



# THE WORLD'S WOMEN ACCORDING TO THE UN

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The United Nations is referred to as the World's policeman, and by implication this means it has to be the world's conscience if it is to be, as it says it is, impartial. What can be illustrated through a discussion of the images of women which the UN promotes, is the grasp that the UN has on global perceptions of morality.

The World's Women 1995: Trends and Statistics is a book produced by the United Nations which is about the status of women around the globe.

This year's copy is in fact the second version, and was produced in the run up to the Fourth World Conference on Women which was held in Beijing in September. The reason why I have chosen this book, or rather the idea of this book as a starting point is that for the duration of that conference, this book was the point of reference for everything discussed, to the exclusion of all other data. For a lot of people there from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, this was ironic to say the least, and it illustrates some serious flaws in the United Nations overt claims to be guardian of the world's morality - the global transcendental conscience.

Firstly as believers, we have been consistently castigated for believing in the Quran as the literal word of Allah. We are outdated, implicitly simple for being so credulous and so on. Secondly the basis for this criticism stems from this notion which is purportedly enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and all the ideological paraphernalia that surrounds it - in the idea of discussion and freedom of speech, as somehow engendering the greater good and progress of humanity. I'm sure we've all heard enough of that argument in the last six years or so to last several lifetimes.

Thirdly because in its Universal Declarations, the United Nations has always set itself up to be the promoter of respect between cultures, and of equality and anti-discrimination.

What this book and the conference that surrounded it showed is that there is no plurality of discussion - there is only one text, and that is a United Nations textbook of truth, from which all else is determined.

Further there is and can be no discussion on the subject unless it is in the terms outlined in the book. So when in s.1 the book speaks of sex selection, and condemns abortion in India, China, the Republic of Korea and Pakistan, we are to reel in horror at the inhumanity of these nations. When in s.3 we read about the lack of abortion facilities in central, south and far eastern Asia we are again supposed to condemn these countries and work towards the examples set by developed nations in providing the appropriate facilities.

We cannot however break out of this compartmentalisation of the issues surrounding abortion, and talk about the paradox of the view taken - according to the agenda of the conference there is none. Neither can anyone question the morality of the issue except in the terms laid out by the book. Although the book is ostensibly simply data, and therefore supposedly amoral and apolitical, it measures women's progress through various categories, one of which is the availability of abortion as a contraceptive method.

As a result of this categorisation of progress, developed countries, unsurprisingly come out as league leaders. Further, countries which are particularly out of favour are cited as bad examples in the commentary, wherever a statistic supports their condemnation, as with the examples already given. So China is condemned for providing very easy access to abortion in one section, despite this making it a leader country in health provision in another section. Sinophobia then has an important role in the UN's ethos and publications - hardly respectful or fair.

Statistics can be misleading, but in the absence of all the material from which this book was compiled we have to simply take it as read that these statistics are accurate - we must rely on the integrity of The

Statistical Division, in the Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy analysis of the UN Secretariat.

Strangely enough however, other bodies within the UN, don't seem to have when preparing their literature for this and the other big conferences of the last eighteen months.

It would be nice to think that this is because they saw the presentation of that data as biased, or unfair or unrepresentative. However, as some of the examples from the literature provided to press and to delegates show, where these organisations deviated from the data in *The World's Women* it was to create an even more damning picture of the Developing World, and especially the Muslim world. Rather than acting against another department, UNICEF, UNDP et al seemed to be furthering very consistently, a specific media agenda in the representation of nations via images of women.

The following case study which was one of many circulated by UNICEF, although it was in fact part of an NGO press kit, about the abuse of the girl-child's rights. It ought to be made clear perhaps, although it is probably self explanatory that the majority of people who criticise these definitions and representations of the world, are not somehow trying to justify undoubted abuse - the concern is with the way the abuse is portrayed as well as who the perpetrators of that abuse are supposed to be.

The study reads:

Lorna My family.

There are always people fighting in our family. They will use the smallest excuse to start a fight. here is no discipline, no respect - even when it comes to using up all the water, not washing hands, hitting each other on the head. They fight even when there are visitors in the house; when they have to buy something from the store, they will not line up properly with the others.

