Narrator

Nafis Sadik, M.D. (b. 1929) is former head of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (1987–2000) and the first woman to head a major, voluntarily funded UN program. She was appointed secretary-general of the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994. Sadik worked for many years in Pakistan’s family planning program.

http://www.unfpa.org/ed/nafissadik.htm

Interviewer

Rebecca Sharpless directed the Institute for Oral History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, from 1993 to 2006. She is the author of **Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900–1940** (University of North Carolina Press, 1999). She is also co-editor, with Thomas L. Charlton and Lois E. Myers, of **Handbook of Oral History** (AltaMira Press, 2006). In 2006 she joined the department of history at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas.

Restrictions

None

Format

Four 60-minute audiocassettes.

Transcript

Transcribed, audited and edited at Baylor University. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Nafis Sadik.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

**Audio Recording**


**Transcript**

Today is July 24, 2003. My name is Rebecca Sharpless, and this is the first oral history interview with Dr. Nafis Sadik. The interview is taking place at her home in New York City, on East Fifty-sixth Street. And this is part of the Population Pioneers Project being sponsored by the Hewlett Foundation. Dr. Sadik, thank you so much for seeing me this morning. You maintain a busy schedule and I know this is—

Still very busy, even though I am retired. It seems like I’m constantly having to do something.

Yes. I know that we have a limited amount of time together here, but if you wouldn’t mind, could you take us back just a little bit, to mainly, your decision to become a doctor? How did you decide to become a medical doctor?

Well, you know, I come from a family in which, at that time, most families—the girls were not very well educated and got married in their teens. But my father was a great believer in education and especially education for both girls and boys. So in that sense I was fortunate. When I was in school, I always wanted to, as we all used to say, be somebody, you know, like someone who will make a difference and has all these idealistic dreams. And
that’s what I was going to a profession. Shall I be a scientist? Shall I be an engineer? Shall I be a physician? And I went through pre-medical—at my college I did everything. My college courses were like school courses because I wasn’t sure which profession I would really go into. But medicine at that time, in the late forties and fifties, was a profession which was very acceptable for women. Didn’t want to be a teacher somehow, but engineer was something that people really would have been shocked at. And science was not that developed so people didn’t become scientists. So medicine seemed to be—and I also, in fact, liked medicine. It was because my father was such a supporter that I got to medical school, because in extended families everyone is in on decision making. And they thought what a terrible thing my parents were doing, sending a girl to college when she should actually be married and having children and, you know, quote unquote settle down. So I got to college that way. My father said it was nobody’s business but theirs. And if his daughter wanted to be educated, he would have her educated. And in fact, he insisted that both his daughters must be educated. So that’s how I went to college in the first place. And my decision to do medicine—it was not like I felt a great vocation for medicine in particular. I mean, I liked it. But it was the desire to have a profession and to be independent and, as I used to say to everyone, I’m going to make a difference in the world.

Sharpless: How did you choose to go to the Dow Medical College?

Sadik: Well, I didn’t choose. We were in Calcutta, so I went to the Calcutta Medical College, and then came the partition of India and my parents—we were
Muslims, we opted to go to Pakistan, so that’s how I came to Pakistan.

Sadik

In Calcutta. I did the first year and a half in Calcutta, and then I did the rest in Karachi. That was the only medical school in Karachi.

Sadik

For my parents it was a decision, because their ancestral home and a lot of family members were all in India at that time. But interestingly, a lot of my father’s close—his brothers, for example, both came to Pakistan. Many of his cousins also came. And interestingly, over the years maybe that generation didn’t, but their children migrated to Pakistan. So many of my cousins, after all, came to Pakistan from my father’s mother’s side and my mother’s side as well.

Sadik

So that’s how we came to Pakistan.

Sadik

Yes, we moved to Karachi and that’s how I went to Dow Medical School.

Sadik

You know, the curriculum was the old-fashioned curriculum, with no community health. Public health was taught, but it was not a major subject. At that time it was patterned on the British medical education system and just followed everything that the British medical system did. And in fact, for years while the international schools changed to other ways, our school stayed the same. It’s only in the seventies and eighties that they really started to make the change in which they required community medicine—more
attention to public health. And also now, you know, more requirements for physics and chemistry, because medicine is becoming a combination of disciplines and sciences, not just the art of diagnosing and healing.

**Sharpless**
What was the national background of the faculty at the Dow Medical College?

**Sadik**
They were all people from the subcontinent.

**Sharpless**
So they were not British.

**Sadik**
No, the college was set up by the British, but the dean of the college, or the principal, as he was called, was also a Pakistani at that time, but obviously educated. But most of them had been educated—they had their postgraduate education in England. At that time nobody actually from the subcontinent came to the States to specialize. Everyone went England. In fact, my ambition was to go to England as well. And I opted to do gynecology because that was also a profession which was open to women, and most women in the subcontinent like to go to women. But I didn’t get my post-graduate [training] in England because my father got posted to the World Bank and that’s how I came to the States. And then I got the internship and residency at City Hospital, in Baltimore. So my post-graduate was—I did a year’s internship in Pakistan, in Karachi, and then I came to the City Hospital, in Baltimore here, which had professors from both the Maryland School of Medicine and also from Hopkins, somehow jointly looked after the obstetrics department.

**Sharpless**
Okay. So you decided to become a gynecologist primarily because—

**Sadik**
That was the best profession for women, so to speak. Though when I came
here, interestingly enough, and I was doing my internship, there were no
American women in obstetrics. American women—and in fact, in some
ways there were fewer American women in medical schools at that time than
there were even in the subcontinent. In the subcontinent we always had like
20 percent, sometimes 25 percent girls. Not all of them practiced after
graduating. Many got married and didn’t, but the numbers were quite
considerable. But mostly they went into either—in the subcontinent we went
into either obstetrics and gynecology or pediatrics. But here, I noticed in the
States that women didn’t become obstetricians and gynecologists, only men
[did], because women preferred to go to male doctors. Women here became
pediatricians, became anesthesiologists, or went into pathology or lab work,
or did ophthalmology, dermatology, but not obstetrics, internal medicine,
surgery, you know, anything. I don’t know, somehow—the public also,
including women, associated that with a male profession. And so, the people
who interned with me at City Hospital were two Indian girls, one German
woman, one woman from Latin America, Honduras, and then the rest were
men. There was a Canadian man, there were three American men, but no
American or North American women at all. And in internal medicine, there
were hardly any women. There were only men. I, in fact, started my
internship at City Hospital in medicine because that was the place open. So I
did that for a couple of months until there was an opening in obstetrics. And
there were very few women in medicine.

Sharpless

What were the most interesting problems of your patients that you saw?

Sadik

In Pakistan or here?
Sharpless

Well, here, during my internship, you know, the cultural differences, which actually one doesn’t learn about, were so great [that] I made some big mistakes like taking histories. I never asked a woman who came in pregnant whether she was married because in subcontinent it’s taken for granted. You don’t ask people if they’re married. Even in ’52, when I did my internship here, many women were not married. Then one day when someone had to have a c-section, caesarian section, they looked up the chart and said, Oh, married—get a hold of the husband for permission or information. And found that she wasn’t and then, you know, it was, “Don’t you know that you can be pregnant without being married?” (laughter) Yes. But I mean, these were the kinds of things—I had some other experiences, but you learn very fast that it’s a different kind of setup. Also here, the effort to save a life even though the person is going to die in the next six hours was, at that time, in heroic proportions. I mean, you had these chronic patients with encephalosis, large—been there for like four years and was now dying of kidney failure and the nurse said, “Well, what are you going to do?” So I said, “Oh, well, there’s nothing I can do.” “Oh no, you’ve got to give her adrenaline. You’ve got to do this.” You know, that was the concept and it was quite a shock to me that we would go to such heroic measures, put so much effort, blood transfusion, this, that and the other, to keep someone in misery alive for another few hours. But I suppose you don’t—in one way, it was a lesson that life is precious regardless of at what stage. In other ways it seemed like prolonging suffering of somebody, and nobody had a say in it,
neither the patient nor the relatives. But something I kept in my mind, because in the subcontinent there is not that value for life, which was, in fact, an important lesson for me. The language was different. The pronunciations were totally different. [For] cervical we used to say cerv- EYE-cal, and, you know, that kind of stuff. And sometimes I didn't understand what people were talking about.

Sadik

But when I started to work in Pakistan—my internship I did in the city of Karachi, but when I started to work—I got married in ’54. My husband and I were engaged and then we came back to Pakistan. He was in the army, so I was working in army hospitals.

Sadik

Let me interrupt you. Did you ever consider staying in the United States at that point?

Sadik

No, really not. In fact, people used to keep saying to me, Now you must apply for your board and this, that and the other. And I said, “What for?” Because I was going back. It never really occurred to me to stay here, even though my parents, my father and mother, were here in the States, at the World Bank. But at that time, people didn’t really move, though some obviously did, but not that many.

Sadik

Going back, yes, yes. I mean, never even dreamt of staying here. That idea didn’t even come into my mind.

Sadik

And was your fiancé in Pakistan, while you were here—

Sadik

Yes, yes.
—or was he here?

We were engaged, but the agreement was that we’d get married after two years, after I finished my residency. So, that’s how we got married in ’54 and when I went back, he was in the army so I used to work in the army hospitals. And I started to do some work in the rural areas for the places where the army people came from, the soldiers came from. And that’s where I had some experiences which were interesting in that they molded my thinking in the future. Like, you know, dealing with pregnant women, and they would be malnourished, anemic, and some of them had had several children and you’d say to them, “Well, you know, now you must have a space, at least two years, because you’re not in good health.” And they would laugh and look at me as if I’d come from the moon. I mean, they didn’t make those decisions, and besides, that was their purpose and their lot in life. And if they had too many girls then, of course, it was very imperative that they immediately become pregnant and have a boy. And I started to think, you really can’t do anything about their health because they themselves don’t want to do anything about themselves and they had no control over their lives. Then I decided—this was like in ’55, ’56, ’57 something like that, that maybe the answer to all this was to have family planning for them. So I went to my commanding officer in the army hospital and I said, “I would like some money to buy contraceptives.” And, you know, in the fifties, they didn’t have contraceptives. Nobody talked about it and he thought I was also crazy and said, “We don’t deal in those things.” But I must have persisted, because finally he gave me some money from his
impressed account that he had control over. And it was not a large amount of money, but he said, “I'm giving it to you as part of our good will for the work that we are contributing, the army is contributing, and you can buy what you like with it, but when you get into trouble, which I know you will, I have had nothing to do with it. You're on your own.” So, I bought the contraceptives and I went back to the village and I started to try to persuade the women and they said, Ugh, not at all. Then I decided to call the husbands. I said, “Next time I come I want all the husbands to be here.” So then I told the husbands that their wives could not get pregnant. There were not that many women, maybe eight or ten or something like that. And I said, “Your wives could not be pregnant for another one year, two years,” or whatever it was. And they looked shocked at me and I said, “Anyone who disagrees with me, well, I'm taking his wife to the hospital and I will keep her there for two years so she cannot get pregnant.” I think when you are young you are very brash. But anyway, I got the message across and finally they became quite friendly towards me and the whole village used to come out and turn out and greet me, because I looked after everybody. I mean, they brought their aunts, uncles, relatives from another village. Okay. For a time I sort of made priorities. These are my priorities. And then sometimes I was supposed to go there for like three hours and I would spend the whole day looking after, not the whole village, but a lot of people.

