

Text of Speech by Gita Sen, Representative of the Women's Coalition for the ICPD
(Presented on July 2, 1999, before the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Population and Development.)

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates, and my friends in the **NGO** community, I am speaking today on behalf of the Women's Coalition for the ICPD, which brings together over 100 **NGOs** **from** across the globe working together to support the implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action and to advance gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights. In country **after** country, in the years since Cairo, we have been coming together to transform **population-**related policies so that they are more firmly grounded in the human rights of women and girls. Tonight, the Women's Coalition celebrates the overwhelming support **from** governments for the important advances we have made together in the last few days:

- promoting and protecting the sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people, with respect for their need for privacy and confidentiality and their ability to make responsible life choices;
- taking major steps to reduce the tragedy of maternal deaths by strengthening women's access to essential obstetric care and, importantly, by making sure that health providers are better trained and equipped to provide safe abortion services;
- identifying ways to prevent and treat HIV/AIDS and to provide access to services without stigma, discrimination, or violence;
- fostering partnerships between governments and civil society with **full** respect for NGO autonomy; and
- recognizing the urgent need for a more enabling macro-economic environment, accessible health services, and greater economic justice.

Most heartening during these days has been the enthusiasm and seriousness of young voices claiming their rights and challenging us to respond with equal concern and enthusiasm.

While we celebrate what we have accomplished together here, much remains to be done in the real world outside these walls. Let us not forget that every minute of **every** day, a woman dies of mostly preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth; that young people, especially girls, remain vulnerable to violence and sexual abuse; that health care services are far from adequate in terms of resources, accessibility, scope, and quality. But we believe that working together we can make progress, sooner rather than later.

We know the overwhelming weight of the support we have on our side from governments and agencies. **Sadly, a small** minority that opposed Cairo in the first place continue to do so. **However, one** of the most fascinating successes of ICPD implementation has been the extent to which parties initially skeptical of the Cairo approach are now quoting it chapter and verse and will brook no departure **from** it. The Women's Coalition looks forward to building on the successes of Cairo and Cairo+5 -- to advance women's human rights, including our sexual and reproductive rights in the coming years.

Tonight, at the end of these negotiations, we wish to say once again to governments and agencies that the women of the world care -- and care deeply -- because it is our bodies and our lives that are at stake. The new millennium will be the millennium of women's rights, gender equality, and gender justice. The women of the world are here -- in the gallery, and also in official delegations -- we are with you, we are still watching you, and we will never go away.