



# for better, not for worse...

## The Beijing Platform of Action and the Millenium Development Goals on the Rights and Empowerment of Filipino Women

*The historic World Conference of Women in Beijing was an occasion which marked the initiative of world governments and organized women's movements across the globe, to forge an agenda for women's human rights and empowerment. A decade later, are Filipino women and girls better off? While health has long been established and accepted as a human right and at the core of the right to life itself, women's health continues to be contested and very much so in the Philippines. Access to quality information and basic services in reproductive health can provide simple yet profound changes to the quality of women's lives and ultimately, ensure better health for women and their families. Indeed, women's decision-making and access to basic services like health care, are the very enabling conditions for women's exercise of other basic rights. Without these enabling conditions, declarations of gender equality and women's rights are mere platitudes.*

**W**hen the Philippine Government made a committment ten years ago to the 1995 World Conference on Women's Platform of Action, it made a committment to make the lives of Filipino women better.

Five years ago even as world governments assessed how much had been done to realize the Beijing Platform for Action, another international document was created. The Millenium Development Goals outlined actual targets which also serve as benchmarks for world governments to measure progress in eradicating world poverty. Again, the Philippines signed a committment to meet this challenge head on.

The Philippines has ratified and signed all of the major International human rights documents and treaties. It also has numerous laws promoting and protecting women's rights. However, alarming trends in terms of policy reversals on women's sexual and reproductive health threatens to defeat whatever gains there have been in the past decade, and worse, the fifty years it took to claim women's rights, as human rights. Indeed, while part of the strength International conventions and committments have is derived from their status as legal obligations, state committments to human rights (which includes women's human rights), are no less than moral obligations.

Two of the 8 goals set specific targets to improve the lives of women and girl children by 2015 but all the other goals, specifically Goal 1 (Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger); Goal 2 (Universal Education); Goal 6 (Combat HIV-AIDS, Malaria and other diseases); and Goal 4 (Reduce Child Mortality) are key areas which impact the lives of the world's poorest, majority of whom are women and girls.

**Goal 3 Promote gender equality & empower women**  
**Goal 5 Improve maternal health**

Family Planning Organization of  
the Philippines (FPOP).2005

Email: rhansec2005@yahoo.com

# International Human Rights, Women's Reproductive Rights in the Philippines and the Millenium Development Goals

*Even considering only 2 specific MDGs and the situation of Filipino women today, how has the Philippine government fared in improving the lives of women and girls?*

The Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

The CEDAW also called the Women's Convention, established women's rights as human rights. As a treaty that the Philippines has ratified, which includes an Optional Protocol, it is a source of legally demandable rights and State obligations. An Optional Protocol enhances its enforceability by providing direct mechanisms through the UN system.

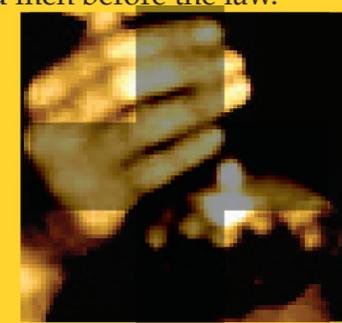
Its main goal is the full realization Women's Human Rights before the law and in practice, through the elimination of discrimination perpetuated by institutions (primarily the law and other public institutions) as well as customs and practices (tradition and religious practice in the family and community).

The CEDAW is the first (and only) International Convention which specifically mentioned "Family Planning," in the context of State obligations to ensure women's access to health care and the recognition of women's specific health needs in maternity.

*"Reproductive rights embrace certain human rights that are already recognized in national laws, international human rights documents and other relevant UN consensus documents. These rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. They also include the right of all to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence." (International Conference on Population and Development, (ICPD) 1994).*

The ICPD signalled the paradigm shift in population and development frameworks from that of "population control and management," to an emphasis on the quality of life, women's empowerment and decision-making, giving rise to a rights-based approach in the provision of services like reproductive health care.

The 1987 Constitution not only promotes health as a human right, but it also provides that the State shall "uphold and defend" the right of spouses to plan their family in accordance with their religious beliefs." This is also consistent with other state principles upholding the "separation of church and state," as part and parcel of the gurantee of religious freedom and religious expression. The Constitution also specifically calls for the fundamental equality of women and men before the law.



Philippine Plan for Gender and Development (PPGD) Drafted and incorporated in government planning (NEDA) in 1994, 1995 through 1996, the PPGD marked the heyday of "gender mainstreaming" efforts in the history of Philippine governance. Reproductive Health Care was included in the DOH budget via administrative program issuances and sheer political will.

