

• (1015)

[Translation]

Mrs. Christiane Gagnon (Québec): Madam Speaker, the impressions we have brought back from the International Conference on Population in Cairo are too many to sum up in just a few minutes. But I would say that the two words that describe them the best are openness and progress.

I am glad that the minister shared with us this morning his thoughts about this international conference. It makes us realize the importance of such gatherings because when cultures and deep differences that shape nations come in contact, we can subscribe to the idea that discussion promotes openness, and openness promotes progress and the furtherance of ideas.

For us, Cairo was above all an occasion to voice major concerns that much not only be discussed in international fora but also in our target communities as well as in our parliamentary institutions.

I would like to emphasize an aspect of the conference that distressed me deeply as a parliamentarian and a woman, and that is the status of women. It remains a stumbling block, the central area in which progress needs to be made if our civilization is to embark upon the quest for the well-being of our people.

Suffering can affect both body and soul. Just think of the plight of millions of young women around the world who are subjected to what we call excision or infibulation.

In a world in which technology and science keep turning everything upside down on a daily basis in the way we live and think, two thirds of the 960 million illiterate persons on this planet are women.

Considering that life expectancy in Zimbabwe is 44 years for women and 40 for men, the tragic reality behind these figures shows strikingly the major imbalance between developing countries and industrialized countries. This geopolitical reality was palpable during discussions at the conference. The international community is faced with this implacable reality that concerns us all.

The attitude change in people world-wide on issues such as family planning, health and education, is a sign of modest progress in the status of women, although much remains to be done. I noticed how widespread were the concerns expressed by women about abortion legislation. I also noticed how government leaders can make overcautious statements on this issue, statements that do nothing to help women in their everyday lives. To avert a potential disaster for mankind, it is imperative that every woman in the world be given equal opportunity and the chance to achieve her potential. That is the message from Cairo, the message that must be sent out.

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It must also be heard in this House. We must look at what has been accomplished in Canada in concrete term and how much progress remains to be done. I suggest to you that, while being ahead of many other countries on the issue of women status, Canada still has quite a long way to go.

Economic equality for women is still far from a sure thing. Women working for the federal government continue to be paid less than their male counterparts. Yet, we know that to further the cause of women and the state of the children requires that women and men be treated as equals.

It is also imperative that our government provide protection to women from foreign cultures by making illegal practices that adversely affect their basic rights. In fact, I would suggest that the government support the bill on the mutilation of feminine genitalia that I will be introducing today in this House, the purpose of which is precisely to protect a fair number of our Canadian women.

I would also ask the government to take all necessary steps to fight child poverty and to take action immediately.

[English]

Mr. Bob Mills (Red Deer): Madam Speaker, I also want to commend the public servants who worked on this program. I know a number of people in foreign affairs put in a lot of time on this.

Without really reviewing the conference and what happened, I would like to highlight a few facts where I think there would be agreement among all of us. Certainly over population is a threat and the world's sustainability is certainly dependent on us bringing this problem under control.

However, demographers and researchers have done an awful lot of work on this. It is a topic for study in universities. I am not sure that a conference of this magnitude would be necessary to discuss the fact that there is a problem.

• (1020)

Second, the empowerment of women, giving them greater control over their lives through increased access to education, health care, and increasing their economic contribution in developing countries should be strongly supported and would have our utmost support.

Uncontrolled migration is another major problem. We have seen what has happened in Rwanda and it is something that we must deal with. Making things better at home is one way to help uncontrolled migration.

It is rather a motherhood issue to say we would support the essentials of life, such as water, food and shelter. Certainly the preservation of basic human needs is vital and we are all concerned about that.