United Nation’s Policy and the Family in the Context of Population Control

by

Maria Sophia Aguirre and Ann Wolfgram

In the last forty years, both international and national policy discussions have been overwhelmingly shaped by the language of overpopulation and women’s rights. The focus and, often obsession, with these limited themes has translated into a popular overhaul of the traditional outlook on the family as a unique organic unit. In light of the upcoming United Nation’s events, particularly the Special General Assembly Session for Follow-Up to the World Summit for Children, the 4th Session of the World Youth Forum, and the High-Level Intergovernmental Event on Financing for Development, it is worthwhile to examine the development of UN policies on the family to better comprehend present perspectives as well as proposals for the future state of familial relationships. A startup point for this discussion is to look at the UN’s early policy on the family and then to trace the major evolution of this policy since the 1960’s. An evaluation of the ICPD conferences since Bucharest reveals that UN policy on the family has degenerated from a natural societal unit entitled to protection and rights (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Articles 12, 16, & 25) from its earliest stages to its present placement within the context of the population control policies framework. This relegation of the family to population control issues has proven to be of lasting effect with the introduction of rights language into family relationships. We will then proceed, in the second of these two essays, to examine in further detail the progressive history of UN perspectives on the family and to evaluate the implications of discussing family in human rights terms.

Perspectives

Five major perspectives have played the largest role in shaping the UN dialogue that has essentially redefined the notion of family. The population control perspective approaches population as a problem that needs control. Those who advocate this perspective see population as the main cause of
poverty and a block to development based on resources availability as well as a large problem behind female oppression. Also greatly affecting the family is the women’s rights perspective, which views children as an obstacle to female personal development. In this view, family responsibilities are primarily a source of oppression and reproductive services will help alleviate this problem because women will have fewer children. A third perspective, concentrating on children’s rights, tends to drive a wedge in the parent-child relationship by speaking of children autonomously with certain rights over and against parents. Fourth, the sexual and reproductive rights perspective combines the first two perspectives assuming that all women find motherhood oppressive and that population growth is negative and argues that an availability of reproductive information and services will solve both. Finally, a fifth perspective, which has also reshaped the traditional conception of family, focuses on gender by claiming that binary gender understanding restricts personal sexual expression and instead advocates alternative gender language.

**Early UN Approach to Family**

Early UN treatment of the family began with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, specifically in Articles 12, 16, and 25, recognized the family as the natural and fundamental societal unit entitled to protection and rights. The UN addressed rights to health and education but without reference to sexual or reproductive health, which has dominated discussion in the last twenty years. Through the 1960’s, the marriage institution was affirmed as the foundation of the family. Parents were given the protective role regarding the moral formation and education of their children. It was not until the 1974 Population and Development Conference in Bucharest that the first major challenge to the family unit appeared in the context of a strong rising tendency of the UN to address the family primarily in the limiting terms of reproductive capacity. This began the development of fertility regulation policies within future UN conferences.

**The UN, the Family, and Population Control**

Within the context of international conferences of population and development (ICPD), especially in 1984 and 1994, the UN has fundamentally affected the family by progressively making an explicit link
between family planning, women’s rights, population, and development. As a result, UN documents now refer to the family in terms of women’s rights and population control debates.