I feel sad whenever Mama and Papa fight. They fight frequently, especially when I was still very young. Every time they fight, Papa would hit Mama; and Mama would always leave the house and stay with my Auntie Luz. Sometimes, she'd constantly be drunk; sometimes, she doesn't drink at all. That happened when I was nine years old. I cried very hard then and just sat on the floor near the door. My brothers and sisters were asleep so they don't know about what happened.

This was part of a set of examples about the abuse of children in the Philippines. As always there are favoured developing nations, and the criteria for favouritism seemed to be allowing wholesale condemnation of your nation, regardless of whether it helped promote a stereotype and in the long term increase the oppression that nation feels. That case study could have been from this country, or the United States. Instead, as with all the case studies cited it was about a non-European family in a developing country. Somewhere reassuringly geographically and ethnically distant from the ideal world promoted by UN Literature.

There were a lot of problems with the promotion of certain concepts, in particular teenage pregnancies. As even *The World's Women* conceded the United States has a very high rate of teenage pregnancies which it was the conference's avowed aim to curb. In the UNICEF leaflet called *Too old for toys, too young for Motherhood* there was not a single illustration of this fact. Not a single picture in that book contained an image of the developed world. There was one article on the subject of the high teenage pregnancy rate in the states, in a NGO newsletter supplement to a UNICEF publication which was not distributed to the press with its press pack. Some freedom of information you may think, relieved that the United Nations does live up to its own so-called expectations in this respect. Unfortunately the photograph that accompanies this article is one of African American and Latino girls in the States.

Likewise whenever the issue of violence against women is raised, despite references to high rates of domestic violence in Scandinavia and Canada, although strangely not the rest of Europe and the States, the most prevalent form of violence against women in Europe is laid at the door of immigrant communities who if you believe the literature, all ritually mutilate their daughters and beat up their wives. Again the

problems in Europe and North America are not indigenous, they have been imported from the savage developing world that surrounds it.

UNHCR literature images of refugees are of South and Central Asian, as well as Somali women, who are portrayed as vulnerable to rape and abuse in various refugee camps controlled by Pakistani and Tanzanian men. It does not extend this to Europe and the plight of Bosnian women in refugee camps controlled by UN personnel. The perpetrators of abuse against women are amoral, and i.e. non-European in their origin.

The World Health Organisation and the UN Fund for Children both produced masses of literature about women's and girls' health issues. In all the literature examined, all images of disease were illustrated by non-European origin faces and examples. In particular, the concept of the spread of HIV/AIDS and other STDs was one firmly rooted in the developing world. Women of colour are used as examples of victims of male promiscuity and as promiscuous themselves in contracting and spreading infection. This is then, an argument for greater family planning in the Southern world. The woman of colour's fertility is indissolubly linked with the idea of the spread of disease.

This image of the south as an illness needing to be cured is furthered by the UN Population and Development Fund's literature which pictures again children from the South, the proliferation of whom, it is inferred still needs to be limited in accordance with the aims of women's health propounded at the Cairo conference last year. The images that need controlling then, are those that are not white - and in The Progress of Nations Report, birth rates in the developing world are reported as falling in accordance with the success of UN programmes, although the drop in birth rates in the developed world is not as marked, and not questioned, suggesting to those who wish to see beyond the statistics, that there is a different agenda in population control than simply women's health and sustainable economic growth.

This suggests that there is no one women's agenda. On the last day of the conference the writer spent about an hour queuing for tickets for entrance to the Press Gallery for the closing session. When she got to the front of the queue however she was told by no less than the head of the UN's Department of Information that she could not have a ticket because four tickets has been given to Iran already. The writer was intrigued by this not least because, as she repeatedly told her - she is not actually Iranian. However, stereotyping aside, everybody had been queuing for a long time because we were told that tickets would be allocated on a strictly first come first served basis. It exemplifies that there is nothing universal about anything the UN believes in or the way it treats people. I was not the only one turned away despite following the UN's procedure and so being technically eligible for the benefits of my trouble.

We are quite used to images of women of colour as oppressed beings in this country, but this is taken to extremes in UN literature. Women of colour are consistently seen as oppressed: victims of violence and social and economic prejudice at the hands of men and systems of colour, which need to be eradicated if women are to emulate their developed counterparts.

