

## RESPONSES TO ATTEMPTS TO CREATE AUTONOMOUS RIGHTS, INCLUDING "REPRODUCTIVE AND SEXUAL RIGHTS," FOR MINOR CHILDREN THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME? YOUTH RIGHTS IN INTERNATIONAL YOUTH FORA

Cory W. Leonard, associate director, World Family Policy Center, and director of Student Programs, Kennedy Center for International Studies

### Rights for Youth

I would like to take a slightly different approach in my few remarks on children's rights and focus on an emerging category of rights that—strangely enough—is both inclusive and exclusive of children's rights. I also speak as one who straddles the fence—as both a youth (under some definitions) and as someone who works with youth and student programs. Youth rights, as such, have not come loudly to the scene. It is a stereotype developed by marketers that some youth say that they only want their MTV, Nikes, and steady spate of mindless media. Perhaps, youth want access to the Internet, control over their lives. Some youth eschew political involvement, although without doubt, a youth element has been key throughout global protests of the WTO in Seattle, riots, and revolutions. But youth mobilizing for a new regime of rights? That is a scene rarely seen on Ted Turner's own influential international organization, CNN.

And yet two international youth meetings, held in 1998 and 1999, operated on the assumption that youth must be afforded new economic, social, political, and sexual rights; these are even contained in a proposed Youth Rights Charter, which heretofore doesn't exist, but has been flying below radar for some time. Although various definitions of youth persist (12–18, 11–21, 9–35), a true diversity of youth perspectives are excluded, would-be democratic and transparent processes are unfair, responsibilities are ignored, and parental/family rights, null.

Various meetings incorporate youth tracks, especially as youth as a constituency have been interested in United Nations substantive debate and procedure for more than thirty years—owing to such vehicles as Model United Nations and student congresses. However, the World Youth Forum, the subsequent World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, held in Braga and Lisbon, Portugal, as well as the Hague Forum (part of the ICPD negotiations held in The Hague in February 1999) provide examples where so-called youth rights are being vigorously constructed as if by the youth themselves. But most troubling of all is the perspective on youth rights that was suggested by a senior representative of the UNAIDS secretariat. He commented that youth as young as ten being given the right of sexual expression was a step in the right direction, because it empowered them to control their own bodies.<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that concerns inherent to reproductive and sexual youth rights introduced at such meetings are

being manifest in younger and younger adolescents, particularly in the United States. A *New York Times* story quotes Dr. Ava L. Siegler, a psychologist and author of *The Essential Guide to the New Adolescence* that "preteens in our culture are eight and nine." Dr. Richard Gallagher, director of the Parenting Institute at New York University's Child Study Center says, "I see no reason not to believe that soon a substantial number of youth will be having intercourse in the middle-school years. It's already happening."<sup>2</sup>

Not to be outdone, an even more troubling *Washington Post* piece reveals a new youth fad to be a far cry from Pokemon or PlayStation. As many as a dozen girls and two or three boys, thirteen and fourteen years old, were engaging in oral sex throughout the school year at Williamsburg Middle School in Arlington, Virginia. The report notes:

National surveys of teen sexual behavior generally look only at highschoolers, not younger students. But in dozens of interviews, researchers and school officials throughout the Washington area said that they are seeing something new in kids in their early teens: a casual approach to oral sex as a substitute for intercourse and as a reaction against the fear engendered by AIDS awareness programs.<sup>3</sup>

The *Times* story frankly notes that "psychiatrists and psychologists, however, say that most young teenagers cannot handle the profound feelings that go with early sex." It also observes that "most psychologists say that what is needed is not just to supply youngsters with facts and information . . . but also to provide them with forums to explore their feelings and to digest the proliferation of sexual messages they receive." Where will these forums be found? In the family or in the various World Youth Fora themselves? Analyses of causality and discussions of influences may be difficult and controversial. The parallel and ongoing responses in the slow but advancing notion of youth rights provide an interesting international policy angle to consider vis-à-vis this behavior.

### Missing Perspectives

Pre-session preparatory meetings consisting of interested non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies were held at the UN headquarters in New York in conjunction with the initial negotiations of the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth. Even so, the World Youth Forum is the third in a series that have attempted to create a focused, international policy forum for youth, by youth. It

claims an impressive number of interagency partnerships and cooperative efforts, including UNFPA, ILO, WHO, and UNAIDS, among others.

Of more than three hundred youth representatives, few participants represented religious or family perspectives. Only a small delegation from the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, two Holy See youth observers, and World Family Policy Center delegates<sup>4</sup> attended, and their participation was subsequently limited by adult UN facilitators, many of whom were “gratis” employees.<sup>5</sup> Also, repeated attempts to introduce faith-influenced perspectives on such important and controversial issues as sexual and reproductive rights (encompassing sex and AIDS education, attitudes toward homosexuality, etc.) were met with derision by handpicked youth and intolerance by staff.