**Sharpless**

Could I clarify a couple of things here? Okay, so you were working with the army going into the rural areas where the soldiers came from?

**Sadik**

Right.
Sharpless: Okay. Were you doing just gynecology or general medicine?

Sadik: No. They let me do obstetrics—my main thing was obstetrics, looking after the women, but I also looked after the children, like ordered their immunizations and things like that. And then looked after coughs, colds, fever, and, you know, whatever, diarrhea. Little things. I mean, it was not the art of real medicine, but I mean, just looking after little things.

Sharpless: And so, you traveled among the villages?

Sadik: Two villages.


Sadik: Yes. So I started to think about how little control women—it was not like something that was very obvious in my mind, but when I trace it back, it started from that. When my husband was transferred to Karachi, and then when I went to the army hospital in Karachi, I went through the same experience—looked after women and I did the obstetrics and gynecology and then also looked after women in the tuberculosis ward, many of them pregnant. During pregnancy, tuberculosis sort of gets—what do you call it?—less obvious, but after the delivery it really flares up. And some of them, of course, could be treated fully, but you really couldn’t get pregnant again. So again, I tried family planning and after a while I really got fed up because it was like you were trying to do this one at a time, when it was really a much bigger problem. It was more of social problem than a health problem. So my answer to this with my husband was that I wanted to quit working. I’m just fed up with this. And so he said, “I think you should just take some holidays and see whether you like it or not.” So I went on a two-month vacation and
after the end of a month I was so fed up I decided that this was not for me. Then I decided to do public health. I thought maybe that was the way to go.

**Sharpless** Let me ask you one other thing. This is a real nuts-and-bolts [question], but when you got the contraceptives, were they mainly condoms?

**Sadik** Mainly condoms and some diaphragms.

**Sharpless** And where did you get them? They were available in Pakistan?

**Sadik** Yes, they were available. You could buy them in the market. You could buy them from the Family Planning Association, which had just started.

**Sharpless** Okay. So there was a Family Planning Association.

**Sadik** It started in the fifties. In fact, I had to find out where to get them. Condoms were available in the market but they were quite expensive. But the Family Planning Association had them much more cheaply. So I got them from the Pakistan Family Planning Association.

**Sharpless** Now, you said that you talked to the men. This is a—

**Sadik** Because, you know, the diaphragms could rarely be used by most of the women. Many of them had cervical infections, and also it’s not so easy for them to say, Wait, I have to put on a diaphragm. And so, I decided that condoms, at that time, was the only other method. I gave them to the women, but the women said they couldn’t tell their husbands what to do. It then became a major cultural thing, how to tell men how to use the condom. But obviously I managed, because they understood. In the beginning they all giggled and looked at me as if, you know, I mean, really, this forward woman telling them what to do. But, you know, by the time I got to the stage of getting the men and telling them what to do, I think I already established my
credentials, so to speak, in the village.

**Sharpless**

You had built the rapport with them.

**Sadik**

I built a rapport with the community, a little bit.

**Sharpless**

I’m just trying to imagine how you changed—I mean, this is still a big question—how you changed the attitudes from getting—

**Sadik**

I think it’s hard work. You have to start by making them understand that it’s not that you are pushing something, that it’s really for the health of their family. And sometimes you—one of the men said to me, “Well, if my wife dies, so what? I’ll get another wife.” And so I said, “You know, the pregnancy that she’s carrying—the child will also die.” “Oh.” Well, that was more important. You know, you get a real shock to think about how low the status of women is there. Someone else said to me, “But if I can’t have sex with my wife, then what good is she?” So I said, “But you can have. It’s just that you cannot make her pregnant.” And, you know, I just learned how to say it and how to respond to them. And it was so long ago, I can’t even remember what I must have thought and done. In retrospect now, maybe I would never have done it if I’d known all the difficulty. But at that time I was so intent on looking after the health of those women, that whatever was required, I was willing to do. And I think it’s actually to do with inexperience and youth. I think the more you think about what you cannot do, the less you do it.

**Sharpless**

How different were things in Karachi, from the rural areas?

**Sadik**

Not much different, because many of the people came from rural areas.

They have mental attitudes. Their social relationships were the same. They
hadn’t got urbanized. Again, I worked at the army hospital, so most of the—
this was the army-navy combined hospital, so there were navy people, et
cetera. But many, or the majority, I would say, came from rural backgrounds.

Sharpless

So even though it was a huge city.

Sadik

Yeah, but the hospital setting—but even in the city itself, it’s the same
attitudes that prevailed.

Sharpless

What did you do on your two-month holiday?

Sadik

Two-month holiday I played bridge. I went to lunches and whatnot, but got
so bored with myself—you know, in Pakistan, you have a lot of help, so my
domestics used to say, Aren’t you going out today? Because I didn’t know
what to do in the house. You know, I’ve never been used to—I used to ask
other women what did they do when they were at home. They said supervise
the cleaning and cleaning the silver and doing this and doing that. So boring.
If they’re supposed to do it, they’ll do it. Why should you have to supervise?
See that everything is done properly, my God. I said, “That’s not my job.”

So then I decided to apply for the—there was a job advertised in the
Planning Commission on health planning. So I decided to apply for it.

Sharpless

How much did you know about public health at that point?

Sadik

Not too much. Not too much. So I decided to apply for it and, in fact, I
obviously did quite all right in the interview, because it was a public service
commission, a public service job. And I was given it and I said that I had to
have a course in public health. So I came—USAID [U.S. Agency for
International Development], I’m not quite sure why, but they financed my
coming to Johns Hopkins for an international course on health planning. So
I came and did that for, I don’t know, six months or something. So that was my public health background, because I was going into planning and I already joined so I had some idea of what the planning entailed in Pakistan, but there was no data, so how do you assemble information, and all that. And then I started to read a lot more. I read a lot of books on public health and WHO [World Health Organization] publications on public health systems, and so on. And a lot of it was self-education. The Johns Hopkins background was good, because they gave you a lot of material and reading. So that’s how I came back and was in the planning commission in charge of planning health programs for Pakistan. Most developing countries at that time, used to have development plans, which were five-year development plans. When I joined the planning commission, the commission was preparing what was called the third five-year plan, 1965 to ’70. So I had the opportunity to work on that plan and I recommended then the government should have a national family planning program as part of the health program. And, in fact, I worked on the development of national family planning. That policy recommendation was accepted. The government accepted that recommendation. The Family Planning Association had already established itself, so the government felt that it was not such a sensitive, controversial subject, or that there would be a great opposition and reaction against the program from the public. And so, then it was whether it should be a public sector program or should it be done by non-governmental organizations. My recommendation was that it should be public sector, though we should also use the NGOs. But anyway, the
government should allocate an amount of development money for the program as well. And so that’s how I became the—I did the third five-year plan for health, which included the family planning program, and then at the same time worked on the family planning program. So, when the family planning program was approved by the government, it became part of the development plan. And they set up a semi-autonomous government structure to manage it so that it wouldn’t get bogged down in bureaucracy. And they then asked me to join them as the director of planning and training. And because, you know, I had become so interested in it, so I then moved here, I think it was in ’65, from the planning commission to the family planning program.

Sharpless

Okay, let me turn my tape right quick.

Tape 1, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.

Sharpless

And how do you go about making a plan for something as large as a country the size of Pakistan?

Sadik

Well, you know, there were many actually external advisors. We had Pop Council, Ford Foundation. USAID at that time was not involved in family planning, but the person who was in charge of health was quite interested and so also gave some advice. WHO, although they were not very good, but still some information. And then we ourselves brainstormed amongst ourselves and many of us had some experience of working in the field and how to organize it, how to get the information, the education, and that came from advice from external people, but also our own. In fact, the plan on paper looked so perfect.
What did it look like?

It was, you know, how to work at the lowest levels and to involve local community leaders, local health persons, to have extension field workers that would arrange community dialogue, discussion, education, to have home visitors so that they could go to the homes, because most women didn’t come out of the homes, but if possible, also to arrange for women to meet together. So that was the kind of set up and this was at the local level and then at sub local, district, and then provincial and at the national level.

And this was family planning?

Which was family planning. It was called the family planning program.

Okay, so the idea was to try to get contraceptives in.

Information, education, contraceptives, and services. And by that time the IUD had arrived and both India and Pakistan—their external advisors, in fact, said that IUDs were the answer. So in a sense the programs promoted such methods rather than promoted family planning, which was a big error. You know, they really should have promoted the concept of planning and why it was important, not method. And then what happened to us was that I think the information spread wide and was very well accepted, and women in particular were very keen. But the IUD, which was also pushed, had many side effects, and the system was not set up to look after the complications and the side effects, the bleeding, et cetera. And in any case, the poor people don’t get very good attention. The public health services are not very good. So both India and Pakistan had this problem with the backlash against the IUD and I think that set our program back quite a bit, because if we had
started with just the idea of promoting family planning and these were the methods and you can choose which ones—but, you know, I think all of us, our desire was to get women more autonomy over their own decisions. And if you promoted condoms, then the women had no control over this. So the IUD was like women would be able to control their own destiny. But in fact, they couldn’t, because if they got bleeding—if they had an IUD inserted and they got problems, husband would know, because many women wanted to have a contraceptive without their husbands knowing about it. Or then, if they got a problem, then they would just get rid of it and that was that. Because they hadn’t really—you know, it was a fragile demand for family planning because the idea was not there. I mean, planning was not something that existed in their day-to-day existence. I mean, they live from day to day and everything was like fate. So planning of births was, Okay, you say it. I can do it, but then this method did this. Well, then planning was not the most important thing. But on the other hand, the knowledge and the idea of family planning spread widely. I mean, that was a great success. In fact, the Pakistan plan was considered such a great success story that everyone used to come from all over the world—and I went as an advisor to Indonesia to help them set up their program, to Egypt, Tunisia, to many places. And we used to arrange training programs—people from all over the world used to come to our program. We had great, of course, political support from the top leaders, and that helped a lot. After that the family planning program in the seventies, when the president at that time, who had been very strong on family planning, and my father, [who was] actually the
minister of finance, and who was very keen that countries should plan [their] population according to their resources. My father left in ’66, to come back to the World Bank as vice president. President Yahya Khan’s government finished in ’69, and the succeeding government felt that this was not such a politically acceptable program, and so it tried to downgrade it and downplay it. And then from the seventies onward, Pakistan’s never had strong leadership for the family planning program. As a result that the program didn’t get the required support, good people were not put in the program to manage the program. And then the local resource, which was the mainstay of the program, was misused and given to political patronage—the workers were not used for family planning work. I mean, all kinds of things happened to the program which led to its lack of success, while it was poised in the seventies to become a successful program. What we needed to do was to learn from our experience of the IUD, et cetera, like Bangladesh did, and other countries, and then move on to a different approach, which meant individuals chose their own contraceptives, but inform them about why it was important and both men and women, not just women.

