

What's Good for Women is Good for the Planet

Kavita N. Ramdas

Planned Parenthood Talk, October 18th, 2010

Austin, Texas

Good Evening! I'd like to thank all of my colleagues at the Global Fund whose work over the past 14 years has sustained and nourished me and led me into my next chapter as a movement activist and story teller. I thank my colleagues at Planned Parenthood, Austin, who have extended such a warm welcome to me – I am sorry I was not able to join some of you last night, but a result of this condition of “parenthood” is that some of us don't always seem to be able to “plan” for the realities of teenagers! ☺ A special warm thanks to Bonnie Mills, a long time GFW and PPF supporter – we know how much we owe thanks to the generosity of activists, advocates, and altruists like her and all of you in this audience here tonight – our work is made possible because you believe in it and invest in it. Thank you all.

My remarks are based on an article I recently authored in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. The article notes the findings of two new studies that offer compelling evidence that enabling women to determine the number and spacing of their

pregnancies has another benefit besides improving women's health and advancing their human rights. Giving women and girls' access to contraception can lead to a substantial reduction in carbon emissions. When women have the power to plan their families, populations grow more slowly, as do greenhouse gas emissions. In other words, "what is good for women is good for the Planet."

Now, as Mira, my 16 year old would say, "duh, pretty obvious". It is. Especially for those of us in the women's movement who have been marching to this tune for the past few decades. But, in this current environment, where so many rights we once assumed were guaranteed have been rolled back, it is nice to have the gold standard of science confirm what women have always known.

Women like my mother in law Ammi. Married at 16, she bore her first child before she was 18, and lost it to infectious disease. Pregnant again at 19, she journeyed 1,000 miles from her small village in eastern India to reconnect with her husband in Karachi, in the new state of Pakistan. By 30, she had borne seven children. She had a fourth grade education, and, like others of her generation, knew very little about contraceptive choices.

My husband, Zulfiqar, and his five surviving siblings are all educated, and none has more than two children. Yet for millions of women in modern day Pakistan, like the young woman who cleans Ammi's home in Karachi, access to contraception remains almost as inaccessible as it was to Ammi more than 50 years ago. Actually, in Ammi's opinion, growing fundamentalism in Pakistan may have made it even less accessible.

Married off to a cousin at 15 and illiterate, Rani already has three children and, like the majority of married Pakistani women who have never used modern contraception, will most likely have at least one more.¹

Around the world, hundreds of millions of women like Rani are still denied a basic education, married off too early against their wills, subjected to forced sex, or simply unable to access, afford, or negotiate with their partners about birth control. Most would like more control over how and when they become sexually active or pregnant, but lack the personal power and access necessary to make informed choices.

The ability to determine whether and when to become pregnant is fundamental to the realization of women's rights – basic human rights. When all women are able to choose to engage in sex, ensure that it is safe, decide how many children they want, and raise those children in decent living conditions, the world will be a much better place.

Women's health, children's health, and opportunities for families and communities will improve dramatically².

World leaders agree. At the Millennium Summit in 2000, 189 United Nation members and 23 leading development institutions agreed to eight Millennium Development Goals. These goals contain 18 quantifiable targets to be achieved by 2015, including universal access to family planning.

The 2 groundbreaking studies I wrote about for the Science journal have, for the first time, rigorously quantified the effect on the environment of allowing women and girls to

control their reproductive destinies. The results are tremendously heartening to all of us who care about advancing human rights, development, and environmental justice.

The new studies--by the Futures Group and the National Center for Atmospheric Research and the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis—together show that:

- Empowering women to time their pregnancies would reduce carbon emissions significantly, providing 8 to 15 percent of the reductions needed to avert dangerous climate change³.
- The cost of providing these needed family planning services is minimal compared with other development and emissions reductions strategies -- roughly \$3.7 billion per year for the United States and developing countries combined. Just for comparison, the CRS (Congressional Research service) estimated that in 2009, the US spent \$3.6 billion a month in Afghanistan alone – and this was prior to the troop surge.

More than 200 million women in the United States and developing countries are sexually active and do not want to become pregnant, yet are not using modern contraception. The results: one in four births worldwide unplanned, and 70 to 80 million abortions performed each year, half of them clandestinely, killing 68,000 women in the process. The human toll of denying women the fundamental right to plan their families is extraordinarily high.

My experience over the past 14 years at the Global Fund, however, reveals that women's

contributions to the planet are not merely to be counted in terms of decreased CO2 emissions, although the work of PPF certainly stands out as a key component in advancing this particular strategy. Instead, women are increasingly proving to be the eco-warriors or perhaps to use less militaristic language, the eco-nurturers or leaders of a more sustainable future.

Why is this the case?

I. Our Bodies mimic the Planet - literally

Women's bodies are the most revealing indicators of the health of the planet. Ecologist Sandra Steingraber puts it brilliantly when she reminds us that the womb is the first ecosystem that forms every human being. And, as it turns out, women's wombs are remarkably sensitive and reliable indicators of what is out of whack in our world.