The door was first opened for family regulation by population control in document from Bucharest: Buchanan Plan of Action. The Chinese implementation of a one-child policy between 1974 and 1984, however, turned the public against any seemingly coercive population policies. To avoid this stigma, the same “population control” policies were merely repackaged in positive language terms such as “family planning assistance” or “reproductive education and services” to equate population control with better healthcare. Recommendation 25 of the 1984 Mexico City ICPD document, Recommendations for the further implementation of the World Population Plan of Action, gives evidence of this rhetorical shift. The document avoids coercive language working on the assumption that couples generally want fewer children. Rather, it recommends, “Government should, as a matter of urgency, make universally available information, education and the means to assist couples and individuals to achieve their desired number of children.” The link between decreased population and improved well-being and sustainable development was a result of arguments based on the theory of Malthusian limits and, all too simply, tied poverty directly to fertility. The 1994 conference in Cairo, strongly influenced by these arguments, made the explicit connection in a UN document between women’s rights (especially reproductive rights) and population and development. Every chapter in the Cairo ICPD Programme of Action either treats women’s issues as its main subject or in detail in a subsection. This explicit connection tying development to women’s control over their own fertility would have major implications for family and family life. The answer to this “feminization of poverty” was to ensure that reproductive services were readily available to all women while consequently ignoring other issues of education or absentee fathers when, in fact, “the tie between population and poverty was a tenuous correlation at best.” The Cairo conference did promote equal access to education, but those at the conference seemed to work under the presumption that educated women would want fewer children.

Thus, the UN’s population control aims progressed from the level of disease prevention to making decisions and assumptions about the most intimate act between a husband and wife. Chapter IV of the Cairo document defines reproductive health as, “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to
its functions and processes.” Through this means, the UN dramatically altered the concept of the marriage institution, which had been recognized only thirty years before as the foundation of the family. Essentially, the family was redefined in terms of individual rights and the Cairo conference introduced new language addressing “various forms of family” rather than one natural unit. This artificial approach necessarily reduces natural family bonds to tenuous contractual agreements. Implementing naturally individualistic “rights” language into the family, particularly through reproduction issues, was often initiated with good intentions of eliminating abuse and other tragic situations, but it has weakened the organic unity of the family.

**Bibliography**


United Nations’ Documents:


Human Rights and the Family within United Nation’s Policy

by

Maria Sophia Aguirre and Ann Wolfgram

Current United Nations discussions concerning the family and familial relationships have been reduced to an issue revolving around human rights language. An evaluation of the ICPD conferences since Bucharest reveals that UN policy on the family has degenerated from a natural societal unit entitled to protection and rights (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Articles 12, 16, & 25) from its earliest stages to its present context within the population control framework. This relegation of the family to population control issues proved to be of lasting effect with the introduction of rights language into family relationships and is especially relevant to the upcoming Third UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC-III) and the High-Level Intergovernmental Event on Financing for Development both in 2001. In this second essay, I intend to examine in further detail the progressive history of UN perspectives on the family and the implications of discussing family in human rights terms. Early recognition of the family as a societal unit entitled to protection and rights preserved a natural gap between the public realm of the state and the private realm of basic human relationships. Subsequent discussion of family, however, has been placed in population control language binding family relationships to public goals and transforming the notion of family into a policy issue.

Human Rights within the Family

Since the 1968 World Conference on Human Rights in Tehran, United Nation’s discussion, conferences, and documents have insistently placed the family within the human rights framework. Modern rights language, however, is rooted in the Lockean understanding of rights, which by its individualistic nature is unable to address organic groups such as the family. Discussions of women’s

---

* This is the second portion of a two-part article on UN Policy and the Family.

2. Department of Business and Economics, the Catholic University of America, Washington DC, 20064.
rights and children’s rights in particular have been foremost in the UN conferences of the last thirty years and the effects of this focus have gone beyond women’s and children’s issues to affect the organic social structure of the family.

**Women’s Rights and the Family**

Within the UN, during the UN Decade for Women from 1976 to 1985, the role of women in development was first tied to issues such as poverty, overpopulation, illiteracy, and poor health. At later conferences, in light of the population control debate, women’s role in development became more and more tied to the control of their fertility. Tying women solely to fertility caused them to be increasingly portrayed as discriminated victims of their biological and societal circumstances as well as to be treated as a tool of policy. In particular, the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) shifted the focus from the development of the multi-faceted character of women to focusing on controlling her fertility. Reproductive control was seen as a means for females to overcome their discriminated status and gain equality with men. It is worth mentioning, however, that at this stage the gap between public and private spheres was still respected.

