

Women against the birth-control war

by Gabriele Liebig

Some 65 women from 24 countries gathered in Comilla, Bangladesh on Dec. 12-15, 1993, in order to "oppose the myth of the population explosion," which is only being spread "in order to cover up the actual causes of poverty, inequality, and environmental destruction." The final declaration of this "women's summit" states: "We must expose the secret aims of the International Conference on Population and Development, which is to take place in September 1994 in Cairo, and which is being organized by the United Nations Organization (U.N.O.). It is to be feared that this conference will pave the way for more aggressive population-control measures, under the false assumption that population growth is a dire threat to human survival on this planet. . . . We hereby oppose population control. A policy of population control goes in the direction of the elimination of poor people; it is grounded in inherently racist and eugenic ideologies, in that it selects a few who are given the right to survive, while everyone else, such as the indigenous peoples, the weak, blacks, and others are thrown on the junkheap."

The symposium, titled "People's Perspectives on Population," was sponsored by the Research Foundation for Science and Ecology (India), the People's Health Network (India), the Third World Network (Malaysia), and the Ubinig and Resistance Network (Bangladesh). We came across the report on this conference in a German-language brochure titled "Few Children—Little Consumption," which had been printed up by three Swiss groups: the Protestant organization Bread for All, the Catholic group Fast Offerings, and the Bern Declaration.

The brochure contains other very informative contributions from women around the world on the question of birth control. One of these, by Farida Akther of Bangladesh, says that the Cairo conference's watchword, "reproductive rights," is nothing but "a slogan for covert population control," since it is intended only to signify contraception. "It does not address the right to have children or not to have them. The demand is simply to be allowed not to have children. . . . Poor peasant women are being sterilized without their consent. . . . Of course, we also get Depo Provera—a contraceptive injection which is being massively administered even before all the test results are in. And now we are subjected to another assault from Norplant—this 'marvelous innovation' from the Population Council." Once the Norplant implant is in place, it is difficult for a woman to get it re-

moved. Many women have reported that their requests to have the implant removed have been turned down. "Why can't a woman be allowed to decide on her own, whether to have more children? Credit-issuing institutions such as the World Bank want to lower our population's birthrate. Whatever term we want to use, the aim is to reduce the number of children by means of modern imported contraceptive methods. . . . These programs are being forced upon us."

Sumati Nair of Africa traces the birth-control movement back to the eugenics movement in the United States: "The eugenics movement had the backing of . . . Rockefeller and Ford, and later DuPont, Shell, and many others. It promoted sterilization . . . under the slogan of planned parenthood. . . . Up to the present, 92 Third World countries have been subjected to population-policy programs. The greatest pressure to introduce these programs over the past ten years has come from the World Bank, with the assistance of USAID [the U.S. Agency for International Development]."

Another author, Anna Sax, in an article titled "Bankers Against Babies: The World Bank's Population Policy," gives some hard statistics: Up through 1986, the World Bank granted \$881 million in credits for population programs, and in 1990-93 an additional \$675 million. For years now, the implementation of population programs has been made into a credit conditionality, especially with regard to African countries such as Senegal and Kenya.

'Just like a war'

The India Population Project, one of the oldest of these programs, has been pushed since 1972, with \$124.6 million in credits granted to it in 1989 alone. Deepa Dhanraj of India has made a film on this, titled ". . . Just Like a War." In it, she shows how within the framework set up by the program, "women by the thousands are coaxed, by means of gifts and promises, into having themselves sterilized," and how "teachers and village leaders are denied wages for months if they fail to deliver enough 'cases'—'cases' being women who are ready to have themselves sterilized."

Unfortunately, quite a few of the essays contained in the brochure get bogged down in neo-malthusian overpopulation propaganda. This is particularly pronounced with the contributors from Switzerland and Germany, who have fallen head-first into the ideological trap of allegedly "limited resources," and who claim that the standard of living in the developing sector can only be improved at the expense of curtailing "overconsumption" in the industrial countries. A hostility toward science and technology is also in evidence here. Without true technological progress, humanity will have no long-term chances of survival. This must be recognized, because otherwise the women's movement will be overtaken by precisely what Thais Corral warns about: "Up to now, women's organizations have been the best-organized lobby for Cairo. . . . We must under no circumstances succumb to the idea that population control can have a feminist face."