UC Berkeley's School of Public Health study finds link between prenatal exposure to pesticides closely relates to the prevalence of attention disorders (ADHD) at age 5, especially among boys. A baby's nervous system develops the most while still in the womb. The mothers and children in the study were Mexican-Americans living in an agricultural community, so they probably had higher and more frequent exposure. However, the pesticide is widely used and represents a red flag for the general population as well. Another study, at Harvard, looked at exposure to organophosphate pesticides in school-aged children and also found a positive link to ADHD. "Symptoms of ADHD by age 5 are a major contributor to learning and achievement problems in school, accidental injuries at home and in the neighborhood, and a host of problems in peer relationships."

Connections like these led one of the Global Fund for Women's grantee partners, Oral Ataniyazova, a gynaecologist to launch a campaign to educate her community in Karalpakstan, Uzbekistan about the impact of pesticides and other harmful chemical residues in their highly industrialized agricultural economy. Disturbed at what she was seeing in terms of birth defects and maternal morbidity, Oral and her organization Center Perzent began to trace the poor health of her patients to the declining health of their surrounding environment. A Global Fund grant of \$5,000 helped launch the program and slowly, Center Perzent has changed agricultural practice and encouraged organic farming in the region, succeeding in educating public officials and local farmers alike. In 2000, Oral was given prestigious Goldman award for Environmental Justice.

Five years later, another grantee won the Goldman award: **Eco Center, Kazakhstan.** Between 1949 to 1989, the Soviet Union conducted nuclear tests in a remote region in eastern Kazhakstan where the equivalent of 20,000 Hiroshima bombs were detonated. As a biology student, Kaisha Atakhanova saw the genetic effects of nuclear radiation. She knew there was a high level of mutation that the local population was unaware about, so she set out to work with them to defend their ecological rights. 1.5 million people in this area have been exposed to nuclear poisoning and their entire food system contaminated: Cancer rates are five times higher than the national average. According to Kaisha, 500 million children have died unborn and an estimated 375 million people have contracted cancer from the effects of radiation—more than the US population.

In June 2001, the nuclear energy industry tried to introduce legislation to allow nuclear wastes to be imported commercially and disposed of in Kazakhstan. Kaisha knew she had to stop the deal if she wanted to avoid making Kazakhstan a nuclear dumping ground. With support from the GFW, Ecocenter joined forces with 100 NGOs to fight the proposal, organizing petitions and hearings, forcing government to listen to the concerns of ordinary citizens. She also helped defeat a proposal by Parliament to restrict the organizing of NGOs.

In her acceptance speech at the Goldman awards ceremony, Kaisha reminded us that radioactive contamination doesn't just reside in Kazakhstan, it spreads through the biosphere; it recognizes no boundaries and will last for millions of years. By 2000 the world had already created more than 1400 tons of plutonium enough to destroy the planet many times over. Kaisha says, "It's all of our responsibility to fight for the safety of our children and say no. Imagine what tremendous strength we have to together to defend the right of our planet to life. "

II. Women are on the front lines of Ecological Devastation – as water/fuel gatherers and healers and preservers of indigenous knowledge – from seedbanks in the Andes to native livestock in India

As those responsible for gathering fuel and firewood, women and girls are often the first to note changes in topography, in the availability of clean drinking water, in the pollution

of wells, rivers, and streams, in the disappearance of forests and deforestation of natural habitats.

And, to our great relief, women are refusing to tolerate the abuse of our planet in the name of mining corporations, economic development, or national security. One of the Global Fund advisors in Guinea reminded me, “in a war, Kavita, it is not just women who are raped, our mother, the earth, she is raped as well.” Women in indigenous communities from Nigeria to Bolivia and the Congo are challenging major oil producers Shell and Exxon Mobil and mining companies. Small fisherwomen groups in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu are raising awareness about the dangers of overfishing created by the mass reliance on commercial fishing trawlers and fleets. And, women’s groups are increasing their mobilization on issues of natural resources, sustainable, non-monoculture and non-cash crop agriculture. They are asking for support in their efforts to propose alternative, more culturally relevant, and renewable strategies to both increase their own incomes and protect their natural habitats. Even the large international environmental players from Greenpeace to the World Wildlife Fund recognize women are key to re-imagine and reset our world’s economic architecture to be more aligned with the genuine long-term human security of our world.

Story: Nepali women and reforestation – some years ago....

Story: My sister Sagari is in Nagoya, Japan – where activists are gathering for the Convention on Bio-Diversity. Since 2002, most measures of the health of the natural world have gone downhill rather than up.

The majority of species studied over the period are moving closer to extinction rather than further away, while important natural habitat such as forests, wetlands, rivers and coral reefs continue to shrink or be disturbed.

"Since the 1960s we've doubled our food consumption, our water consumption," said Jonathan Baillie, director of conservation programmes at the Zoological Society of London (ZSL).

"The world's population has doubled, and the economy has grown sixfold; in 2050 there will be 9.2 billion people on the planet."