As the paranoia about the spread of Islamic awareness increases in the developed world, so does the analogy of Islam with abuse, disease and economic, social and political injustice. Pictures and literature which describe women's problems imply that they are peculiarly coloured problems. According to The World's Women 1995 women are underpaid in relation to men the world over, yet emphasis is placed on women of the South as economically exploited - the justification for which is the squalor or low standards of living presented visually in comparison to the West. Global economic problems and their causes, or perhaps more accurately their cause countries are never discussed The economic oppression of women of the south is due to the South's prejudice against women, not the north's economic stranglehold of the world and its own prejudice against women.

In education, we see UNICEF using Muslim and pseudo-Muslim images of women as ill educated, and exploited in the workplace from an early age, whilst contributors on pieces on education are reassuringly Aryan.

Unfortunately these images are fed as authoritative to the media to be disseminated across the world. The whole UN system is so self-referential, that even the most well-meaning reporter finds it hard to believe anything else. One of the most amusing things about The World's Women 1995 is that it contains league tables, which when they have been introduced in education and health in this country have caused an uproar as unfair, misrepresentative and politically biased. The same could be applied to The World's Women 1995 yet it is promoted more as a Premier League Table of Nations with everyone playing in the same game, which the best team wins. Without wishing to labour the football analogy, we know that Southampton are not going to win the Premiership unless Manchester United give them a lot of their players and so-called expertise for free. But then Southampton would just be Manchester United under another name. What would be the use of two teams playing like Manchester United, unless you are a fan of that sort of football?

The media here have been quick to grasp the sophisticated nature of this argument when it is applied to the British political system, because although political discourse in this country is extremely limited, there is no supposition that in its internal affairs at least, that the government is infallible.

This simply does not apply to the UN's conception of itself, and it has been extremely successful in promoting itself the moral authority in the world today.

It's interesting to note that the UN has set up a media monitoring unit to monitor the abuse of women in the media. MAG monitors the South Asian media, which is seen as perpetrating violence against women through stereotypes. Anyone familiar with Bollywood would probably agree. However there is no similar facility to monitor the images that Bollywood imports - the idea that Hollywood should be censored is one that idea of freedom of speech. In the final analysis what makes the Indian version of The Bodyguard heinous and the Hollywood version acceptable other than the colour of the leading characters?. The idea of abusive South Asian and Third World men, is similar to the images of marauding Turks and Arabs which have characterised European consciousness for a thousand years. The attempts to destroy Islam a thousand years ago were justified in the name of protecting Christian values, now we can see the UN aiding and abetting the destruction of Bosnia in the name of universal values. As the crusaders marauded and raped their own as well as others, so too the new crusaders and the crusading mentality continue to do so.

The type of literature that I've outlined, were not starting points for debates on issues to be included in the Draft Platform of Action, because discussion took place at the regional preparatory committee stages which are woefully inadequately prepared for by Muslim nations. This literature is justification for the final document, whose final wording was decided in that fortnight. The media did not have access to the debate that preceded the document.

As a result, it is impossible to ask any questions. If any country extended negotiations on phraseology it was permitted to ask questions of them as to why they were not accepting the Draft Platform of Action, but there was no reciprocal facility where the media could ask what right or jurisdiction or just in basic terms what business the UN, which is still at the end of the day a group of men had for discussing the problems of women. Getting a lot of women to come and apologise for the decisions men were making about women's futures in Beijing didn't make the conference pro-women in a feminist, Islamic or any other sense except for in the eyes of the UN.

To close I would like to refer to a Benetton advertisement which caused a lot of controversy showing a white child looking like an angel, and a black child looking like a devil. It quite rightly raised a lot of protest from people from different backgrounds. Look at the two opposing pages from the last World Health Organisation Newsletter, contrasting good family planning in Europe, and bad family planning in Thailand, and ask why the Benetton organisation is deemed racist, but the UNO is not. The problem of misrepresentation is not just a Muslim one, but it is one that affects us enormously.

The control that the UN has over global perceptions of morality and moral issues is imperceptibly increasing. Not only is there no ideological debate, there is no possibility of questioning a single image, because the UN's integrity is unchallengable. One of the main tools by which it sets itself up as infallible,

is the notion that a believer of any faith cannot speak objectively, whereas the representative body of all and no faiths can. Even if such a body could exist - the UN is not an impartial body. It is simply the perpetrator of an old world vision in a new form. In our perception of the world, we have to be conscious of where the images presented to us are coming from and why.

*The World's Women According to the United Nations, by Arzu Merali*