A later document at the 1985 Nairobi conference ending, the UN Decade for Women, complained of a failure to fully implement the objectives outlined by CEDAW, the ICPD in Mexico City 1984, and the World Conference of the UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development, and Peace in Copenhagen 1980. It blamed this failure primarily on “major factors in the enduring inequality of women and *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination against them; the continuation of women’s subordinate roles in development, a consequence of physiological, social and cultural biases” (*The United Nations and the Advancement of Women*, UN Dept. of Information 1995, 46). The document focused on an antagonistic relationship between men and women, especially regarding domestic violence, thus emphasizing the division within the family between women and men in terms of family planning. While the document did not reserve fertility control or family planning as an exclusive female right, control of their fertility became the “basis of enjoyment” for all of other female rights. Paragraph 29 of the conference’s document, *Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women*, reads: “the issues of fertility rates permit women to exercise effectively their rights in matters pertaining to population concerns, including the basic right to
control their own fertility which forms an important basis for the enjoyment of other rights…” This linkage implies that without control of her fertility a woman will be denied, where men are able, the means to exercise or enjoy any of her other rights and will thus suffer discrimination. This view is still prevalent in the UN today.

During the period between the Nairobi conference and the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, women’s rights groups made a further connection between discrimination of women and violence. They began working to eliminate discrimination against women, not by itself, but within the language and framework of violence. ‘Violence’ denotes a necessity for crime control that crosses public boundaries into the private domain of most women. Thus, including the language of violence made the issue of discrimination much more pressing and effectively rendered states responsible for inaction as well as action. It also deepened the assumption of inherent antagonism in the male-female relationship. Later documents, including the Declaration for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW), called for special protection of women from violence without the same provisions for boys or men. Article 1 of DEVAW defined violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.” Women became a special group with special individual rights divisively separating them from the rest of the family. The family and home were now seen as a source of violence against women necessitating activist and interventionist protection.

Building on the now divisive male/female roles of family planning, the actions of the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing in 1995 ensured that the language of “reproductive rights” would be on the agenda of future conferences and placed sexual and reproductive healthcare prior to all other needs. While the Beijing document made no explicit mention of reproductive “rights” per se, reproductive health was understood as a woman’s right and women’s rights as part of human rights. During this conference, the idea of viewing the family as a source of discrimination for girls was introduced. Paragraph 285(a) of the conference report, called for governments and NGOs to “formulate policies and programmes to help the family…in its supporting, educating and nurturing roles, with particular emphasis on the elimination of intra-family discrimination against the girl child.”
Five years later, at the Beijing follow-up conference, many of these fragile constructed points between reproductive health, women’s rights and human rights nearly crumbled. Many of the developed nations pushed even further to implement vague language concerning gender roles, homosexuality, abortion, and the reproductive rights of the girl child upsetting other conference members by consistently ignoring parental rights and degrading traditional roles such as motherhood. Developing Countries and other organizations were largely successful in preventing the inclusion of this language, yet despite their considerable efforts, some ground was lost in the document’s language of gender and sexual rights. The Beijing +5 document, *Further Actions and Initiatives to Implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, further defined language of reproductive health and reproductive health care. Adding sexual health to the realm of reproductive health, section 107(g) described reproductive health care as “the constellation of methods, techniques and services that contribute to reproductive health and well-being by preventing and solving reproductive health problems. It also includes sexual health, the purpose of which is the enhancement of life and personal relations, and not merely counseling and care related to reproduction and sexually transmitted diseases.” The same section proceeded to link this definition with the concept of reproductive rights under which they included not only the right to determine the number and spacing of children, but also each woman’s “right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence, as expressed in human rights documents.” This attempt to define reproductive rights, however, works on an assumption that within the natural marital relation exists an antagonism between husband and wife reaching to violent proportions and thus requiring the regulation of individual rights language.

