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Gender Equality and the United Nations
An Interview with Nafis Sadik

As a women’s rights advocate and physician, could you tell us a little about your thoughts on Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) three and five, which focus on promoting gender equality and improving maternal health, respectively?

The goals could be a little more strongly worded, but at least they are now being discussed on the international level. I was at a meeting for the MDGs, and spoke there as well. I urged them to set not only the goals, but also the steps needed to achieve the goals. I called on the governments to be proactive and speak about them at every opportunity. The United Nations does its part, but the countries do not necessarily follow. Unless countries start making sure steps are taken toward the goals, they are not going to succeed.

How do broad, international goals work on the local level with individual needs and contexts?

You can have general goals that countries strive to achieve, but each country has to set its own, specific steps to achieve the goal. Generally, the steps the countries take are very miniscule. The goals are not given the priority that they need. One thing that needs to be done is to address gender equality in all of the MDGs. You don’t need to have this specific goal on gender equality to address gender issues. They can be addressed in each of the goals.

Secondly, there should be more practical approaches to achieving those goals. I am sometimes disappointed that the progress has not been greater than it is. Gender disparity has existed for thousands of years, and a dominant feature of this has been men’s desire to control fertility. Both men and women are needed for fertility, but women are the only ones that have the power to reproduce, and this fact cannot be changed. Women have been speaking up, but it is not uniform. It needs to be everywhere, all the time. You have to find wherever gender issues can be inserted and pushed.

NAFIS SADIK is currently the special advisor to the UN Secretary-General and special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Asia. She was one of the first women to serve as the executive director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) beginning in 1987.
What practical approaches can governments take on issues of gender inequality?

The problem is that leaders understand the issues, but they do not want to give up control. Women have not yet been able to exercise a strong voice—where they have, things have changed rapidly. But where they have not, and that is quite a large part of the world, things are moving much more slowly.

How can we address this resistance to women's leadership in government and the public sphere?

There needs to be a lot more push on women's leadership, but also male leadership. I think many male leaders have this idea in the back of their mind that more women's leadership means they will lose their importance and their status. They have to be reassured that giving women rights is not going to reduce their importance. I think things have changed a lot, but in many parts of the world, especially the developing world, the change needs to be more rapid.

Examples of success in pushing for gender equality in developing countries should be publicized a great deal more, and people from these countries should have a strong voice to speak to people in other countries. Women themselves have to speak up and take their rights. If no one gives you rights, you eventually have to claim them.

Some have called the MDGs unfair for developing countries, given that there are vast disparities among countries in terms of the magnitude of their development issues. What are your thoughts on this?

Developing countries have always felt that the MDGs are a Western agenda pushed on them. They need to embrace it as their own agenda—it is in their interest. Until they realize that, there is always going to be reluctant change on their part. They are all eager to eliminate poverty, but you cannot eliminate poverty without half of the population being active participants in that elimination. You cannot eliminate poverty for someone; they have to be part of it. That is something that leaders in developing countries do not always realize.

Instead of seeing it as a need in their countries, developing countries feel that it is a Western agenda. They use it to get other issues addressed—generally economic issues—rather than seeing it as a problem for themselves.

What are some measures that can be taken so that developing countries are more included?

When women's groups get together, they should enable women from developing countries to learn to speak up. When I was active in the United Nations, I found that a lot of these women understood these issues, but they did not know how to address them in their own setting. I am not so active anymore, but when people come see me from developing countries for ideas, I still find that they are reluctant to speak up. It's changing, and I think that will be the gate for women, if women leaders seize the issue and push it at every opportunity.

Did you experience such attitude toward women's leadership at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), where you were the secretary-general?

Yes, very much. I was a female head, and that made them worry a little bit. The key to making the male leaders part of the support is to try to reassure them that when women are in control of their bodies, it is not going to take away anything they have. It will just empower everybody.

You began your career as a physician in Pakistan in the late 1950s, teaching women and men about family planning and reproductive health. How has this experience influenced your career in the United Nations?

Through my experience, the fact that there was so much reluctance from the leadership to accept that these issues need to be central in development became key to my understanding. Then the United Nations itself, which is run by governments, often became subservient to what the governments said rather than putting out information and knowledge. That was my contribution—speaking up on these issues and making them visible at every opportunity. Gradually, they became very visible, and governments began to adopt and understand that these issues are not “feminine” issues, but rather key to development agenda.

Women never used to speak, but now they are speaking up: they have found their voice. Helping women articulate these issues is a powerful advocacy tool. It makes a huge difference. It is important that the forum in which these issues are discussed are also accessible and available to women, and it is becoming like that. Everything is changing.

When I first started, I always spoke out on these issues and on other issues because I had views on them. In the beginning, they would look at me but not pay any attention. I started to insist—I said, “When my male colleague said it, everyone says ‘This is such a good idea,’ but I said the same thing ten minutes ago.” So you had to be assertive in the beginning. But now, it is becoming accepted. So things have changed quite dramatically from when I started.

When you were advocating for issues like sexual and reproductive health, they were often taboo. How did you get people to open up and talk about these issues?

I decided that unless these issues are talked about in the public arena, nothing was going to change. So I had to learn how to do it without just getting pushed out. Gradually, I learned how to speak up and I never let an opportunity go by where I can insert some of these issues, in
a way that was not threatening. You really have to find the opportunities, and I was scared, but on the other hand, I was quite outspoken and I was known for that. Unless you are outspoken, nothing changes.

While working on population and reproductive health issues, how did you balance between reaching targets and respecting families’ privacy?

At that time, there were no targets. But I used to push them, because I was sure of their connection to most development issues. I said, unless women and men participated equally in development, development was not going to happen as rapidly as it could. And for women to participate equally, they have to have control over everything that was within their control. Yet fertility was controlled by men. Women’s bodies were controlled by their male counterparts rather than by themselves. This was the key to the change that happened. Women started to be in control of their own decisions about their own bodies. I think that was the change I managed to push—getting women to become part of the agenda, and getting men who also believed in that to be part of the agenda. Many women were reluctant to speak up about these issues, saying that men controlled women’s decision and this could not be changed. So women themselves were sometimes the problem. But it changed, and it changed suddenly. When change started to happen, it happened very rapidly. I was fortunate that I happened to be there.

I did not miss any opportunities in the United Nations, when other issues were being discussed, to put this issue as part of the main UN development agenda. And sometimes my male counterparts said, “This has nothing to do with anything.” And I said, “This has everything to do with everything.” That used to be the way of thinking. But that has changed, and I don’t think most people even remember that time, when these issues used to be taboo and when male dominance was accepted. They now accept that women were equal partners, more or less. It is up to women also to speak out on issues they think are important. It is up to women leaders to be more articulate, and more outspoken—and to be brave.

Do you think that the United Nations can improve its approach on issues that vary significantly by culture by hiring more local experts?

This has been done, and it should always be done. I think all new recruits should be taught how to address some of these difficult issues, and also where to find the language. When I was working on these issues, I used to tell everybody on the field “Whatever I say, consider it yours. You do not have to give me credit; you should take it and paraphrase it into your own language, and push the issues.” To have control over your language, and exactly how you said it, is not moving the agenda forward.

People in the United Nations are learning that for countries that are adopting and taking ideas covered by the United Nations, the ideas may not be useful because they cannot find the language. You have to let people use the words, and they do not have to give you credit for the quotations. They should be able to use it as theirs. Because

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