**Sharpless**

When you were with the family planning council, what did you do on a daily basis?

**Sadik**

On a daily basis I looked at the implementation of the plan. And so I visited every district in Pakistan, I think a hundred and something, to see how the program was doing, what was being implemented, and, you know, wrote reports about how that should be adjusted and changed. Not always were my recommendations well received, because, you know, people at the top want
to show that the program is a great success and I was just writing the reports as they were, that, you know, bleeding and we really had to take care of it and so on. And the health services were very antagonistic, because they felt the program should be only in health, so there shouldn’t have been this independent council. In the beginning, the services were all in the health centers. But the health ministry instructed their staff that they should give low priority to family planning. So when a woman used to come with bleeding, they would say, Well, whoever inserted it, go back to that person. And there was this big tussle that also led to so many problems. And after two or three years, the head of the family planning council, who had in fact been the main implementer of the program, decided he would separate from health, which was not a good decision. I mean, the decision should have been to instruct the health ministry to cooperate rather than to set up a parallel structure. But anyway, at that time the government decided that this was such an important program, so they set up a parallel structure. Now, the parallel structure—many people sort of read “family planning clinic,” and many people didn’t want to be seen going to only a family planning clinic, which to this day exists. You know, they liked to go to a health place where they also get family planning. And so, this—

**Sharpless**  
Where people don’t see you walking in the door.

**Sadik**  
Right, right. So, you know, this was also a part of this conflict that was going on. So my job was, in fact, to look at how the program was, you know, planning included, evaluation, and oversight. And the training was great—planning the training needs, which I did, in fact, I think, rather well. Because
I planned training for ten years of all the disciplines that we needed, like in communication skills, in evaluation skills, research skills, management, and clinical technology. And I made a plan to send people in the program over a staggered period of time, over a period of like six, seven years, to do various things and they were to come back and do certain jobs. In fact, you know, we did such a good job of developing our human resources that those resources served us for twenty or twenty-five years, because the government, after I left in ’71, didn’t really do that kind of training. So we did training of a certain number of people abroad in many U.S. universities and the U.K., and then they would come back and train a certain number in the house and then many of them would go back with short-term training, back to the States. So it was quite an effective way of keeping up with new knowledge, new experience. And also included in that, which in fact, even the UN didn’t do very well at that time, was to send people to meetings so that they could learn from each other’s experiences. All these things became, like India afterwards, in the eighties, et cetera—that these were junkets and that people shouldn’t be allowed to go for training. After all, we could get training here. Shouldn’t be allowed to learn new technology. They might stay on outside, and things like that, with the result that you lose a lot of new knowledge that is coming and new experiences that you can get on an interpersonal basis. When you go to a meeting, it’s not just what is presented at the meeting, but what you learn from other people.

**Sharpless**  
Why was there this openness in the 1960s to this family planning?

**Sadik**  
I think that’s because the leadership at that time was very keen on Pakistan
being in the modern world and the finance minister—which happened to be [my father]—was a great believer, as I said, in education. So anything to do with education and knowledge and technology or science he thought was absolutely imperative for—

**Sharpless**

This is your father?

**Sadik**

That’s my father. (laughter) And the president was the same. And he was very keen on the family planning program.

**Sharpless**

Well, I know that you don’t want to extend this, but where do you think your father got his thinking on these ideas?

**Sadik**

I think from his father. From the stories—my grandfather died when I was maybe about eight, nine or something. I think he was also apparently a great, great one for education. Didn’t educate his daughter. He had only one daughter, who grew to adulthood but died as a very young adult, I think at the age of like twenty-four or something. But his sons were very well educated, and he himself was well educated, because he was a lawyer and a member of the municipality, which was apparently a big thing in those days. My grandmother used to tell stories of how my father and uncles used to always compete to do better than each other and how much desire they had for learning and how much they read. And so obviously, this was in that environment, though the family background was not—many people were not very well educated.

**Sharpless**

Uh-huh. So your father was part of—

**Sadik**

I think his father had something to do with it and my father extended it to all of his daughters, and not to just us—anyone who came to stay with us in
Calcutta, my cousins and all lived there. You know, people used to pull girls out of school—it didn’t matter if they missed school—and bring them home, because they never wanted to leave them. And so, he said, “Why are they here? Aren’t they supposed to be in school?” Oh, but they’re girls. So he said, “Oh, well, if they’re coming to my house, they will go to school.” So he used to put them in school and when they used to send young men to—you know, my second cousins, my first cousin, when they had matriculated through high school and get him a job, [my father] said, “What do you mean, a job? He has to go to college.” Then he would send people to college. So, our house was like a dormitory. We had so many people living [there] who were going to college, going to do this, I don’t know. And so, he was quite a fanatic about educating and also obviously very charitable, because he used up the house and our money to send people—his money to send people to school at college. Because his thing was that, you know, a nation cannot progress unless all its people are educated.

**Sharpless**

How much discussion of that was there in Pakistan in the sixties?

**Sadik**

About education?

**Sharpless**

Yes, and about progress.

**Sadik**

A lot. I think everyone was very idealistic and very optimistic. And in the sixties and seventies, actually we did very well economically and, I mean, every one was very gung-ho and doing something. So I think that was a good time. And for example, the tax structure—books were always tax free, regardless. So I mean, little things, like that was not a big thing. Not that many books were bought, but any printed material was tax free. No sales tax,
no nothing on it, as an encouragement to people to read and to buy books.

Sadik

Symbolic gesture. As I told you, in our house we always had such a lot of people going here and there so we never had our [own] rooms as children. We never had a room. We lived in one room but there was one room he would never allow anyone to have, a guest to have, which was the library. We had a library in which he had thousands of books and he said, when we sometimes complained, he said, “But your room is safe. This is your room. And any book in this room you can read. No book is prohibited. So, all books you can read.” So we read all the sex books, all the poetry books, all the literature, everything, whatever books he had. We read everything.

(laughs)

Sadik

Well, my mother used to say to me—when I went to medical school she said, because all her relatives would say, Why don’t you get her married? No one will marry her. She will be so old. I, in fact, graduated from medical school when I was not even twenty-two, but I was so old, who would marry me? So, my mother used to try to bribe me by offering clothes and jewelry, which I love still, and then I used to think about it and then say, “I'll be a doctor and buy my own.” (Sharpless laughs) You know, something like that. But the thing is, when I graduated from medical school, everyone was like I was this—I don’t know, somebody so much on a pedestal—any decision,
they have to ask Nafis. Anyone—they'll ask Nafis. I said to my mother, I said, “I don’t know what they think. I’ve just graduated from medical school. That doesn’t mean I know everything.” “No, no, no, but you know more than them.” I said, “Yeah, I know more than them.” But I mean, when new cars come, only I can drive. No one else can drive. (laughs) You know, silly things like this I remember. You know, status changes and then all my cousins were—my father was the eldest. They’re all younger than me. They’re all in professions. You know, I think it was his decision to open the way for so many others.

Sharpless

All the women are in professions?

Sadik

Many of them. My sister is not in a profession but went to college and finished. And my father got her in to college because she didn’t really want to be in college. She wanted to be married. And he used to say, “Chammo, all your brothers and your sister, they’re just technicians. You’re the only one getting an education,” because she was doing literature. And so she felt and bragged to me, “I’m educated and all of you are technicians.” Because we were all in professions.

Sharpless

So he would encourage her that way? That’s amazing.

Sadik

Yes, and got her through college. (laughter) And what’s more, my mother was not educated. When she got married, she was fifteen years old and I was born when she was like sixteen, or maybe even fourteen or fifteen. One doesn’t know because they didn’t even know their ages. But when I went to school at the age of six, my mother had a tutor from the time she was married to the time I went to school, who used to come from nine to four to
teach her every day. And if you met her, if you had met my mother, she died many years ago, you would never have known that she was not educated, that she hadn’t learned English in an English-speaking school, that she hadn’t been to college, because she was so well educated. I mean, for five years she was educated at home and that she agreed to be educated is a tribute to my mother.

Sadik: Yes, yes. She saw your father’s vision.

Sadik: Yes. And, you know, she adored my father, so I think whatever he thought she should do she was willing to do.

Sharpless: Uh-huh. Now, how did you meet your husband?

Sadik: We met in Karachi. He was an ADC [aide-de-camp] to the governor general, you know, he was like the president of the country at that time. This was under the British thing and he was an ADC, so that’s how I met him. And he became interested and then I think courted me for like a year and a half and finally came to propose. In those days relatives come and propose. So my father is supposed to have told my husband-to-be, “You know that she expects to work.” So he said, “Oh, don’t I know it. I hear it every day.” (laughs) And so, you know, from the beginning I think I made it quite clear that I was going to medical school and it was not that I was just doing this to pass my time. It was because I wanted a profession and I wanted to work, because as I told you, many girls went to medical school but then didn’t work after that. They just got married. You know, maybe they had intentions of working. So when I was [there], Dow Medical College had just started. I was the second batch to graduate from there and we had five girls with us,
and of the five girls, only two of us worked. The rest just got married and did not work. But gradually that percentage has increased over the years.

**Sharpless**

I’m trying to imagine what your husband’s relatives must have thought when they said, He’s engaged, but she’s going off to the United States.

**Sadik**

I think that he just told them, She’s gone to study, so therefore—I’m sure they must have been a bit surprised.

**Sharpless**

But he waited for you.

**Sadik**

Yes, yes.

**Sharpless**

Times were changing in Pakistan.

**Sadik**

Times were changing, slowly, but sometimes not always for the better. Up to the seventies they were for the better, but after the seventies, I think they’ve stayed static. One of the things that Pakistan has not done is invested in education, though in the early years of Pakistan, this was the mission, that we must have an educated and healthy population. But the economics of planning at that time—and we had this very prestigious Harvard group of planners—at that time it was always this trickle-down economics, that the economy must grow and then it will lift the social sectors, not that you invested in the social sectors, and that would help the economy. And they would always say, Well, these are the consuming sectors, health and education. And, you know, all reductions in expenditures were always made in these areas because they have a large recurring expenditure budget. They need people—health and education needs people. There’s not that much of a capital [expense]—I mean, there is if you put hospitals up, but for health centers and all, it’s not a huge capital expenditure. It’s really investing in the
recurring cost of the hospital supplies, the running of the hospital and the personnel. I mean, that’s the big cost. Also, you know, a very large part of Pakistan was very feudalistic, in the Punjab and all that. And many of them used to say, Well, if we educate our population, they’ll start to demand all kinds of rights. That was the same idea as far as women were concerned, that if you educate girls, they’ll get too big for their boots. You won’t be able to control them. So it denied them knowledge, and then you can control them. All the reasons one promotes education were the reasons that they wouldn’t invest in it. So some of it was deliberate and some of it was like this, you know, the budgetary, the restrictions, and then of course the enmity with India over Kashmir. We were constantly fighting wars, and wars cost a lot of money.

