



Marie Cocco

# Bush Is Already at War—Against Women

by Marie Cocco

It hasn't the popular ring of the "axis of evil," nor the urgency of demands for "regime change" in Iraq.

There's been no presidential speech to etch the phrase into America's mind, nor calculated TV appearances to promote this entry in the Bush administration's lexicon of fighting words: "Reproductive health services."

The United States is at war with those words. They are pivotal to U.S. delegates in international conferences and treaty negotiations on global economic and social policy. President George W. Bush considers them so crucial that America now allies itself with countries that routinely and brutally repress women. Our new partners in the war against "reproductive health services" have included the likes of Algeria, Libya, Sudan - even Iran and Iraq, two designated members of the "axis of evil." "When he's doing a war on terrorism, they're the axis of evil," said Adrienne Germain, president of the International Women's Health Coalition. "When he's waging a war on women they're his allies."

Perhaps the phrase "reproductive health services," to your ears, means Pap smears or pre-natal care or AIDS prevention. To the conservative activists Bush appoints as official representatives to international conferences, they mean abortion and, sometimes, birth control.

As the World Summit on Sustainable Development gets underway in Johannesburg, the U.S. delegation has been trying to scratch "reproductive health services" from official agreements, and pencil in "basic health services" instead. Conservatives believe "basic health services" would preclude abortion and birth control.

In preliminary talks in Bali last June, the United States tried the re-write, but failed. Conference participants said the Americans also tried to remove language on the right of adolescents to health services involving their sexuality.

Now a new fight brews. In previous summits, Germain said, women's health provisions were couched in language that called for respect for "culture and tradition"—with the caveat that this should be "in conformity with universal human rights and fundamental freedoms." The world generally does not approve of such cultural traditions as ownership of a widow by a husband's family, or rape as male right.

But the rights-and-freedoms part got left out in Bali. Canada and Europe now object. They may try to re-open the talks on health, giving the U.S. another chance for mischief.

Washington counts on these international conferences to provoke indifferent yawns at home. News out of Johannesburg is likely to be dominated by bickering over global warming, not women's rights.



A women's ward at the Buwenge Health Center in the Jinja District of Uganda. Photo: Harvey Nelson, JHU/CCP



A crowded entrance to a family planning clinic in India. Photo: Benjamin Lozare, JHU/CCP

But over the past decade, the world has agreed that population control through government quotas and other forms of coercion is passé. It's been replaced with the idea of empowering women through education and economic advancement, and making it clear they have a right to reproductive care and voluntary family planning to control their fertility—and the course of their lives.

This is what America now seeks to undermine.

The administration has diminished the role of the State Department, which is viewed by conservatives as an appeaser of an international community that supports family planning and condoms to prevent AIDS. Bush has elevated the Department of Health and Human Services, more to their liking.

Last May, the administration fought at the United Nations to purge official commitments on children of references to “reproductive health services.” It tried, but failed, to proclaim “abstinence-only” to be the sole health pro-

gram regarding adolescent sex—this, despite an AIDS epidemic in Africa that is fast becoming a plague among girls.

It has promised money only to prevent AIDS transmission from mother to child. Saving the mother's life is not a matter of concern. She had sex, and so is undeserving.

It cut off funding for the UN agency that provides pregnancy care and family planning in corners of the world where lying on a sterile sheet during labor is a luxury. It did so even though the administration's own investigators found no evidence to support anti-abortion groups' claims that the UN was a handmaiden to China's forced abortion policy.

This White House is home to a bellicose bunch. Bush talks openly of war among men. He counts on this preoccupation to conceal his campaign against women.

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