



## **ABORTION IS A GLOBAL POLITICAL ISSUE**

*By Sonia Correa*

Abortion is a global political issue that must be addressed and widely debated; particularly by those who are concerned both with the negative impacts of globalisation and who are committed to women's human rights. A simple way to demonstrate that abortion is relevant globally is to examine available data, as in the information compiled by Catholics for a Free Choice and the Center for Reproductive Law and Policy<sup>1</sup> (see Box 1, P2). In addition to global civil society movements recognising the scale of abortion as a worldwide public health problem, it is DAWN's view that they are also challenged to fully understand both the history of abortion and especially the present (geo) political implications.

Historically, in the West and elsewhere, laws and religious norms have forbidden abortion. This is not surprising as these laws and norms were moulded by dominant patriarchal societies and, as we are reminded by Daniel Maguire: *The religions of the world were founded at times when depopulation was a problem in the world. In the Roman Empire when Christianity was established, only four people out of 100 could expect to reach their 50th birthday. Infant mortality was high...Religions bred in such times would stress the blessing of fertility*".<sup>2</sup> There are both historical and contemporary records of situations in which these laws permit extreme punishment. For instance, the European Catholic Inquisition pursued and executed as witches women who aborted and the midwives who helped them. In Nepal until last year, teen-agers who resorted to illegal abortion were condemned to up to twenty years in prison. But neither in the past nor today have religious and legal prohibitions been able to restrain the extensive practice of abortion. The idea that an estimated 700,000 Brazilian women who undergo clandestine abortion each year can be incarcerated cannot be taken seriously by any policy maker, independently of his moral stand on the issue. These laws remain in place basically to sustain a cultural climate of moral condemnation of women who resort to the interruption of pregnancies, instead of making other efforts to seriously try to understand why they do so.

Also — although this is not widely recognised — abortion has been part of the international progressive agenda at least since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The best illustration is the work of the socialist leader Emma Goldman, who before 1917 promoted the use of contraception among women workers in New York. Then she went to Russia where she influenced the early policies of the Soviet Revolution in relation to sex education and decriminalisation of abortion. After 1945, this early Soviet experience influenced law reform in most of Eastern Europe and some other places. If we remember that Cuba legalised abortion in 1959, immediately after the revolution, it becomes clear that Goldman's socialist views on women's reproductive self-determination has also travelled South, even if we do not know much about the path this took.

The abortion agenda became global after the procedure was made legal in a large number of industrialised countries in the 1960s and 1970s: US, France, Holland, Italy, Canada, Scandinavian countries and Australia. The feminist movement in developing countries rapidly appropriated the debate on reproductive self-determination, including access to legal and safe abortion. As early as 1979 and against all odds — dictatorship on the one hand and the reaction of Catholic forces on the other — the Brazilian feminist movement publicly advocated decriminalisation of abortion. In this new era, however, powerful moral conservative forces also immediately made abortion a major political target. Mostly based in the North, these forces did not restrict their actions to their own national arenas, but tried to restrain the liberalisation of laws in other parts of the world.

As soon as the American Supreme Court decided on the constitutionality of abortion in 1973, the ultra-conservative Senator Jesse Helms was able to obtain approval of a provision prohibiting the use of American aid funds in abortion related activities <sup>3</sup>. Similarly in Catholic countries of the South, constitutional reforms of the 1980s and early 1990s were targeted by a global Vatican lobby that called for the incorporation of a 'right to life from conception' provision in final texts. Brazil was the only country where the new constitution did not include this provision, because the feminist movement was able to build alliances with progressive congressmen and women and struggled hard against the proposal.

During the same period in the US, the Right to Life movement rapidly expanded, particularly after Reagan was elected president. In the 1980s and also in the 1990s their agents bombed clinics and killed doctors who provided abortions. In recent years these groups — whose actions cannot be described as political but rather as terrorist tactics — have been increasing their connections within developing countries, specially those with large Catholic communities.

Another critical site in which to examine recent developments in the global politics of abortion is the United Nations. At the International Population Conference in Mexico in 1984, the alliance between the Reagan administration and the Holy See created a major controversy around abortion. The United States cut funding for the UN Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) saying that the programmes facilitated access to abortion. As a result abortion was excluded from the agenda of the Women's Conference of Nairobi in 1985. These negative trends, however, would start to be reversed in the so-called UN Social Cycle of the 1990s, an interconnected series of global debates starting with Environment and Development (Rio 1992).