Sadik

So that began very early.

Sadik

That began in the sixties, yeah. Sixty-five was the first war. And then defense expenditures doubled. That’s why my father resigned in ’66. He said, “You know, the economy is the way to progress and the defense will look after itself.” He was very much against the war. And he said, “Whatever you might spend on the war will take you twenty times that number of years to get it back.” So then he resigned and came to the World Bank here. But from the sixties, both India and Pakistan have spent a huge amount of money on defense and consequently there was much less money to invest in the social sectors, which require a lot of recurring expenditure. In East Pakistan, for example, there were a lot of health centers, but they were not manned and there were no supplies. And even now in Pakistan, as I see in
many other developing countries, you build the infrastructure, you might even pay for staff, but then the supplies are not there. And somebody did a study, I think the Population Council, and I think concluded from some countries, I don’t remember the countries, that if you close down like 70 or 80 percent of the health centers, you would still give the same coverage, because only a few of the centers had supplies for the whole year. The rest had supplies for like two months or three months. So it was useless to have those centers. And you had this false impression that you were providing services to everyone, but in fact you were not.

**Sharpless**

That you were doing something. Let me change the tape.

*Tape 1 ends; tape 2, side 1, begins.*

**Sharpless**

All right. This is the second tape with Dr. Nafis Sadik on July 24. Okay, when you joined the Central Family Planning Council, what would you say were your greatest challenges?

**Sadik**

Greatest challenge was, first, to get people in the government to face up to unpleasant realities in order to deal with them. They felt that covering them up was the way to show success. And my view was, and is today also, that unless we face up to our own problems, we’re not going to make progress.

**Sharpless**

Are you referring specifically to the IUD or other things?

**Sadik**

Well, the IUD was one of the main things, but then you can’t say that your program is a great success and you have such a high prevalence level and all of that, because that’s not correct, because women have been removing them. You know, these were some of the big challenges. Secondly, many of the men were, in fact, really opposed to the program and we were not really
addressing how to get men on board. You know, we had a lot of discussions, but it was a problem I’m not sure we knew how to deal with it. And one [way] was to try to buy some of the local religious leaders and some leaders by giving them an honorarium every month and things like that. But if you stop giving that, well, then they came back to—so you were not changing attitude. Third was, there was a lot of misreporting because all the officials wanted to show that they were so successful and [focused on] how to get this idea out that reporting the truth was going to get you into trouble, because the attitude was that if you reported success, you were somehow responsible for doing it so well, and if you reported some problems, well, then you were personally responsible for the problems. And that’s an attitude that exists to this day in many of our societies, and I don’t think that has changed. Also, supervisors [needed] to accept that the problem may be an inherent problem, not the problem of the worker, and that you have to resolve it together. These are lessons that we still have not learned, but these were major problems. Fourth, that you know they’re not making the connections between the situation of women and trying to persuade them to use family planning. I think we never made the connection early in our programs that the status of women and their lack of decision-making authority and all that, autonomy, was a major factor in success or failure of the program. There were some who were going to do it regardless, but there were many who wouldn’t because they were not really autonomous and they were too scared of the social circumstances, of the social or family environment, to do very much about it. I think these are issues that are
coming out now. Maybe, you know, it was too much of a cultural thing, to take on so many issues. But, you know, these were some of the problems that we knew existed, but we ourselves didn’t want to articulate them too openly and publicly. And I think unless you articulate and state problems, you’re not going to deal with them. There’s the tendency to sweep them under the carpet. And the rich always got family planning. They had family planning. They did whatever was required. I mean, abortion is not allowed in Pakistan, but many rich people have abortions for their girls.

Sadik

How did they get them?

Sadik

Doctors perform them.

Sadik

In Pakistan?

Sadik

In Pakistan. They know which doctors do it and nobody is prosecuted. So, you know, these are the double standards that exist in the society and continue to exist. I mean, this is everywhere in the world. It’s not particular to Pakistan.

Sadik

Yes, yes. And so, it exists. Everywhere in the world where abortion is not allowed, this exists. And then violence within the home: a woman was just not recognized and not spoken about at all. And there was a lot of domestic sexual violence, which was just not addressed. You know, one knew it and yet didn’t say anything about it and nobody really thought about it too directly and it was not talked about at all. When it was talked about, it was also like what a terrible thing. It was just as if it was an isolated case, when in fact one knew that it was not so isolated. But again, these are all in
hindsight—much more visible than they were at that time.

**Sharpless**
I’m thinking about the woman who puts in the IUD and tries not to tell her husband.

**Sadik**
Well, you know, I myself had an experience. I was visiting a clinic doing a review of some clinic and I went to the clinic and there was this very irate man who had come in and he was shouting and whatnot, “How dare you put an IUD in my wife?” And then the wife said, “I want to have it removed.” I said, “But, you know, by law she’s allowed to have an IUD, because it’s her decision.” And we had put that in the guidelines and the rules. So anyway, she said no, now she wanted it out. So it was taken out. And then he said, “Now I give her permission, and you can put it in.” So, I mean, just an illustration of the kind of control men wanted to exert over their wives. And the wife then meekly came back in [after] the IUD had been removed and he said, “Now, I give you permission to put it in.” I wanted to donk him on the head. (laughs)

**Sharpless**
I was going to ask you how you would hold your tongue at these situations.

**Sadik**
I mean, what can you do? You really can't do anything. I told him, “You know, you’re subjecting your wife to torture.” He said, “But she has to learn to be a dutiful wife.”

**Sharpless**
How did you handle it when a man says to you—

**Sadik**
Well, there’s not much we can do—

**Sharpless**
“If she dies, I’ll get another wife?”

**Sadik**
Yeah, I mean, those are things that really shock you and you look very shocked. And needless to say, this man said, “Why are you looking so
shocked? There are plenty of women.” Or one man said, “I paid an amount for my wife.” You know, in the frontier they pay for their wives. “So, I lose my wife. Well, if I can’t use her sexually, than what use [is she] to me?” I wanted to say to him, Well, I’ll pay for your wife and you just leave her alone. But you can’t do that either. No, I mean, these are things we really are so shocked at and you just don’t know what the answer is.

**Sharpless**

You mentioned prevalence. How well were you all able to collect data?

**Sadik**

We had a very good survey, which was developed in collaboration with the Population Council. It was one of the best surveys that was designed at that time, in the late sixties, in fact, one of the first surveys of that kind. And in fact, you know, many universities use the data to analyze various things—North Carolina. Many people came from Pakistan and worked with people here who use the data [at the University of] California, Berkeley, and all that. So it was a very good survey, not done by us independently, but done by external people and internal, obviously, but very well designed, [and with] well-trained interviewers. After that I don’t think we’ve had any good national surveys. I mean, they do collect data, but that first survey was a very good survey. We showed—I can’t remember now, maybe 8 or 9 percent prevalence, which was not bad, you know, from starting from nothing—maybe 12 percent prevalence, and 90 percent knowledge of some methods of family planning. So in a few years that knowledge—because of this large number of field workers and organizing in the field, then community people and all that—that knowledge had spread very widely. And prevalence, because there was a huge latent demand, had very clearly had risen from
whatever it was, 1 percent, to 12 percent very rapidly. But then it stayed that way for a very long time. I don’t remember the data now from Pakistan.

**Sharpless**
There was a big initial jump and then it plateaued.

**Sadik**
And also the initial thrust of the program it was a very well-mounted program with a lot of—and after that the political leadership became so weak so then the people at the field level were not working as they were meant to be working.

**Sharpless**
How did you recruit the community workers?

**Sadik**
There was some criteria for the recruiting the—what were they called? I can’t remember—maybe the family health worker or something like that, that they had to come from the village. They had to have a certain number of years of education. I think in the beginning it was that they should be married but later that qualification was dropped because married people had more access. And most places you found some number. Some places you couldn’t have—if you couldn’t get the educational qualification required, then they dropped the education qualification. And in some places they just brought in someone from a neighboring community. But in a lot of places you found enough people to work. And you found one person then he or she would organize—there were always a male and a female worker so they were both organizing. The district person in the beginning was always a male. Then later it was also, you know, some number of female and district-type officers who did the supervision. But in the beginning it was, Oh, you can’t have a woman because she can’t be traveling around and, you know, the usual kinds of things, but gradually that has changed.
Did you travel by yourself?

I traveled a lot by myself, yes. And, you know, we used to have what were called local union councils. That was the local government. And union council leaders were also a part of the community leadership program. Many of them became quite active supporters in the early years of the family planning program. And then you had a male leader being active. It really was a very successful approach. Then we had many—I don’t know how many, but we had several religious leaders at the local level also as a part of the program, and they would give the—you know, the speeches in the mosque on Fridays would be in support of family planning or the health of children or mothers and that was also very effective.

How did you do that?

Some number wanted, in fact, family planning for their family so we said we would provide them family planning services but then they had to do something. And some of them were paid a retainer—not very much, just like a few dollars a month—to give sermons in the mosque.

I’m sorry. I should know this and I don’t. Is there mainly one kind of Islam in Pakistan?

No, mostly Sunnis but also Shias.

Okay, so it’s two kinds. One or the other more interested in family planning, or was it on both sides?

I think both are the same.

Okay, interesting. Well, you went from planning and training to the general oversight of the family—
Sadik

I got promoted to deputy director general of the family planning program and then became the director general, who was in charge of all the technical services and oversight of all the training all over the country, in fact, in charge of the program more or less between ’65 and ’71. And then in ’71, I left to join the UNFPA [United Nations Fund for Population Activities]. In fact, when the UNFPA was set up in ’69, I met the executive director then, Mr. Salas, at a meeting in Bellagio and there were many people from family planning programs. When he asked me to join the UNFPA, because he was looking for people, I said, “Oh, I have no intention of leaving Pakistan.” So, he said, “Oh, well, whenever you visit New York, come and see me.” So I visited New York, I think in the beginning ’71. I was going to North Carolina, so I decided to visit the UNFPA, because in ’70 they had come also to discuss a program in Pakistan. And so when I went to see him he said, “Oh, why don’t you join us?” again. “I’m searching for people who have had experience in family planning.” And obviously he had heard about me a little bit. And so anyway, I did go to the personnel office, because he had already arranged an appointment for me. And I had a real to-do with the personnel people, because they said, Oh, well, we would be willing to offer you a P4. And I wasn’t really looking for a job, so I said, “Oh, is that higher than a P5?” So, they said, Of course not; P5 is higher. So I said, “Why aren’t you offering me a P5, because I know a colleague of mine who is also director general in health, and he’s here at P5.” So, they said, Oh. But short of saying, You’re a woman and my age, someone said, “If you come in at P5 at this level, what do you expect to become, the head of the
organization?”—in this real aggressive way. So I said, “None of your business, but anyway, what’s wrong with my thinking about becoming the head of the organization?” Well, it was not my point of asking, to become the head of the organization, it was just why am I not being treated equally. Anyway, he said, “I’ll give you a P4,” and whatever. So I said, “Well, I’m not looking for a job and that’s it. Thank you very much.” So, I came back and told Salas no way was I accepting it. I was not looking for a job in any case. I was never going to accept a job which didn’t value me for what I was and was giving me a level lower than what I think I should be valued. And I just asked the question innocently. It just happened I knew that there was someone, a colleague of mine, who was a P5. He had mentioned it to me. So, when I came back, they offered me a job. I said, “Thank you, very much. I’m not interested in a P4.” Then they offered me again and they said, We’ll increase the steps. I said, “I’m sorry. I don’t really want the job and I’m never going to take it.” The UNDP resident representative, who represented the UNFPA also, said, “But you know, they are going up.” I said, “You know, Mr. Gritly”—he was a very nice Egyptian man—“I didn’t ask for the job, and besides, can you imagine working for an organization that discriminates before you even got in? So, I’m never going to.” Finally they offered me a P5, the P5 that they should have offered me in the first place. Then also I told Aly Gritly, I said, “I’m not taking it because it’s a matter of principle.” So, he said, “Oh, no, now we worked so hard on getting this P5.” Anyway, by this time the circumstances in Pakistan had changed also and Mr. Bhutto come into power and the whole program was not doing very
well, because there was not political support for—the program was really
down. So I thought—my husband and I discussed it and then we thought
that maybe it’s not a bad idea to go here, come here for a short time. And
the children were ready to go to universities, so then maybe it would be a
good thing for the family. But then I took it in October ’71, after the whole
year negotiating, with things going back and forth. I came at the end of
October to the UNFPA.