In summary, over the last twenty years of UN activity the natural family has suffered seriously with respect to women’s rights. Conferences over the 1980s and 1990s tied reproductive health to women’s rights while overlooking other health issues such as education, clean water or malaria. Activists have ceased mentioning the father’s contribution to the reproductive decision making process and pitted women’s rights against men’s. Infant mortality, even, has been attributed to too frequent pregnancies without consideration of pre- or post-natal care. In this period, women’s rights and population control advocates have introduced assumptions of antagonism, discrimination and violence within the family and have subsequently based policy on these assumptions.
Children’s rights discussion has also affected the portrayal of relationships within the family and, consequently, the traditional conception of the family unit. Historically, the parental role in the parent-child relationship involved protection and fundamental decision making for the not yet mature child. This attitude, clearly seen in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, recognized natural parental authority and responsibility and generally prevented state intervention. This historic conception began to shift quietly in the 1960s and 70s and vocally in the 1980s. In the new perspective, the state and the family (no longer recognized as an organic unit) were tied in a duty relationship with parental rights and authority granted by the state in contract. With a rising skepticism of authority, the next step was to advocate child autonomy to whom the state ensured necessary rights and acted as the primary provider of protection and care implying that the state was better able to determine a child’s best interests rather than parents. This attitude was clearly prevalent in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child where parents receive mention, but it is clear that the state serves as an overriding protector and caretaker. Article 2 of the document reads: “State’s parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of the parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and, to this end, shall take all appropriate legislative and administrative measures.” Generally, the UN has sought to play a role in all areas of decision-making for children and has ignored parental authority and responsibility in the process.

UN Influence on Family and Culture

Overall, the last thirty years have witnessed an increasing ability of the UN control to shape societal attitudes and culture most specifically through the shaping of gender roles (especially motherhood) in the family. This process developed from, initially, little to no mention of gender roles through the 1975 World Conference on Women in Mexico City to an enormous dialectic of male-female antagonism and a call for the abolition of traditional gender stereotypes and roles. The Mexico City conference saw the need for greater participation of women in society, but did so in a positive light rather than speaking of women as merely discriminated sex objects as the media tended to do. CEDAW altered this approach with assumptions that the traditional female role was inherently stereotyped and prevented realization of her full
potential. Article 5.2 of the CEDAW document mandates that states “modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either sex or on the stereotyped roles for men and women.” This attitude remained prevalent throughout the 1980s. In a further step at Cairo in 1994, the UN, through the conference’s ICPD Programme of Action, sought to involve education and the media in altering cultural perception not only of male-female roles but also of sexual and reproductive health regarding adolescents. This step sought to involve the whole of society in these issues because parental authority was no longer trusted. The key to focusing on all of these issues was the assumption that family does not build or fulfill women but limits and restricts. The Beijing+5 document, particularly in paragraph 128 (e), carried this assumption even further by arguing that traditional female roles were not just limiting but damaging.

These open and unapologetic attempts by the UN to change societal attitudes and culture have had serious ramifications for the family. The UN has come closer and closer to replacing the natural family, recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the fundamental group unit of society, with an unnatural, inorganic, and contractual family based on the rights or duties of individuals. Over the last twenty years, UN documents have “drastically redefined” the family unit and fragmented it by placing the family within the dialogue of human rights, which by nature can only address individual rights. Human rights language, to be sure, has a purpose, but not within the unique unit of the family. Such language is unable to deal with these basic, natural relationships and has led to a dialogue addressing the family not as an organic unit but only in terms of its sexual and reproductive assets. The family is more than just a demeaning source of discrimination and violence or purely a sexual and reproductive source of rampant overpopulation. Family serves as the first introduction to and the basic unit of society. It is also multidimensional and thus able to affect all areas of society. The health of civil society depends on the health of the family. If the family continues to be fragmented and demeaned, societal consequences will necessarily result.
Bibliography


UN Documents:


Further Actions and Initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing +5).