In Rio — against the position of both the Vatican and Bush (father of the current US President George W. Bush) — a recommendation was adopted on adding access to reproductive health as part of family planning. Vienna's definitions with respect to women's human rights affirmed that they applied to both public and private realms. This created the basis for further development at Cairo (International Conference on Population and Development, 1994) and Beijing (IV World Conference on Women, 1995) where agreement was achieved

in relation to the concepts of reproductive and sexual rights, and abortion was defined as a major public health problem. In Beijing, the recommendation was also made that countries should review their punitive legislation with respect to pregnancy termination. Women's organisations have marked these victories worldwide and have started using these definitions to advocate for legal reform at country level.

But the battle continued. In the Cairo+5 and Beijing +5 Reviews (1999-2000), items relating to abortion were subjected to virulent attacks on the part of the Holy See, some Islamic countries and a few other developing countries. Despite that, the 1994-1995 consensus was preserved and even slightly expanded<sup>4</sup>. Then, in 2001, the current Bush administration entered the scene and immediately revived the Reagan politics of the 1980s. Even before refusing to ratify the Kyoto protocol it issued the gag rule to restrict American aid funds for NGOs that include any abortion-related activity in their programmes.

This was followed by the exclusion of Cairo-Beijing targets in regard to sexual and reproductive rights from the indicators defined to monitor UN Millennium Development Goals, because the US interpreted reproductive health as synonymous with abortion. In the Child Summit Review (May 2002) there was harsh debate on abortion language. In Rio+10 (August 2002), one paragraph was disputed until the very end because the US and its Islamic allies called for language that made health policies subject to religious and cultural values. In her last public intervention as High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson was outspoken against this formulation. At the same time, the US Congress once again suspended the funding for UNFPA. Lastly, in the ESCAP meeting in preparation for Cairo +10 (December 2002), the Bush administration was beaten in a UN negotiation for the first time since it took power ( see article on the 5<sup>th</sup> Asian and Pacific Population Conference, P4).

To fully understand what is at play behind these various UN battles it is crucial to have in mind the analysis deployed by Catholics for a Free Choice:

*The roots of fundamentalist political behaviour are found in patriarchal interpretations of religious beliefs and values. Fundamentalists believe they are protecting and preserving religious culture, traditions and established ways of life from secular erosion. ... This is particularly problematic for women because when fundamentalists act politically to block women's access to reproductive health services, state and government officials (who are often men who were educated within patriarchal religious traditions) are more likely to accept the fundamentalist perspective as representative of tradition. Progressive perspectives are seen as new and less legitimate. Policy makers are more likely to accept the fundamentalist agenda against women because it is familiar and preserves male privileges.<sup>5</sup>*

It is also fundamentally important to be aware that in global negotiations "abortion" is always at risk of becoming the object of easy diplomatic bargains. Governments can easily drop their formal commitment to women's reproductive self-determination when offered tiny gains in the economic or geopolitical terrain. In the Cairo and Beijing+5 reviews, countries whose legislation allow for abortion

on request — as in the case of Cuba, India and South Africa — behaved as if they were not bound by their own laws.

Despite clear evidence that abortion is a critical global geo-political issue, it has not been consistently addressed on the central stages of events such as the World Social Forum, for which this supplement was originally published.

DAWN believes the global politics of abortion must be fully debated, firstly because nothing indicates that the Bush administration or other powerful forces against abortion will give up easily on their moral conservative position. This will certainly play out in the various global negotiations currently under way or projected for the near future. Secondly, but no less importantly, access to legal and safe abortion is a non-negotiable dimension of sexual equality. The claim that abortion should be decriminalised belongs to the women's human rights agenda. Remember that the sexual and reproductive health and rights framework was agreed upon in Cairo and Beijing by a large majority of UN member states. Thirdly, abortion must be seen as a crucial element in the contemporary debate on democracy, among other reasons because it obliges us to properly reassess the relations between religion and the State.

As Daniel Maguire wisely says:

*“The separation between religion and the state has opened the doors for modern democratic governance. Any effort to revive the fusion that previously existed invites the return to medieval chaos.... Religion can do good things. States can do great doings. But the fusion between the two does not entail good result. Each of them must have its own domain.”*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> From CONSCIENCE, The Politics of Abortion in the Modern Age, by Dr Parmilla Senanayake and Karen Newman (Vol. XXIII No.3, Autumn 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Author of Sacred Choices, <http://www.sacredchoices.org>

<sup>3</sup> Senator Helms was also for many years the backbone of the American Cuban policy: sanctions at all costs.

<sup>4</sup> In Cairo+5 a recommendation was approved that health providers should be trained to provide appropriate post-abortion care and perform procedures in the case of legal abortion.

<sup>5</sup> From CONSCIENCE, Women Under Oppressive Regimes, by Frances Kissling and Serra Sippel (Vol.XXII, No.4, Winter 2001/2002).

<sup>6</sup> Author of Sacred Choices, <http://www.sacredchoices.org>