



Nicholas D. Kristof

Bush vs. Women

by Nicholas D. Kristof

The central moral struggle of the 19th century concerned slavery, and that of the 20th pitted democracy against Nazism, Communism and other despotic isms. Our own pre-eminent moral challenge will be to ease the brutality that kills and maims girls and women across much of Africa and Asia.

Alas, this summer President Bush is putting the U.S. on the wrong side of the battle lines. Most outrageous, last month Mr. Bush cut off all \$34 million in funds for the United Nations Population Fund, in all 142 countries in which it operates, because of concerns about its role in China. What does this mean on the ground?

An emergency obstetric care program was to begin this year in Burundi, where only one-quarter of births are attended by a trained midwife (almost none by a doctor) and where one woman in eight will die in childbirth.

Because of Mr. Bush's move, however, that program in Burundi has now been canceled—along with plans for midwife training in Algeria, a center to fight AIDS in Haiti and a maternal mortality reduction program in India.

Conservatives are right to object to China's of ten brutal one-child policy. But only Washington could come up with a solution to Chinese problems that involves killing teenage girls in Burundi.

Aside from cutting off funding for the population agency, the Bush administration is busy devastating third-world women in other ways. It is trying to block a landmark international treaty on the rights of women, even though the State Department initially backed it. The treaty, known as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, or CEDAW, would make no

difference in America but would be one more tool to help women in countries where discrimination means death.

The Bush administration is also undercutting international efforts to use conferences to bolster support for rural health care for poor women. For example, the Bushies tied up negotiations for this month's Earth Summit in Johannesburg by insisting that documents be purged of phrases like "reproductive health services" that they think connote abortion.

President Bush has also walloped international family planning efforts by banning the use of American aid to overseas organizations that provide any information about abortions.



This mother and her child live in Mali, one of the 142 countries that UNFPA serves. The Bush administration has cut all funding for UNFPA in all of these countries.

Photo: JHU/CCP



An illustrated sign in front of the Neighbors Family Planning Center in Zamboanga City, Philippines. Photo: JHU/CCP

And while Mr. Bush basked in his promise of \$500 million for the global AIDS fund, his administration is making such onerous demands of the fund that none of the money can be used anytime soon.

In one crucial field, the battle against sexual trafficking, it is conservative Christians who have taken the lead in fighting on behalf of third-world women. So on this one issue has Mr. Bush shown any mettle?

No. As a reproachful letter to him from a broad range of conservative leaders pointed out on June 28, the administration record "is one of passive acceptance of the world trafficking status quo."

In the Bush administration, the assumption is that in all these cases the fundamental issue is abortions or sex. It is not.

The central issue is that 500,000 women die each year in pregnancy or childbirth; that 100 million women and girls worldwide are "missing" because they are denied adequate food or medical care, or because they are aborted or killed at birth because they are female; that 60 percent of the children kept out of elementary school are girls; that 130

million girls have undergone genital mutilation; that between one and two million girls and women are trafficked into prostitution annually.

If I'm angry, it's because those figures conjure real faces of people I've met: Aisha Idris, a Sudanese peasant left incontinent after giving birth at 14, with no midwife or prenatal care, to a stillborn child; Mariam Karega, a young woman nursing her dying baby in a Tanzanian village far from any doctor; Sriy, a smart and vibrant 13-year-old Cambodian girl who was sold into prostitution by her stepfather and by now is probably dead of AIDS.

Instead of joining the fight on behalf of Ms. Idris, Ms. Karega or Sriy, the Bush administration is allying the U.S. with the likes of Iran, Sudan and Syria to frustrate international efforts to save the lives of some of the most helpless people on earth. Somehow we have become the core of an Axis of Medieval.

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