But not if we give women the chance to make informed and voluntary choices they deserve to be able to make. And women's movements are responding with creativity connecting up with movements on bio diversity and climate change across the globe.

And, it is not all bad news : The goods news: Maternal Deaths Decline Sharply Across the Globe

According to findings published in the medical journal *The Lancet* this spring, for the first time in decades, researchers found a significant drop worldwide in the number of women dying each year from pregnancy and childbirth, to about 342,900 in 2008 from 526,300 in 1980. The study cited a number of reasons for the improvement: lower pregnancy rates in some countries; higher income, which improves nutrition and access to health care; more education for women; and the increasing availability of "skilled attendants" — people with some medical training — to help women give birth.

Improvements in large countries like India and China helped to drive down the overall death rates.

These numbers show that investments in women's health, education, income and their access to reproductive justice and medical care make a difference. And, thanks to friends like Sheyl Wudunn and her husband Nick Kristof, who co-authored the best selling book, *Half the Sky* – there is growing interest and willingness to consider making those investments – at least overseas . Yet, even as Investing in Women becomes “hot” we find people willing to talk about the education of girls but much less willing to deal with “messier issues” like sex, sexuality, and changing current power dynamics in the home, in society and in corporate and business sectors or at the level of governmental policy.

At the same time – the challenges loom large right here in the so called, “developed world”. What we have to remember is that the “third world” is alive and well right here in the United States. The same truths hold – women and children are 70% of the poorest people in the US, they are the ones we routinely ignore, leave out of health care, fail to include in decisionmaking, and fail to invest in. If we did, we might be surprised at the good things it would do not just to our families and communities but to our lagging economy as well. For women, are not just reproducers – they are also producers and the economic engines of our societies. Indeed, numerous studies have shown that simply paying women equal pay for equal work – that radical dangerous notion behind the vision of the ERA of the 1970s – would cut the US poverty rate in half, without a single additional penny in government programs or allocations.

III. What can we do to support Women's Leadership:

So what can we do – privileged to live here in the USA and not in Afghanistan, Nepal or Uzbekistan to make what’s good for women, good for the planet, for the USA and yes, maybe, even good enough for Texas! My to do list has five suggestions:

- Challenge and end the climate of Fear and silence: At a recent gathering in NYC – I watched Mary Robinson and other world leaders who have formed the Global Council on Reproductive Rights call for us to reclaim the space to discuss sexuality, contraception and reproduction in an open and free climate – we must speak out or risk becoming part of the problem. It took brave pioneers like Marie Stopes decades to make birth control available – we need to claim the space to celebrate it and we need to be open and tolerant and willing to listen to others who disagree with us. We cannot use the same shut down, violent confrontational tactics they do. We can take heart from the recent conference being held at Princeton where people from all sides of the abortion debate are in civil conversation with one another.
- Participate and make our voice heard in the Political System: women and their families need desperately to be able to make the right choices – to bring children on to the planet who are loved and can be nurtured. For this to happen we must be able to speak up for sex education, celebrating the joys and yes the pleasures of sexuality and moving away from the notion that sex is unpleasant, to be feared or to be abstained from. We cannot let our politicians tell us otherwise. We must

use the vote. We must mobilize. Women in the rest of the world are counting on us to do nothing less.

- Speak up and voice our dissent in our churches, mosques, and temples, when Religion is used to demean or diminish women or “others” – for those of us who see the harm and pain inflicted on women in the name of religion across the world it is frightening to see the growth of literalism and belief in the Bible right here in the USA – we cannot hope to move forward the rights of women living under Muslim laws or Hindu laws or other religious laws, when the basic space accorded to women that was created by the separation of church and state is shrinking in the very part of the world that purports to be the leader in global human rights. And, we cannot stand for the rights of women if we fail to stand up for the rights of others – gays, lesbian and transgender people, immigrant communities, and other minorities.
- Broaden our Movement: Women must continue to struggle for reproductive freedom and choice, but it must happen within a broader context. This is about the choice to raise babies safely as well as the choice not to have them at all, it is about the choice to have access to education healthcare and childcare, to a good job, to legal status. To demand that our govt invests more in Human Capital than in wars and weapons.
- Put our Money where our Mouth is: the organizations that are helping do all this are all around us – they do it at a local level like PPF, Austin, they do it at

national levels – I was just speaking with Cecile Richards who was at the UN meetings in New York. They do it at international and global levels like the Global Fund for Women and Planned Parenthood International. They raise every penny from individuals like you and me – we cannot and do not have to wait until we are Bill or Melinda Gates – our monthly contributions, our birthday celebrations, our legacy gifts are a way to ensure that our voices are heard and are part of the national debate.

Conclusion: When we do all these things then we can say we are living Gandhi's words as we seek to be the change we want to see in the world. Investing in women has already been proven as an essential strategy to ensure the health, safety, and development of societies. We may now find that it is also the most effective way to safely steward Mother Earth through her most challenging crisis.

Thank you.