Sharpless

I was going to ask you. We haven’t talked about your children and how you
handled having children and doing what you’re doing.

Sadik

In Pakistan it’s not so difficult because, you know, you have a lot of help and
then you also live very close to where you work. So when the children were
young, I worked very close to where—and I used to come home to feed the
babies and all that. Not a problem. I also adopted two children—in fact, my
husband’s half-sister’s. When their mother died, the younger one, whom I
adopted first, was just a few months old and they didn’t know what to do
with this baby, so my own daughter was two months old also, so I decided
to bring her back. I had two babies, and then I took the elder sister when the
father died a few years later. So then I had five. I brought up five children.
But in Pakistan it was not so difficult. We had help at home and we had two
maid servants to look after the children.

Sharpless

But in the late 1960s and the early seventies, they were getting ready to go to
college, then?

Sadik

The older ones were going to be in high school, yes.

Sharpless

So you talked about it and then decided—
Sadik And then decided to come here, yes.

Sharpless Well, before we leave your work in Pakistan, what was the most satisfying part of that work for you?

Sadik Well, for the Pakistan program I also organized—I decided to invite the UN to do an evaluation of the program that would be an independent evaluation. And I got this idea because I had attended some meetings, so I persuaded the director general of the program that it would be a good idea to invite the UN to do an independent evaluation. So they agreed. So I wrote to the UN and asked them to send us a team to come and do an independent evaluation. And then with the help of the Pop Council I prepared the whole terms of reference of what they should look at and so on. Anyway, the team came with Sir Ronald Walker from Australia, an ambassador and I don’t know what else, if he had any high rank, as the head of the team, and people from various organizations. And then the report wouldn’t come. Two months passed, three months passed, and then everyone was getting very upset with me. What happened to the report? They sent us a draft, which we corrected, but we didn’t change anything, and sent it back again. And so, finally I was sent to New York to find out what happened to the UN report, because by this time Pakistan started to say that this must be a terrible program and they are just hiding, you know, suppressing the report. So when I came here, that’s when I discovered how the UN has so many conflicts. They had the conflict, the UN, because our program, by that time, was a vertical program. And the WHO wanted to recommend that it must be—that this was a big, total disaster and a big failure and a big mistake, but the
health person that they had was someone from the Caribbean, who said no, that in the circumstances of Pakistan, he's seen the health services and they’re so bad that it was wiser to have this vertical program. The vertical program, in fact, did much better. And that would be the nucleus for the development of the health system, rather than the other way around. And over this conflict WHO would not let the report be released. But I said, “It was not WHO’s report to release or otherwise. It was the request from the government of Pakistan to come and do an evaluation. You are supposed to report to us, not to WHO or to anyone else.” They said, Oh, but this is the UN system. There was a Mr. Carl Friesen present from the UN who was in ESCAP, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. He was in charge of this project and he kept saying, “There’s nothing I can do, Nafis, because this is the UN.” I said I didn’t know much about the UN. I said, “The UN has a bad reputation. I mean, also you are making us look bad. We’ve been very open. I don’t care what you say in the report. If the WHO wants to say that, fine, they should say that. But they cannot override their own expert’s opinion. The expert is convinced that we are on the right track.” We had many recommendations of how to improve, but on this matter of principle what he said was eventually this should be an integrated program and part of health, but at this moment, the separate program was the right approach, but WHO couldn’t allow that. It took like seven months for the report to come out. But the report was very good because we had done many good things and it commended us and made some recommendations on how to group the oversight and the training and
participation and so on. But on balance, it was a very positive report for us. I was very happy with that. But the fact that it came out seven months later made people always suspicious that we had doctored it. And I was so angry. There had been no doctoring. We had not put pressure on anyone except to show them, and [we] had done an enormous amount of work. I prepared, I don’t know, one thousand questions for them that we wanted answered in different—you know, arranged them by sectors. Spent a lot of time doing all that. And then to have this. So I was very pleased with the report but I was also very sad that it didn’t come—it could’ve come out three months earlier, or four months earlier, and would have been such a good thing. And instead the UN, in their own internal bickering, domestic fighting, made us look bad. So this was my first experience with the UN, a little bit before I came to UNFPA.

**Sharpless**

Between the report and the personnel office, it’s amazing that you decided to join.

**Sadik**

(laughs) Yes. I thought that if I come here, I’ll be able to help to take care of some of these problems. Because also, when they came to discuss the program in Pakistan, we had a discussion with the deputy and we agreed on the program. And then nothing was happening. No money was being released. No projects were—and every area they put another—there was a discipline mentioned and then they would mention UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization] and I said, “What has UNESCO got to do with it?” Because we had a population education program in the schools, for example. And so, they put population education
school—we had an out-of-school program, all before the UN ever came on the scene. We had it with trade unions, in agriculture colleges, with employers’ union, you know, with many different professional associations. We had a very well-constructed program. So we already had education in these, and where possible, also services, but didn’t realize when the UNFPA negotiated the program, it put every agency in it. So the ILO [International Labor Organization] was put in for the trade union. Then the FAO [Food and Agricultural Organization] as put in for the agriculture colleges, and UNESCO was put in for the population education in the school system. The UN was put in for statistics and data and research, and WHO was put in for health. Then they said that WHO has to come back and said, We’ve never asked WHO to come or we’d never asked ILO, whoever else. “No, but you see it’s in this—the labor, then it means ILO.” So I came here, was sent here again. We negotiated the program, what’s happening. So then I understood. I said, “You know, this is not the way to operate.” Because we were one of the first programs of UNFPA, because we were one of the few countries with a program—Egypt and, I think, Pakistan. I said, “But this is not how we understood it. We negotiated with UNFPA, not with ten other organizations and now we have to deal with ten people coming and each one sending a specialist paid out of our program funds.” So I thought, you know, these are things that really have to be addressed. And then all the money can be used only for external buying of things or payment of things, nothing internally. I said, “Most of the program is inside the country. So if you have money only for things that can be bought outside, then it’s only for supplies
and consultants. What else can you buy outside? There’s nothing else that we can buy outside. Some training—that’s not we want to up the program. I mean training, yes, but a lot of the program is all inside the country and even training is also inside the country.” So I thought that this is from lack of knowledge of what countries actually need, and I thought if I came to UNFPA, one, it would give me a broader scene, and secondly also it was for personal reasons. My children were ready to go to university.

Sadik

Sharpless

Let me make sure I understand. When you said UNFPA had a program in Pakistan—

Sadik

Yes, financial program.

Sharpless

Financial program, okay. Explain to me exactly what that was.

Sadik

UNFPA came to negotiate assistance to a program in Pakistan. The first program was, I don’t know, two million dollars for five years, or something like that.

Sharpless

Okay, but there wasn’t anything—

Sadik

—which would be in this area.

Sharpless

But there wasn’t anything you could spend it on?

Sadik

No, then it’s supposed to be in these areas which we agreed on, et cetera. Then it was like it cannot be for local costs. It had to be for external costs. So what were the external costs? Well, gradually they changed all that, because there wasn’t that much external cost in programs of getting education in the trade union system or in agriculture colleges, that when you couldn’t bring an expert from outside to deal with an agricultural college in Pakistan, you had to have something in Pakistan. Maybe a specialist in
population education, but then you could have one specialist and he or she
can do it all. Don’t have to have a special one for each area. But we had to
have one for the ILO program for the UNESCO—you know, in school you
can understand, yes, but for everything else you didn’t need a specialist to
come and do population education.

Sharpless

Now, you’ve mentioned the Pop Council a couple of times.

Sadik

They were one of the pioneers in Pakistan, even before we had the program.
They were people who were advocating that Pakistan and India at that
time—remember, Coale and Hoover had done that population study of, I
think, India and Asia and something like that. And the population
projections were so horrendous, and so at that time the whole thinking was
that population growth was going to be a big problem and a big issue in
developing countries and what would be the solution in family planning
then. You know, how to get fertility down, and then family planning was
considered a solution. In fact, that was one of the things that put family
planning into disrepute, because family planning really started for the health
and rights of women, not as a demographic objective. But even with
Margaret Sanger, it acquired a little bit of a demographic objective and, of
course, the means are the same to both ends: a demographic goal but also,
you know, self-empowerment and planning and improving the health are the
same goals. It’s a question of what you push. Family planning associations
push the goal of health for women, reducing maternal mortality, not the
rights of women so much in the beginning. But this, of course, later in the
eighties and nineties, the rights of women became more important.
Uh-huh. Now, who else is working in Pakistan besides the Pop Council?

Ford Foundation was there. In fact, in the sixties, when I joined the family planning program, I wrote to a lot of donors to give some assistance to us, including the U.S. and Canada. Sweden was the only country that was giving some assistance. They had two projects in Pakistan. One was called Johns Hopkins Project, but it was in fact financed by Sweden. And then there was another project in the Sinda area. It was a training institute. The first one in Nahal that I mentioned had also education, communications and all that.

Then I wrote to all of these donors and the U.S. said they didn’t have any policy to support family planning at this time. This was not part of the—but the health advisor in Pakistan gave us money from the population program from local funds, which were called PL-480, from the sale of grains, you know, to Pakistan that repayment had to be in Pakistani rupees and that money was given to the U.S. and they had some say in its use. So from those PL-480 funds [the health advisor] did as much as he could to help us. I wrote to Canada and the Canadians said, Well, at this time this was politically very sensitive, and therefore they didn’t accept—so, the UK the same. Most donors didn’t accept supporting family planning in the sixties, when we first started, except for Sweden. It was only later in the seventies that all the donors started to come, gradually, into the program.

