Women’s Empowerment and Family Planning: Key to Success at Rio+20 Environment Meeting

New York, NY: In a few short days, world leaders will converge on Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in an urgent effort to protect the global environment for current and future generations. Their success - or failure - could hinge on the engagement of a pivotal, but often neglected, group of stakeholders: the world’s women.

The June 20-22 United Nations Rio+20 Earth Summit will draw more than 120 heads of state, as well as tens of thousands of delegates, activists and media representatives. At issue are the planet’s air, land, water, and biological diversity -- and the long-term, sustainable health of those ecosystems on which our lives and prosperity depend.

“Women are central to a sustainable future,” said Vicky Markham, Director of the Center for Environment and Population (CEP). “Around the world, they play an important role as resource managers, and they are on the front lines of environmental crises such as drought and sea-level rise caused by climate change. Yet women are glaringly under-represented in environmental decision-making.” At past meetings on the global environment, women led only 10% of delegations, and some 40% of delegations were comprised of men only, a number which has actually risen in recent years. As a result, women’s concerns are often overlooked.

That is a mistake, says Markham. “Empowering women through education, legal rights, healthcare, and economic opportunities is good for women and good for the planet.” Experts say that family planning and reproductive healthcare is one of the most inexpensive and powerful development strategies to achieve women’s empowerment. Yet over 215 million women worldwide still lack access to these services.

Where women have access to family planning and reproductive healthcare, population growth slows. Slower growth can free up resources for education and other social investments - and it can reduce pressure on ecosystems. Scientists tell us that slower population growth could help significantly reduce global emissions of carbon dioxide over the next 40 years.

Because of this, addressing the unmet need for family planning is an essential tool for achieving women’s empowerment and sustainable development as part of the Rio+20 objectives. As Musimbi Kanyoro of the Global Fund for Women stated, “Sustainable development isn’t sustainable if it doesn’t include empowering women to plan their families, educate themselves and their children, and have a voice in government at all levels.”

Women organized around the first Rio meeting in 1992, and won some mention of women’s role in the original Rio outcome document. Today, women from around the world are mobilizing in preparation for Rio+20, and beyond. This global coalition is advocating for women’s and girls’ empowerment, education, and employment; family planning and reproductive health; and for women’s inclusion in debating, negotiating, and achieving
sustainable development at all levels. After Rio + 20, many of the groups will advocate on these issues around the UK government/Gates Foundation’s Family Planning Summit, the UN Millennium Development Goals, and beyond.

Let’s hope these efforts pay off. The draft Rio+20 outcome document affirms the need for women’s empowerment, but we need firm commitments to action, as stated by the Rio+20 Women’s Major Group. And, Rio+20 provides an important campaign opportunity to link family planning to environmental sustainability on a broader scale. But it is an open question whether those provisions will survive the negotiating process when world leaders convene in June.

**Advocating at Rio+20:** To help keep these topics on the agenda, CEP staff will attend the Rio + 20 Earth Summit and advocate through side-events and press briefings with leading global south women activists, blogging, and tweeting. CEP will also co-host two side-events:

*Women’s Personal Stories for Rio+20 and Beyond*  
**Side-event and press briefing:** June 20, 10am -12 noon, Ford Foundation Pavilion (next to the Brazil Museum of Modern Art, 85 Infante Dom Henrique Avenue, Flamengo Park, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)  
**Organizers:** Center for the Environment and Population (CEP), Climate Wise Women, and Columbia University Coalition for Sustainable Development  
Six outstanding women activists (from Uganda, Nigeria, Cook Islands, Mississippi/US, Philippines, and Brazil), young and old, share their personal narratives to help us understand the profound impacts of climate change and other environmental occurrences on their lives. In conversation they’ll also discuss the importance of women’s empowerment and reproductive health, and new, innovative connections among women of all ages for practical implementation of the Rio+20 outcome, and beyond. Introduction will be given by Nilcéa Freire, Ford Foundation Representative, Rio Office. Individual press briefings will be held immediately after the side-event.

**Making Population Matter: Reaping the Demographic Dividend for Sustainable Development**  
**Side-event:** June 21, 3:30pm-5:00pm, US Country Center, Rio+20, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
**Organizers:** USAID’s Office of Population and Reproductive Health, Center for Environment and Population (CEP), and the Aspen Institute.  
In 2011, the world’s population passed seven billion, a milestone in human history. As another two billion may be added to the planet by 2050, sustainable development will not be possible without meeting the needs of the 215 million women around the world who currently lack access to contraception. Universal access to contraception has been shown to lead to reductions in fertility that increase the proportion of working age adults relative to the very young, increasing productivity and creating economic benefits known as a “demographic dividend.” Drawing from the experience of several East Asian countries, reaping the demographic dividend depends not only on widespread availability and use of contraception, but also improvements in child survival, improvement in educational enrollments and quality, and policies that lead to employment opportunities. Leading experts from Africa, Brazil, and the US will discuss what policies and programs need to be implemented now to ensure that more African countries reap the economic benefits of the demographic dividend.

**Social Media:** CEP is blogging “Daily From Rio+20” with three guest bloggers posts on www.cepnet.org and other sites, and tweeting @markhamy. CEP will also launch a fact sheet, “Women’s Empowerment and Family Planning: Key to Success in Global Development - Rio+20, the Family Planning Summit, UN MDGs and Beyond” available in hardcopy and online.

**For more information or interviews contact:** Vicky Markham, Center for Environment and Population (CEP), website: www.cepnet.org, telephone: (203) 529-3029, or email: vmarkham@cepnet.org.

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