In 2001, the Department of Health banned Postinor, an Emergency Contraceptive Pill which can prevent pregnancy like the pill by delaying ovulation; although taken after sexual intercourse and at a higher dose than the regular pill. ECP is in fact considered an important regimen in rape and sexual abuse cases, as well as cases of regular contraceptive failure, to prevent unwanted pregnancy. It is one of many contraceptives included in the World Health Organization's Essential Drugs List.

While the Reproductive Health Advocacy Network (RHAN) was able to convince the Experts' Committee created by the DOH in 2003 of the safety and legality of ECP, the DOH has refused to act on the recommendation since 2004.

In 2003, the National Government, again through the DOH committed fifty million in public funds to a Catholic NGO to conduct an exclusively Natural Family Planning Program. The DOH also admitted that it diverted funds earmarked for the purchase of contraceptives to another program

Having refused to allocate DOH funds for the purchase of family planning supplies despite the phase-out of USAID support, the President even announced the Catholic framework of her administration's Family Planning program at the World Summit held last September 2005.

*The 2003 National Demographic and Health Survey of the University of the Philippines Population Institute has found that having more children increases a Filipino woman's likelihood of being poor; Filipino men still do not practice safe sex, and that the growing unmet need of Filipino women for modern family planning has led women to look for private sources, often leaving the poorest women devoid of options. The Allan Gutmacher Institute (AGI) in 2005 also noted a marked increase in clandestine abortions from the 1994 figure of 400,000 to an estimated 473,000 annually.*

## Goal 3 Promote gender equality & empower women Goal 5 Improve maternal health

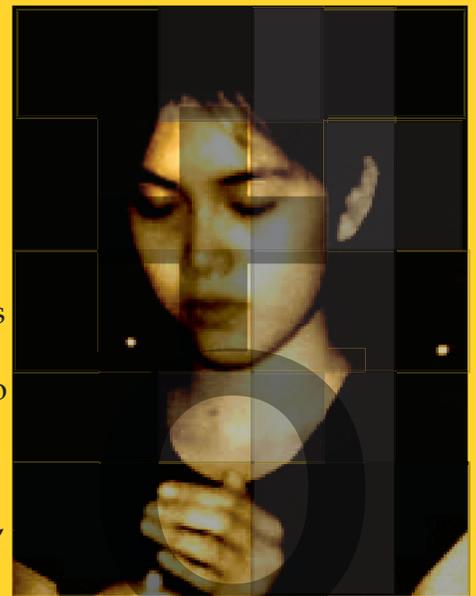
- 12 Critical Areas of Concern:  
Beijing Platform of Action
- The persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women
  - Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to education and training
  - Inequalities and inadequacies and unequal access to health care and related services
  - Violence Against Women
  - The effects of armed or other kinds of conflict on women, including those under foreign occupation
  - Inequality in economic structures and policies, in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources
  - Inequality between women and men in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels
  - Insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women and lack of respect for and inadequate protection of the human rights of women
  - Stereotyping of women and inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication systems, especially in the media
  - Gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in the safeguarding of the environment
  - Persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child
- The BPFA elaborated on the linkages between basic human rights, drawing attention to the marked disadvantage of women and girls from the political, social,, economic and even personal autonomy in the family and the community especially during times of conflict.

# Media and Women's Reproductive Rights: The Challenge of Breaking Stereotypes

Women's access to Media and Communications is one of the critical areas of concern identified by the Beijing Platform of Action (BPFA).

In the context of a raging contest of meanings, the challenge remains for Philippine media, to be able to identify and articulate rights, gender and women's reproductive health issues, without falling into the usual traps:

- Reports featuring policy debates around reproductive health and women's reproductive rights are still tagged as "population control" issues by media despite the 1994 revisioning of population and development in the International Conference on Population and Development into a rights-based frame.
- Many in Philippine media merely report pronouncements of the usual sources or "authorities," (i.e. the government and the Church hierarchy) even when they make "medical" claims contrary to scientific sources or empirical studies.
- Many in media still categorize Filipino women into the stereotypes of "good" and "bad," based on the sexuality double-standard.



*A women's human rights framework is premised on the morality of women's capacity and wisdom to make decisions.*

In 2005, UN Secretary General Kofi Anan called the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) "an unprecedented promise by world leaders to address, as a single package, peace, security, development, human rights and fundamental freedoms." The MDGs also provide an opportunity to frame "development" as a collective responsibility.

However, women's rights advocates around the world cite the importance of linking the MDGs to the human rights frameworks of past commitments and treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, The International Conference on Population and Development Program of Action, as well as the developments in incorporating and interpreting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, its primary instruments and other conventions, to include women's human rights.

This reminder takes on a special significance for the Philippines where the issue of women's reproductive rights and basic reproductive health care has become a veritable battleground of ideology and religious beliefs.

More than ever, a human rights-based framework and no less than a paradigm of gender equality should inform the Philippine government's policies and actions.