

## REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

# Fictitious 'republic' used as example of how countries can improve status of their women

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There is a republic called Mbog and its capital is Masoda. A woman president was recently elected. The country is mostly a rural country with many small villages. The new president named her cabinet—all women except for two men—and she called a cabinet meeting. She asked each member of her cabinet to explain just how each one of them had implemented the empowerment of women and improved their reproductive health.

Of course Mbog is a fictitious republic and the president, Ruth Bamela Engo-Tjeya really is from the Cameroon and is the head of the Special Coordination Office for Africa and Less Developed Countries. This was the Pan-African Seminar on Reproductive Rights meeting on Tuesday morning. The panel discussion was sponsored by the UN Population Fund. The idea of acting out the strategies which the panel presented to the audience made for a lively morning.

The first topic which was discussed was that of health. The greatest number of women's illnesses have to do with



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*Panelists at session organized yesterday by the UN Population Fund.*

reproduction: Pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, in this present moment AIDS being the most threatening and one which affects more women than men today in Africa. In order to address these problems all the "cabinet ministers" explained the importance of education, education per se and sexual education in particular. Clinics are set up with trained personnel. Sexual education is given in school, one minister saying it should be

started in the third grade and continued all the way up.

This is not enough. Education should not start only at the level of the children but should be a family education with a country-wide culture-sensitive campaign on the radio, in the print media, in folklore dramas and even via TV wherever it is available. All clinics and health-care centers should be able to provide any kind of contraceptive method and be able to explain it carefully to women who come for help. How to finance

these clinics? The government has to change its view of budget and allocate more to education and health care than to other less pressing if perhaps more showy projects.

The acting out of problems and solutions was heartily applauded. The hall was full to overflowing and the audience felt it was taking part in a real live drama. The women of the "village" asked for more specific things like water and one even said it would be great to bring entertainment to the village so that the men would have something else to do than to use their wives. The minister of justice in our make-believe country—in actual life the Minister of Justice of Malawi, Miriam Maluwa, was forceful in her plans to change laws to benefit women. They should have the right to own property. Legally punish the men who abuse women in any way.

The morning was too short. Although many more topics and specific strategies were discussed by the ministers and the villagers, both actors and viewers could have continued the play. The curtain had to come down finally. But the play will continue to unfold in real life.