signed, the Cairo document is not at all binding. No government is obliged to put into place any of the actions it suggests. But it is certainly not a stab in the dark either. Its power will emerge in the hands of Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) which will be able to use it to lobby their own governments to tackle issues affecting specific communities.

THE NGO FORUM

Most of my time was spent at the NGO Forum. Its purpose seemed to be much less concrete than Government Conference. It involved the creation of networks between people working on similar issues and the lobbying of government delegations. But the lifeblood of this gathering emerged from the people and the telling of stories.

LOBBYING

The power of the NGOs to lobby their government delegations was harnessed through morning meetings of a Youth Caucus, a Women's Caucus and an Environment Caucus. The Women's Caucus was really alive. Its momentum had built up over several years and many previous conferences, including the three pre-Cairo preparatory meetings in New York. At these meetings the Women's Caucus had worked hard to ensure that women's rights were placed at the heart of the document. And at Cairo this energy was paralleled in the Government Conference

with women like Benzhir Bhutto (from Pakistan) and Prime Minister Bruntland (from Norway) ensuring that women's rights were high on the agenda.

The Youth Caucus, at which I spent most of my time, was smaller and newer. It focussed on issues which had been discussed at a Youth Consultation held just prior to conference. Members felt that the key issues that most affected Youth were education, employment and reproduction. The Youth Caucus formed committees to work on language in the document relating to these issues.

I was part of the 'education' committee of the Youth Caucus which wrote recommendations on chapter 11, 'Population, development and education'. These suggestions were forwarded to Government delegates and, incredibly to us, a couple were incorporated in the final draft. I was flabbergasted that with a little energy, in the right place at the right time, it is possible to make a difference. And I was forced to review my 'chinkless-suit-of-armor' hypothesis about government.

CREATION OF NETWORKS

The NGO forum was also important for the creation of networks of people working on similar issues. These networks emerged from presentations and workshops and they allowed NGOs to share their practical experience. This sharing was especially important for discussion of issues that would be difficult to raise publicly in particular countries. An example is female circumcision. Many presentations were given on this topic and these were always chockablock. A few interested westerners turned up, but the bulk of the audience were women working on practical ways to reduce the practice. The growing networks shared experience and discussed ways to combat deeply entrenched cultural ideals.

TELLING STORIES

The body of information available at the conference was enormous. During each hour of the ten days about eight different Non Government Organisations gave presentations in the many rooms of the NGO forum. But what I remember most from these presentations and the whole experience is not the issues or the arguments but the people, their faces and their stories.

At MUMPA's own presentation (on 'Sex education in Australian schools'), for example, question time was very colourful. Two particular people really stick out in my mind.

The first young woman related her own work for Population Services International in Botswana. She teaches sex education in the streets, at railway and bus stations and anywhere young people will listen. First she talks about abstinence but knows that many of them will take no notice. So she brings her own cucumber along, demonstrating how to use a condom before giving away free ones. I thought a lot about her energy and focus when I returned from Egypt and became involved in a Sex Education in Schools program as part of our third year curriculum. Her conviction gave me hope that it was all worthwhile.

The second was a young woman from Egypt who stood up to rebut a comment by

an older Egyptian doctor. He had claimed that young people in Egypt didn't need sex education because they simply didn't have sex before marriage. The young woman related the story of a friend of hers who had married at about eighteen. On her wedding night she had no idea what her husband was doing to her and thought he was abusing her. You can just imagine the fear that would have gone through that girl's mind – the first time she has been away from her family for an extended period of time and with a man she probably hardly knows. The doctor's next comment: 'Donkeys know how to do it, so why don't we?' just didn't cut it.

These stories and the many others that I heard at Cairo give the 'issues' of population and development faces and names. And in a very subtle way they edged Cairo away from feeling like 'just talk and no action'. Because stories make people feel. And feelings are what eventually incite us into action.

THE IMPACT OF NEW RULES ON HECS AND AUSTUDY ELIGIBILITY

Bob Birrell, Ian Dobson and Virginia Rapson

In May 1995 the Government introduced new rules designed to restrict educational benefits to those who have demonstrated a long term commitment to Australia. However, these rules miss their target and will cause considerable administrative and personal inconvenience.

In May 1995 the Government announced measures to deny students holding permanent residence (as distinct from those who hold Australian citizenship) the right to defer their Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) payments or to receive Austudy benefits. Also, the rules employed to assess the financial eligibility of families for Austudy were tightened.

These measures were triggered in part by a report published in *People and Place* in December 1994.¹ The report examined some of the characteristics of Austudy beneficiaries. It showed that nearly 36 per cent of the eligible age group attending private secondary schools were Austudy recipients, including 12 per cent of those attending the most expensive category of such schools. The report noted that some well-off parents could secure Austudy payments for their children through arrangements which limited their taxable income. It also found that 51.3 of

eligible tertiary-level students born in Hong Kong and 46.4 percent of those born in Malaysia were Austudy beneficiaries – much the same as for the Australian-born student population. Yet Census and related data suggested that students from Hong Kong and Malaysia derive disproportionately from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

In 1994 it was possible for students who deferred their HECS payments (true of the majority) and then left Australia on completion of their degrees to avoid any contribution to their university fees. The *People and Place* report argued that this was most likely to occur with recently-arrived students from the more affluent parts of Asia (like Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore). Though holding permanent-residence status in Australia, these students often return to their country-of-origin upon completion of their course, attracted by the buoyant employment conditions prevailing there. In