

Where Will Taking A Stand Take You?

I had been up most of the night, almost every night, for nearly six weeks now. I was twenty-one, living in New York City studying piano performance. But it was my unpaid “part-time job” that was consuming my waking (and sleeping) hours.

The United Nations evokes prestigious images of flags, important people sitting in chairs with name plaques, sitting in the General Assembly room, as they lean into their mic to address their esteemed colleagues. But it’s in the basement of the UN, in cave-like rooms with orange and green polyester fabric sound-proofing the walls, and fluorescent lights buzzing overhead, that the real negotiations take place. Negotiators test and tease language proposals and attempt to sway allegiance and votes with funding. The most important debates often take place at odd hours, when the dissenting country representatives with few staff are in need of sleep, and advocate votes are ensured.

It was a Thursday, the day my life changed. I was at the Conference on Population and Development, when thirty-two young people took the floor and claimed to represent all three billion of the world’s youth. They demanded sexual rights for children, abortion as a human right and the deletion of parental rights. In claiming to represent the world’s youth, they held sway over delegates as lobbying groups began to coercively impose this agenda on weaker, poorer, countries.

I wanted to stand up and shout. It was unjust. What about those who still don’t have clean water? Sanitation? Education? Infrastructure? Housing? Basic healthcare? What about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Article 26, 3: “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.”

The room was full of influential people: delegates and state representatives, organizations ... Why didn’t they speak up! Who was I? What could I do? In a reaction of conscience, I had to do something. I thought to myself, *these young people don’t represent me and they don’t represent millions of other young people around the world.* I exited the UN basement only to emerge into the darkness of the night, and a long subway commute ahead of me.

Waiting on the subway platform, I looked around to see a homeless man crouched under a bench with his sleeping bag, a musician creatively playing the drums on overturned plastic buckets, and a parent holding a sleeping child in their arms. *We are more than our sexual faculties. Why aren’t we talking about the development of the whole person: the moral, emotional, intellectual, and physical dimensions?* I began writing. A manifesto. A counterstatement.

Hurriedly bursting into the apartment, my roommates enquired if everything was OK? I told them about the thirty-two young people, their demands and ... I could hardly get any other words out of my mouth before they interjected in shock at what was going on. The coercion! It was unjust! The bigger countries were taking advantage of the smaller countries and pushing their own agendas. We spent the rest of the night writing, editing and taking turns sleeping. As the nearest Kinkos (now FedEx) opened, we hurriedly handed over our floppy disk to the store manager, asking for copies of our manifesto on their brightest, pinkest, paper. "We only do flyers and brochures, lady.", he clarified.

In the UN halls, we placed the pink flyers in stacks on the table reserved for "delegates only".

Part of the flyer read:

The eight "proposals" of the UNFPA Youth do not address the real needs of the vast majority of youth around the world. Rather, they are aimed only at sex, money and power, and make bold demands for governments to adopt the same agenda. We reject *their* vision of our future.

On behalf of the youth from around the world who have been deliberately excluded from the youth forum process we would like to re-emphasize the following aspects of the Cairo document:

- We understand that youth rights are already ensured by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reaffirmed by Principle 1 of the Cairo document, and therefore we do not need to create new rights and privileges;
- We endorse and live the principles of sexual restraint and responsibility and reject the promotion of unlimited sexual rights, which lead to illegitimacy, disease, and disillusionment;
- We implore parents to exercise their prior rights and responsibilities to direct the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions and not to relinquish these rights to governments and to UN agencies;

The development of the whole person includes the moral, spiritual, emotional, intellectual as well as the physical dimensions. Please do not reduce us to our sexual faculties. Our main concerns are issues relating to education, family, employment and development. Please don't "reserve and move on"⁹³. Hold fast to principles for our future.

⁹³ This is when Member States voice their reservations on elements of a draft but still agree to adopt the document. The pink flyer asked representatives not to simply register or voice a reservation, but to vote down the proposal completely, and to consider the future they want for the young people in their country.

It's not an exaggeration to say that the pink photocopies caused pandemonium that day. The negotiations were halted as delegates came up to us one by one, saying: "Thank you for standing up." "Thank you for saying this." "Thank you for being here." Many of the delegates knew first-hand how our understanding of the human person lays the foundation for what policies and initiatives are adopted in practice. In their countries, foreign aid funded population control programs, while antibiotics or education needs remain unmet. International delegates asked us to maintain a permanent presence at the United Nations and to work with youth from their countries.

My roommates and I didn't continue down the path to become concert pianists; we took the road less travelled, building an organization of young people from around the world to understand and defend the dignity of the human person. We also eventually got our name on a plaque at the United Nations, that reads: "Non-Governmental Organization, World Youth Alliance."