So, Population Council was really in the forefront then.

Population Council was very much. You know, John D. Rockefeller III talked about population as a very important world issue and set up the Pop Council just for that. And they did many seminars in Pakistan, in India, and
many other places, in Korea, in Kenya. And these were the countries which had the initial family planning programs.

**Sharpless** Uh-huh. What was it like working with the Americans on that?

**Sadik** Well, they were very good, except sometimes they were very idealistic. I mean, they would think that you bring in all the midwives and have conferences. The midwives are not very well educated. They don’t even know what a conference means. So, you know, it took some education. But it was a very collegial group. I think we all worked well. But we had a lot of experts—who, many of them, learned, I think, on the job—but many of them actually did give us very good advice, and they had technical knowhow of how to set up education or communications programs. What it needed was adaptation to the local needs and local developmental levels.

**Sharpless** Is there anything else about the Family Planning Council in Pakistan that we need to talk about before we shift to the United Nations?

**Sadik** No, I think we’ve done enough of that.

**Sharpless** Okay. So you and your husband talked about it, decided that this might be a good time to move to the United States with the children, and despite the previous unpleasantness with the United Nations, you decided to take the job.

**Sadik** (laughs) Yeah, but, you know, Salas was a very good man. I really liked him, the executive director. And then I met many of the people that had come to negotiate the UNFPA program, and they were also very nice. Also I knew a lot of people in the UN already from my previous contact and from going to meetings and conferences. The only organization I had some difficulty
with was WHO, because the WHO disapproved of my being hired by UNFPA. On file, they said that no doctor can be hired by any organization except WHO. Can you believe that? But they changed after me, obviously. But this is a letter in my personnel file from them. And Salas said yes, they had written to him, and he said he was going to hire anyone he thought was good for his program.

**Sharpless**

Was WHO exceptionally territorial?

**Sadik**

Very territorial.

**Sharpless**

More so than the other related agencies?

**Sadik**

I suppose so. I think, on this also, WHO was so late in coming to family planning and I think they always felt guilty. They had Dr. Candau, who’s a Brazilian, who was anti–family planning because he was Catholic. So, can you imagine a technical organization like WHO being anti–family planning and keeping it like that? Because he was there for eighteen years. And it was only when he left that WHO started to become active. They wouldn’t even have a family planning unit in WHO. They called it the division of human reproduction, or something like that. So, it had to have another term, and they did only research—didn’t support services. It was only after he left that WHO started to change and even then took a while to change.

**Sharpless**

I realize you were in Pakistan but, as you understand it, what led to the creation of the UNFPA?

**Sadik**

Well, we had some missions from the UN first of all set up an international population institute or something like that. Then there was a General Draper, who—
Uh-huh, General William Draper.

Yes, who came to visit Pakistan. We had a conference in 19—he came on a visit the first time, and I looked after him. In fact, it was said he was quite impressed because all the flights in Pakistan arrive at two o’clock in the morning and I was designated to look after him and I got quite friendly with him. Then I’d organized a major conference in Pakistan in 1969, and then he brought a whole lot of people to the conference. But the first time that he came, I think it was 1967 or ’68, he told me that he was trying to get the U.S. government to urge the UN to set up a UN population fund, because the UN had always had a population division, which did research, analysis, population projections. But the governments didn’t want any operational programs and no involvement in the UN in an area which they called political. I think General Draper worked very hard with the U.S. government and the U.S. government managed to persuade other donors to join Europeans and said that whoever made the first contribution to the UNFPA—which was the name of the organization, it was UN Fund for Population Activities, I mean, it was a very strange name—that they would match every contribution. So Denmark was the first country to make a contribution to the UNFPA. I’m not sure how it went through the UN. It must have gone through the UN—was it a decision in the ECOSOC [Economic and Social Council] or somewhere. It must have been a decision. I’ve never seen a decision on the setting up of UNFPA. But I know General Draper had a lot to do with it. And in fact, even with my joining the UNFPA, Mr. Salas is the person who asked me—the director—but General
Draper also encouraged me to join the UNFPA and said that the UNFPA would do well to have me and, you know, he was very friendly with me.

**Sharpless**

Just as a little side line here, tell me about General Draper. His name comes up a lot, as you can imagine.

**Sadik**

Yes, well, you know, he was very active with the U.S. government. He was also very active with parliamentarians and his contacts in Japan, for example, because he’s very revered in Japan.

**Sharpless**

For his work after the war.

**Sadik**

After the war. Kishi was no longer prime minister, but [Draper] persuaded him to lead a delegation of parliamentarians to look at population issues in Bangladesh and in East Pakistan at that time, and—no, Bangladesh, India—and so managed to get them. Then he took a delegation of Germans to visit programs. So he worked hard on getting all these countries to join. Because in the beginning there were just a few countries that had joined to contribute and I think the UNFPA funds were like two and a half million or something like that. Then he worked hard to persuade everyone else to join. And he was a very enthusiastic and very well-connected person in the U.S. government and in the U.S. administration. So he was extremely, extremely influential in the U.S. I think that he also persuaded many of the businesses, like Xerox and others, to increase their contribution to the IPPF and others, so that funds for family planning would grow in all kinds of ways. He worked tirelessly. When he had a cause he used to just go constantly, tirelessly working and trying to persuade. And I remember when I joined the UNFPA, whenever he came to New York, he used to come to my office
first and I used to say to him, “But you shouldn’t come to me first. You should go to the executive director.” He said, “No, I am coming to see you as a friend. Now tell me what ideas you have. How should this organization”—and I always had some ideas of how the organization—because the organization in the beginning was not organized. It didn’t have units or anything. And we were just a bunch of people and each one did their thing—and what would you do if you could have a real functioning organization? So I drew him a chart on paper: this is how I would structure it. So he said, “Oh, can I take this. And I said, “But you can’t use my name, because it’s just my idea. I don’t know who else agrees or disagrees with it.” But he used to push it then with people, because you could see how others in senior positions then were starting to push this as an idea. He was a remarkable man. I mean, he talked to everybody and he was friendly with everyone, and talked to everyone at his level. I mean, they were the same level as he and if anyone had any ideas, he was very open to discussion and to listening to them. I think that’s how he was so successful, because he was not full of his own importance. He was very much a person of people and thought that everyone had something to contribute. I think that was his real, real strength. And then when he got committed to this issue he was really committed. I mean, no opportunity did he miss to push it.

**Sharpless**  
Boundless energy—as you say, tireless.

**Sadik**  
Tireless, tireless, absolutely tireless.

**Sharpless**  
Well, when you came to New York, what did you expect your work to be? What was your job description?
Sadik: Well, my job description was anything that I was instructed to do, literally. It was not much of a job description. So when I came here, the deputy executive director was in Geneva, so he asked me to stop over in Geneva, and I said, “You know, I’ve got so many children, I can’t stop over in Geneva.” But anyway, I did. And he said, “Now, when you go there, you must call on all your friends.” Because I knew a lot of people in the population field, like our friends in Pop Council and the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation and the UN and all that. So, I said, having called on them, then what? He said, “Well, then you must establish a relationship with them.” I said, “Well, I already have a relationship so what will I do with them?” He said, “Then the executive director has some ideas that he wants you to implement.” Anyway, I came here first to get my house and this, that and the other. Then Salas said that he wanted me to organize a conference on private sector and family planning, because the private sector had started to move out of family planning. And so, I set about to do that. And of course, I called on the UN first, and they said, But why are you organizing this meeting? And I said, “Well, because I’ve been asked to do that.” They said, Oh, but that’s not the role of UNFPA. It’s to fund the people they should be asking.” And the director of the population division was a friend of mine, Mr. Matsuda, and he was very polite, but everyone else was extremely rude. So, he said, “You know, this is territorial. You are supposed to be just a funding organization.” I said, “Funding or not, this is what I’ve been asked to do. I will do it, regardless of what anyone says.” So then anyway, I went around meeting everyone and I knew lots of donors and
I knew them as the head of—like DANIDA, the head of the Danish Development Agency. I knew the head of the agency. I knew the head of Swedish SIDA. I didn’t know anyone—not too many people below, because those were the people that visited Pakistan. So I decided to invite them all to this conference, including the [World] Bank and whatnot. And lo and behold, everyone accepted and Salas was very impressed. He never said to me, You, at your level, cannot write off these letters. So already you could see that he was—though someone in the UNFPA did say to me, “But, you know, you are not supposed to sign those letters.” So, I said, “But I’m the one who knows them, so if somebody else signs them they’re not going to come.” And I can say in this that I am organizing this conference for UNFPA. Anyway, I think all the UN people were so shocked that there was this conference, with all these people coming to the meeting, that they decided that they wanted to work with me. These are all dynamics that you don’t know anything about and you just go about doing your work. And I invited some private sector people. Not all of them came, but I think someone from Wyeth did come, and someone else. The idea was also to get them to do more in contraceptive supplies and development, because they were all moving out. And that we never got accomplished, but that conference did take place. I can’t remember, I think it was in ’72—March or something. And I remember there was a *New York Times* reporter called Kitty Telsch, and she did an interview of me in the *New York Times* and in fact, that was a very big thing and everyone was so impressed that my name was appearing in the *New York Times* and I thought, what was the big deal in
this? And even Salas said, “How did you know her?” I said, “I didn’t know her. She came to the conference and I invited her to the conference.” Why I invited her, I’m not sure. So whoever I could think of, I invited to the conference and then she did this interview, and apparently I was told later that Salas had been trying to get the New York Times to do something for him. But, you know, he was a very nice man. He never said to me, How come you got this interview and why didn’t you send her to me? And his reaction was that she’s obviously someone who can get things done. And so, he was the one who gave me all the opportunities inside of UNFPA. So when they started to reorganize UNFPA, then he made me the director of what was called the projects division, to the chagrin of some of my colleagues who said they were senior to me. And he said, “Well, senior or not, I have to get someone who can get the job done.”

Sharpless Before you became chief of the projects division—that was in 1973, I believe—

Sadik Yes.

Sharpless —what else did you do?

Sadik At that time then they gave me the deal with all the projects that we have with the agency.

Sharpless But before that you organized the conference and other things that you worked on?