One World Family Policy Center Health Committee youth delegate, Cindy Bishop Grace, tried for three days to include abstinence as merely one of a viable menu of choices available to youth when considering sexual activity. At first, the adult WHO facilitator ignored her suggestions for the language; other youth views were given full consideration and written on the white board. When she determined that for some apparent reason, her views were not welcome, she tried another strategy and was elected as the committee rapporteur. After carefully noting all suggestions from the fifteen-plus youth committee, she also subsequently included her own view—a point not lost on the facilitator.

Other youth delegates—much unlike their adult UN counterparts’ ultimately civil tone even in informal working group sessions—continually mocked and ridiculed her every statement.

Finally, after all of her attempts to include abstinence as a viable alternative strategy for youth sexuality failed, she took a stab in the dark and brought to the group’s attention a UNFPA youth essay publication. In the essay, a fourteen-year-old girl from the Dominican Republic wrote that her mother had essentially taught her that as far as sexually transmitted diseases and contraceptives go, abstinence was the only 100 percent guaranteed method for personal health and well-being. The group of youth delegates—who again, were later touted to have represented the world’s youth—once again began their mocking, only to be interrupted by a delegate in the corner raising her hand. “I am the person who wrote that story. That was my mother.” “I admire your mother and think that you have shown us an important perspective,” commented Cindy. For the remainder of the session, youth were temporarily accepting of the view—at least until the next day began. The adult facilitator closely controlled the outcome of this document through the entire meeting, which emphasized reproductive health, including offering services and sex training to children as young as ten years old, in direct contravention to the rights of parents.<sup>6</sup>

Also, youth seem to have been left out of the picture when it came to planning youth rights. A general lack of organization contributed to the overall sense that youth were not in the driver’s seat. At the World Youth Forum, opening ceremonies began three hours late on the first official working day. The session was filled with typical first-day oratory, while a youth presence was noticeably absent. Around 4 P.M., time was allowed for questions and comments. A spirited young woman from Germany rose and harshly exclaimed that this was a youth event and yet all we had done for the first day was listen to adults tell us what we should think. She indicated that if this were the way that such meetings operated, she would rather go home and not participate. She unexpectedly received a full standing ovation from the crowd. Unfortunately, no formal or informal response addressed her concerns, which were representative of a sizeable constituency at the conference.

These two examples suggest a troubling fact behind these particular efforts to forward youth rights: Youth are not fully represented. In fact, evidence points to the view that the secretariat controlled the attendee list so as to limit any real opposition in the remote locale of Braga, Portugal.

#### Conference Procedure vs. Fish in a Barrel

The parliamentary process of the World Youth Forum focused on twelve committees dealing with a range of platform topics. Perhaps owing to logistics or the change in number of participants, only seven working groups were created, dealing with such topics as health, human rights, employment, education, cross-sectoral issues, UN/NGO partnerships, and youth empowerment. Delegates were asked to go to an adjoining gymnasium where they would meet committee directors and sign up for their areas of interest. No more than thirty people would be allowed for each working group (WG).

Typical conference diplomacy protocol and rules of procedure afford some liberties to the organizers and secretariat. In this case, however, the naivete and disinterest of some delegates was channeled to give the secretariat additional control. Delegates were told that there wasn’t sufficient time to review the document in full or draft new language, and as such, delegates would have to trust the details to the discretion of the organizers.

The most blatant misuse of procedural rules occurred during the final closing ceremony. An unannounced “amendment” process was initiated in a rushed, unaccountable format—much like every other meeting in which we had participated during the forum. Delegates scrambled to the front of the room with proposed amendments on scraps of papers, napkins, or any other available writing material. When an amendment was announced adding the word “homophobia”<sup>7</sup> to the other clearly undesirable societal influences (racism and xenophobia) Ryan Nelson of the WFPC quickly

registered our opposition to the suggested language. This was passed on a “consensus” basis—in spite of our stated opposition. Ryan then hastily drafted an amendment as the thirty-minute process began to draw to a close, requesting the removal of the word “homophobia” and the addition of “religious intolerance” to the same paragraph. We watched as the chair finally read the amendment—which was met with a large measure of disapproval by the crowd. The chair did not read the proposed amendment to include religious intolerance. After speaking with one of the secretariat/organizations, who informed us that the process indeed was democratic and also that consensus did not necessarily mean full agreement, we resigned to drafting a formal reservation that was attached to the final Braga Youth Declaration.

Minutes later, delegates were privy to a personal visit by the secretary-general of the United Nations. We found Mr. Kofi Annan’s comments that “your opponents may try to hurt you, but they can never break you” to be perversely inspiring, in light of everything that we had experienced. As a result of these meetings, the Braga Youth Action Plan was later adopted at the World Conference of Minister’s Responsible for Youth as WCMRY/1998/5. Since then, it has been billed as representative of the global aspirations of the world’s youth.