Sadik Other things. That’s what I’m saying. They gave me all the projects that had to deal with the agencies to work on because, you know, we had a program—we also financed all the agencies for their family planning work.
So I had to go look at all the WHO [projects]—and I wrote copious notes on all of them, what should be and should not be funded. But in fact, the deputy executive director had already agreed that all of them should be funded. And I said, but these ones should—why shouldn’t—for example, there were many WHO things. And I said, “But why should we fund this? That should be WHO’s own work.” For example, maternal mortality, they were not doing any work on it. They should finance it. That’s part of health. I mean, several things of that kind. Then there was this program of human reproduction research, HRP, Human Reproduction Program, after training and research, which was to be funded by other donors, also directly to WHO. And my comment was that if the donors want to finance a program in WHO, then we don’t need to finance that program also. Why should we? Otherwise donors should all send their money through us, if they want us to finance WHO. But why should we finance something that they’re already financing, because the same donors give us money? That was my logic. And, ugh, that created a big uproar. But the donors want us to finance it because we are a population fund. I said, “Well, ask the donors why are they then financing WHO? If they want us to finance it and have oversight, then they should give us the money.” And Salas was very impressed with this logic. He said, “She’s absolutely right. We must not allow anyone else to get population funds.” The WHO thing was already done, because otherwise what is the relevance of us being a funding agency if funds go everywhere else in the UN system directly for population work? And I think that later after that you see that any funds that were given to the UN, any part of the
UN, came through the UNFPA, because there’s no logic to having a
UNFPA and then also financing other places directly. It’s just making a
mockery, so to speak, and fragmenting an organization that you had set up.
It wasn’t like I was against WHO, but I had already got—because I had
already said many things about WHO and looked at the way they operate,
they thought I was anti-WHO, but in fact, I was not. It was just the logic or
the lack of logic of financing something with heavy donor finances. But this,
of course, was commonplace. I mean, all the donors fund something, then
they say the Bank and the UN and all must finance. And I kept saying,
Either the donors [should] finance something directly, or they [should]
finance it through the UN system. Why should they have control over the
UN program, and yet expect the UN to be responsible and do all the
reporting on their behalf, when they are also there trying to control it? They
decide which projects will be financed by whom. Well, they can do that
through a central agency so that the agency can look at and make sure that
every part of the program is funded. But, you know, that has not changed. It
continues to this day and I still continue to say to donors that I think this is
very illogical.

**Sharpless**

Well, maybe that would be a good place for us to stop today. I can release
you for you next appointment.

**Sadik**

Oh, good, good.

**Sharpless**

Yeah. And I'll see you in the morning.

*end Interview 1*
Interview 2

Today is July 25, 2003. My name is Rebecca Sharpless and this is the second oral history interview with Dr. Nafis Sadik. The interview is taking place at her home on East Fifty-sixth, in Manhattan. It’s part of the Population Pioneers Project being sponsored by the Hewlett Foundation. Okay, Dr. Sadik, thank you for squeezing me into your busy schedule this morning. I know you’re about to head out to Washington, D.C., for several days. When we left off yesterday, you had been at the United Nations for a couple of years. You had successfully done a conference on funding. What was on it?

Sadik Private sector and involvement in family planning.

Sharpless Yeah. And shortly, maybe not too long after that, you were appointed as chief of the projects—

Sadik Projects division.

Sharpless Yeah, at the United Nations Fund for Population. What did that entail?

Sadik Well, you know, before that, every individual had sort of a portfolio for a few projects. But now they were trying to put some order and organize it by regions and by subjects and have a unit that processed the project request and a technical unit which would also then review, and then the projects unit would implement or oversee the implementation. So that was one of the first reorganizations, in a sense expanding gradually the fund staff and resources. Also when I joined the UNFPA, we had six field people. But the field people were not representing UNFPA, because initially the fund was set up in the UN. And so, the UN population division had six field advisors paid by this fund. So, when UNFPA was transferred to the UNDP, so to speak, for
oversight and management and became totally operationally independent, so to speak, of the UN secretariat, the staff didn't come back. So it was a very strange arrangement, where staff was drumming up programs in the field to be funded by us, unknown to us. So that was the second thing—that when we put the chief—I mean, we reorganized into a project unit and a policy unit. Then we also had to fight a battle to get our own field people back to be with UNFPA. And it was so long ago I don’t remember exactly how it was done, but anyway, it was managed because the governments also agreed that that made much more logic and sense. The funding of the UNFPA also started to increase gradually as we financed more programs. Donors also gave us more money and I think by now we were like ten million dollars—you know, not very much, but still. And the U.S. was still matching every grant, so it was a 50 percent donor. But we had no intergovernmental oversight, as there was in the UN system. Then the executive director, at that time Mr. Salas, decided that he would set up an international advisory board to be composed of the donors, plus representatives from the regions from the developing countries to advise us. So this high-level board was set up. And this was then also later tasked to look at what kind of an intergovernmental structure should be set up to oversee the work of the UNFPA, you know, what kind of a board in the UN setup. And the recommendation of this board was that we should also report to what was the UN Development Program, the UNDP board, since we were a fund managed in the UNDP. And at that time, all the UNDP representatives were in fact also the UNFPA representatives as well, even though we had field
staff, by this time maybe eight or ten, field people. But they were in the
office up there, resident representative, and he or she was in charge of the
program and in fact made all the decisions. And there was always this
tension between the UNFPA and the resident representatives who were
directed by the UNDP. Many of them in Latin American countries, even
some of the African countries, were not very good advocates for population
policies. And family planning was a difficult subject. I remember I wanted to
visit Brazil, because it's one of the largest countries and the NGO, the IPPF
affiliate NGO, was very active. And they were saying that there was a huge
demand for family planning. In fact, in the country women could only resort
to caesarian and then sterilization in order to end childbearing. There was no
other method available. And oral pills, which were now available, were
distributed rather surreptitiously. So we decided that Brazil was a good place
to have a program. And when I went there, the resident representative didn’t
even want me to meet the government. Said, “Oh, but this is a Catholic
country and didn’t I know it and didn’t we do our homework?” And I said,
“But, you know, the whole idea is to convince governments that these are
important programs for the benefit and welfare of people, and especially of
women.” At that time, of course, women didn’t figure in the equation at all.
So, I’m just saying that in the history of the UNFPA, we had to fight a lot of
battles and some of them inside the UN system itself, because family
planning was a sensitive subject and not a subject which many of the staff
members were willing to speak out on and be advocates for. The general
climate was that you must keep within whatever, so to speak, the cultural
and social norms of the country were, regardless of what international
principles had been agreed by the same governments, like human rights. In
1969, the Human Rights Convention [had] agreed [that] everyone had the
right to plan their own families. But, you know, these conventions were not
well known and not well implemented at the country level. Also, when
UNFPA was first set up, there were just a handful of countries that were
interested in family planning or population policies. And these were, like
India, many in the subcontinent had started programs before the UN ever
came into existence, before donors ever thought about supporting family
planning—like Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh now, which was part of
Pakistan at that time. Korea, Singapore, Kenya, Ghana, Colombia had a
private sector program that was very active. There was a very strange
combination of countries that had programs, but it was just a very few. And
in the African region, there was this view that, We Africans are poor, but we
have this huge continent, which we need to populate, and this is a conspiracy
of the western countries to reduce our numbers and—

Sadik

Right. And also, that we have—the Sudan—I remember visiting Sudan and
Sudanese government was telling me, Well, we are the granary of Africa and
we can be the granary of the world. And look at the huge famines they’ve
had there. So, what the UNFPA had decided was that we didn’t pursue any
particular policies for a government, but we did promote family planning as
part of welfare, health. And we decided that we would help countries to
understand their situation better. And in Africa, countries didn’t really know

Sharpless

The old eugenics argument.
their demographic situation. Many had become independent quite late. They
didn’t know the exact numbers in their population. So we decided to fund a
huge program called the African Census Program. And we funded the first
round of censuses totally. And that produced the first set of figures. But
even then, you know, it was not easy to convince countries based on the data
there. Demographers using various methodologies would predict their
growth rates were going to be high. They wouldn’t understand it until we did
the second round of the censuses in the eighties, where a lot of countries
suddenly discovered that in ten years the population number that they were
quoting of ten years ago was almost going to be doubled, or one and half
times or whatever. And they really got a shock at their rates. And also the
fact that the UN was seen as not politically motivated—as objective and
independent and not having any particular ideology.

**Sharpless**

Was it?

**Sadik**

That was so, yes. So they gradually started to accept the importance of family
planning as a health measure, as the rights of women. So, many countries
had family planning to reduce maternal mortality, to reduce their high
incidence of abortion. This was, in fact, the case in many Latin American
countries. Our first program in Latin America was signed with Chile. And it
was to reduce their very high incidence of abortion, because they had done a
study which showed that 90 percent of the obstetrical hospital beds were
occupied by illegal abortions. And I don’t know, 70 percent of the blood
transfusion supply was used to look after the complications. This was a
major WHO-sponsored study and had a great impact in Chile, and then also
in other countries of Latin America. So Chile was one of the first countries
to sign an agreement. Mexico was the second in Latin America, but they had
both a demographic objective and an objective to reduce maternal mortality.
The third country was Cuba, which in fact, with its communist ideology—
people are a resource and mothers were often given medals for eight and
nine children. Not in Cuba so much, but in Russia, and all that. But there it
also was to reduce abortion, to reduce maternal mortality, and to reduce
adolescent pregnancy. You know, Cuba has a very good health system and
very good health indicators, and the indicators in this reproductive field were
bringing down their overall indicators, and they became quite concerned
about that. So we had the program with Cuba, mainly for social objectives.
But by the 1980s, every country in the world had a family planning program.
And that was a huge remarkable success for the UN, because this happened
in the course of, like, ten years—to change policies of 80 percent of the
world’s population, literally.

**Sharpless**
Let me interrupt you and ask how much, in those early days—how much
influence did the Vatican have?

**Sadik**
There used to be strange allies in the Intergovernmental Executive Board—
Brazil, the Vatican, Russia. But the Vatican was not so vocal because there
were governments that were already sort of speaking for their cause. The
Vatican started to become very vocal after the 1984 conference—or at the
1984 conference.

**Sharpless**
Mexico City.

**Sadik**
Yes. Obviously, they already had an entrée into the Reagan administration.
And also, the subject of the rights of women came on the table and the need to address abortion. So I think that in 1974, at the Bucharest conference, where I was also, the Vatican was very active in the deliberations at the international conference. And we spent the whole night debating a sentence which was that all—the recommendation first read that all individuals had the right to have the information and the means to decide on the spacing and the number of their children, or something like that. The Vatican, and many other governments with them, wanted that individual to be replaced by couples. That is the basis of all their arguments, is [that] couples make decisions, which means, of course, in the developing world, women don’t make the decision. And there was a big fight on this. And finally, the compromise was all couples and individuals. So, I mean, it’s the silliest compromise, and everyone asks, What does this mean, couples and individuals? Aren’t couples composed of individuals? Yes, but so that’s what happened in 1974. And in 1974, the Vatican was on the side of those that said family planning programs should not be a responsibility of governments and should not be provided by governments. They needed to just eradicate poverty and development and then everything else will take care of itself. So obviously there was some flaw in the argument. Why were they against family planning if they didn’t have any influence or effect? In the 1984 conference, women were mentioned very fleetingly. There’s a small section on women, but it’s not very strong on women’s rights in the reproductive health area and reproductive decisions. And in that way—in that conference, one of the recommendations was to—in countries where it was legal, the
UN should provide—or support should be provided. And that was the big fight. And the whole section on abortion was ruled even though countries like India, China, the U.S. itself, allowed abortion for any reason. But this was the Reagan administration era and they managed to get that out. The compromise was—the U.S. exerted huge pressure on capitals around the world. And that then was deleted from the conference. And even then there were some problems on migration issues and this was, you know, Israel and the U.S. And there were lots of votes, but the U.S. lost on that. I mean, everybody voted for the recommendation. I don’t even remember now, even though there was such a big fight on the recommendation. It was just the rights of people in occupied territories or something. Which is—

**Sadik**

The Palestinians.