### Conclusions . . . and Beginnings

The rolling stone of youth rights may be gathering moss and growing its network and constituency, albeit slowly, even in spite of a lack of international awareness. Even so, a number of points may focus pro-family attention to where progress is possible:

- Larger societal trends such as increasing sexual activity at younger ages may be addressed in other areas, such as a focus on the sexualization of children, especially through pornography and Internet media. At the World Family Policy Forum 2000, Professor Richard G. Wilkins proposed the positive use of global standards and norms, as cited in the Declaration of the World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children,<sup>8</sup> to focus attention on this issue and aid in shielding children from potentially harmful online content. Subsequently, an internationally accepted rating system must encompass various country and cultural standards, where possible, to separate out offensive and crude material.
- Safety nets do exist, as other UN bodies must subsequently approve all world youth language. The World Conference of Minister’s Responsible for Youth and The Commission on Social Developments’ exclusion of troublesome language in the Braga Youth Plan of Action points to the fact that vigilant Member State representatives may choose not to accept certain sexual and repro-

ductive rights for minors, as well as other potentially expansive youth rights<sup>9</sup>

- When youth are given the opportunity to draft their own language and ideas, outcomes in the best interest of youth, parents, and the family do occur. As evidence, the Geneva Youth Declaration, drafted by more than 100 youth assembled at the Second World Congress of Families in Geneva, Switzerland in November 1999, noted that:

“We declare that in order to foster a loving home environment and transfer moral and social values and virtues to their children, parents have a divine responsibility and right to direct the . . . growth of their children . . . [and] breaking these sacred bonds of the natural family . . . by such influences as divorce, premarital or extramarital sexual relationships, destructive media, pornography, substance abuse, and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, the family will be hindered from fulfilling its purpose.”<sup>10</sup>

- Continued participation in the UN and international conference system is essential if the outcome of documents is to be shaped. Forthcoming meetings—such as the World Youth Forum scheduled for June 2001 in Senegal—signal the place and time to influence nascent youth rights language.

The adult shepherds of youth rights will attempt to orchestrate an expansion of rights, as seen in the ongoing series of World Youth conferences. Momentum among member states, human rights educators, and advocates to co-opt what could be a useful dialogue on youth rights and responsibilities must not—for the sake of youth, in particular—be allowed to continue. Perhaps in this area, we are early enough to open up new, more representative perspectives and to influence the process. Otherwise, we will see further detrimental global youth policies that lack the power to help shape young people in positive ways and thus strengthen the society they will inherit.

### NOTES

1. One World Family Policy Center delegate, Candice Madsen, had been accredited by NBC News and created an informative 20-minute documentary about the challenges and issues involved in these 1998 World Youth meetings. She obtained interviews with many of the individuals referenced in this presentation. Perhaps the most useful part of this film is footage of actual negotiations with subscript transcriptions—a window into the complex negotiations where G77 delegates made a strong but unsuccessful attempt to include family language in the final document.

2. Jarrell Anne, “The Face of Teenage Sex Grows Younger,” *The New York Times*. p. B1, Monday 3 April 2000.

3. Stepp, Laura Sessions, “Parents are Alarmed by an Unsettling New Fad in Middle Schools: Oral Sex.” *Washington Post*. p. A1, Thursday, 8 July 1999.

4. World Family Policy Center activities at the 1998 Portugal

meetings included several important reports drafted by Executive Director Kathryn Balmforth, as well as efforts by youth representatives Cindy Bishop Grace, Candice Madsen, and Ryan Nelson.

5. As Kathryn Balmforth notes in her unpublished paper "UN Youth Forum Promotes Anti-Family, Pro-Homosexual Agendas," "'a gratis employee' is one who works within the UN System, but who is employed and paid by the government of a member state, or by some other entity. The G-77 in New York has opposed the use of gratis employees because it gives member states an unfair voice within the Secretariat itself."

6. As Kathryn Balmforth consistently points out, the "prior right" of parents is an essential and guaranteed right under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

7. Later in Lisbon at the World Conference for Minister's Responsible for Youth, a longtime youth policy observer and NGO insider with more than ten years experience with these issues described the introduction of the term "homophobia" as unprecedented within the UN system an a "major tactical error." His stated view was that a lack of consensus on the inclusion of this term within the UN system is clear and will stand to strongly discredit the Braga Youth Declaration. He also noted the following: "You can be sure that the youth right to freedom from homophobia will be included in [the] Compilation of Youth Rights as the UN System has agreed to it at a UN Conference which is convened by the UN General Assembly and reports to the General Assembly.

8. United Nations Declaration, 28 August 1996: "Every child is entitled to full protection from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. . . . States are required to protect the child from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse and promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of the child victim."

9. Balmforth notes "between 9 and 19 February 1999, the United Nations Commission on Social Development met in New York . . . and overwhelmingly rejected the Braga Youth Plan of Action and refused to acknowledge it. The Group of 77 also fought for inclusion of family friendly language in the documents produced by the Commission. They were opposed in this effort by the European Union, which insisted that any mention of 'the family' also include language that reminds everyone that the European Union accepts 'various forms of the family,' such as homosexual 'families.' After days of tense negotiations, the European Union succeeded in including this language."

10. Geneva 1999 Youth Declaration. World Congress of Families II, Geneva, Switzerland, November 1999 [http:// www.world-congress.org](http://www.world-congress.org)