**Sadik**

Right, right. But it was somehow—I don’t know that it was recognizing something other than—I don’t know what. Anyway, there was this huge fight and the conference almost could not come to an agreement, but then in the end it went to a vote. The U.S. asked for a vote, which is really not done in conferences, and lost. But then, they did join the consensus. They didn’t decide to walk out of the meeting. By that time, the U.S. contribution had declined from 50 percent to like a third, 33 or 35 percent, something like that. And in the budget, the U.S. budget, there was an amount of, I think, 45 million dollars for the UNFPA. And the amount—we had to write a letter that we did not support abortion as a method of family planning and that was one of the lines that was put there, that abortion is not a method of family planning and must not be promoted as a method of family planning.
And we had to sign an affidavit that we did not support abortion for family planning. The U.S. administrator at that time released 35 million but withheld 10 million in order to see what our program would be in. That’s when our China difficulties started. Because a program is approved in the executive board. Obviously the U.S. is a member, and it was approved by everybody. Then they started to say that no, our program specifically promoted coercion and abortion. So the GAO was sent [in to investigate] and they came back and said, no, our program did not support [coercion and abortion]. Of course, the national policy was such that it promoted this, but our program was not—and then that 10 million dollars was withheld in 1985. And then the next year that same thing, that, you know, the reason for which the 10 million was withheld, was continued to withhold all the money for UNFPA. In fact, we tried to accommodate USAID. USAID, in fact, wanted to be as helpful as they could—tried to help us to maybe rearrange the program and talked also to the Chinese behind the scenes. They were quite accommodating to UNFPA. They kept saying to us, I hope you’re not being influenced by the U.S., but of course we were. But it was an attempt to get the resources. But the U.S. administration, regardless—I mean, they didn’t want to know the truth, so the goal posts kept changing. You agreed, okay, we’ll try to get the Chinese to agree to do this. Spent a lot of time, managed to get them to agree. When you brought that back, No, this was not enough. Now you have to do this. And it was very soon quite apparent that these were just excuses and we were just spinning our wheels for nothing at all. So we just decided to continue. Salas was very, very
disappointed, because Philippines was a country which was very close to the U.S. and he was very close to the U.S. and he was personally really, really disappointed and dejected about that loss.

Sharpless

Could I back up and let’s talk a little bit about the Bucharest Conference. How involved were you in planning the Bucharest Conference?

Sadik

Not at all, not at all. UNFPA, in fact, was not involved at all. It was done by the UN Population Division totally. The secretary general was somebody from the outside. A Mexican gentleman was appointed secretary general. Can’t remember his name. So our executive director was not involved. I mean, often we were not—we went to Bucharest and we were very active there, because obviously it was of interest to us, but we were not involved at all in the planning. But when the 1984 conference time came, then, you know, I think we made some effort. Salas made some effort to make sure that UNFPA had a role and finally the secretary general decided that he would appoint Salas as the secretary general for the conference. So he was appointed—and so, for that conference we had some involvement, though even that was a strange arrangement. He was the secretary general. The deputy secretary general was the director of the population division and they were tasked with the responsibility for preparing the document for negotiation. And so, you know, we sort of had to fight to be influential in the document. Salas was supposed to fundraise and get countries to come to the conference, but the substantive part, and this has always been the tussle, that the substantive areas were the responsibility of the population division. Now, the division is very good in demography but not good on population
issues and needs of countries, because it doesn’t work at the country level. Because by this time the UNFPA had quite a large number of field officers and programs now in almost every developing country, and we were quite knowledgeable about what is required, desired, and was going on in the field. So in the preparation of the conference, we had—didn’t have as much—we had, in fact, very little influence in the content of the ’84 conference, but did try to influence governments in a certain way by giving them information about what was happening. And the developing countries were very keen on population policies, on family planning programs—not on abortion, which is a controversial subject, but on all the other issues they were more influenced by UNFPA than any other UN organization, for obvious reasons—because we were working there. So when the 1994 conference was being planned, then the secretary general thought about how he should organize it and then decided that, as in the last conference, that they would designate me as the executive director of UNFPA to be the secretary general of the conference. And again, with the same arrangement that the deputy secretary general was the director of the division and—

Sadik

—of the population division and would be responsible for the documentation. But I decided that, since I am the secretary general and I’m responsible for the conference, I decided to have the deputy secretary general do it, but to form groups of experts for each topic. So while the leading person was someone from the population division, there were a couple of other people from the UNFPA for, let’s say, the fertility section.
And I decided on a process by which we would do the whole program document and started with just a set of headlines, which I then decided I would discuss with all the governments here, the regional groupings. And then once we agreed on the general content, then I gave an annotated content. And then I filled the annotation with many other ideas of what I wanted to discuss. I did this in a progressive way, so that by the time we did the actual writing of the document, a lot of the content had been, in principle, agreed to by a lot of the governments. For example, maternal mortality—the health of women would be a special section. And it’s put in there, in the discussion, what would be the technical areas. And so, that’s where I had the leeway to then put in the ideas. So they are agreed on gender equality and equity as a chapter, and so on. And then the filling of the chapters and the content, that’s where we had a lot of discussion and complications, difficulties. Many of the staff said, Oh, this is political; abortion is a political. I said, “We are not politicians. We are supposed to be the technical people. It’s for us to say what are the problems, what needs to be done, based on experience. We should substantiate. It should be evidence-based. And let the politics be decided by the government.” So it took, I don’t know, twenty revisions of the plan of action. The first draft that was prepared was so bad, and I didn’t now how to say that it was so bad, that I just would not use it. So, I asked the Rockefeller Foundation—Steve Sinding was head of the program—whether he could finance and organize a meeting outside of the UN, of experts who could look at this document, the Programme of Action, and tell me frankly and openly what
they thought about it. So we agreed—the deputy secretary general of the conference and I selected the experts and we went to the meeting. And so, I said to the experts, “Now I want you to tell me very frankly, truthfully—don’t worry about my feelings, otherwise I wouldn’t be here. And you tell me brutally what you think. I don’t want any politeness and all that.” And the first one that spoke said, “Well, as far as I’m concerned, it’s dead on arrival.” And that set the whole tone for why this said nothing new. They said, You’re just mouthing things that have been said in the past and there are so many issues. So then I made a list of some of the issues that I thought could be put in, including abortion, including the rights of women to make their own decisions—and also the other way around. This is from experience, that there should be no incentives and disincentives for family planning, but they should be just information, counseling, education, but the decision should be made by the individual, and particularly women. And so, these ideas we all discussed and many of my own staff members said, Oh, but these are too radical and these will do this and that. And we discussed adolescent—oh, but nobody will accept adolescent, et cetera, et cetera.

 Anyway—

Sharpless

Let me change the tape right quick.

Tape 1, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.

Sadik

And so, obviously we had to throw that first draft out totally and go to work again. And also in the 1984 conference—we had had no NGO conference. The Mexicans did not want it, because in Mexico there’s a separation between church and state. And they said, If we have an NGO conference,
the church groups will be very active. And they didn’t want their own policies to be affected. So, for the 1994 conference—also, initially there were no plans for an NGO conference. The NGOs kept coming to me. I said, “But you don’t have no money, no staff, and no means to set up”—anyway, MacArthur Foundation then called a meeting of all the NGOs and invited them to come and address them. And the NGOs put their case and I—

Sadik I’m sorry. This is in the eighties?

Sharpless In the nineties, ’94 conference.

Sadik The MacArthur Foundation.

Sadik Yes. This was with me. In ’84, we didn’t have an NGO conference and it was not entertained because the government didn’t agree. In this case, it was I that had decided that, as in 1984, we weren’t going—I mean, it was sort of a matter of course. Then the NGOs made a big case about—so, I said I would be willing to have an NGO conference. It could be helpful to me. But there was no way that I could plan it and I could not add that to my—but if somebody finances an NGO liaison person in my conference group, then that person would provide them with all the support, and et cetera, et cetera, and they would have to raise the finances themselves. So in the end, of course, I helped them to raise quite a lot of money. So, the NGOs, so to speak, persuaded me that they should have a part in the conference, and then we had to negotiate with the Egyptian government where the conference was going to be held and, you know, they finally agreed and where it was—I thought that if you have an NGO conference, it should be somewhere close to the conference, otherwise there’s no access and there’s
no entertain[ing]—then the whole point in having an NGO conference is lost. As was in ’74, the NGO conference was in one part of town and the official conference was in another part and there’s no exchange and so they did their own thing and didn’t really make an input into the political conference—in the intergovernmental conference. And the NGOs, as I explained to the NGOs before the ’94 conference, “You don’t make decisions. You are not at the negotiating table. Only governments are. So you cannot come and shout to me and say, ‘You must do this,’ et cetera, because you can’t. I mean, that has to be done during the negotiations and you have to become part of the government negotiating team, somehow.” So anyway, the NGOs did then—and they used to always tell me, You must put this in, put that in. I said, “I don’t want—NGOs should be from all over the world, not just from the west. They should represent themselves or ideas. NGOs represent those whose voices can’t be heard.” And in the case of the south NGOs, many of them are not representing themselves, they’re represented by another third party. “So, somehow,” I said, “You have to bring some people, particularly from Africa, to the conference.” And I think in that sense it was a very good process, because many of the international NGOs then worked hard to bring many of the south NGOs and individuals to the negotiating table and teach them. And many people who came to the preparatory committees, which prepared the conference, you know, the intergovernmental committees, I decided also then for every preparatory committee that I had I would also have a parallel NGO. And then I would allow the NGOs to have access to the UN, which in fact some incumbents
said I didn’t have the authority, but once it was done it was done. They couldn’t do anything about it. And many of the NGOs that came to the conference came there for the first time, ever. But, you know, they learned so quickly to negotiate and they were a very powerful and important voice. I made the mistake also of telling NGOs that they could send me any recommendations that they wish to include. They should send it in language which I could use and, of course, I had these piles from here to there. The mail was full of people sending recommendations. I spent so many nights reading recommendations, but got some very good ideas from them—obviously didn’t take everything, but quite a lot. And sometimes I would try to tell some of them, “Do you recognize this phrase? It comes from your submission.” So I became quite an enthusiastic supporter of NGO participation and their agents, from something I didn’t want to have, to start with, to where they became a good source of material and advocacy and support. And before the conference itself, I managed to get some donors to finance the traveling per diem of NGOs to the various pre-conference meetings and to the conference itself, and that the money could only be used for an NGO person if that person was a member of the government delegation. And many governments thought, Oh, well, the person who is getting the money, okay, we’ll include her—there were a lot of hers in the delegation. And that’s how, you know, one hundred governments in Cairo had NGOs as members of their delegation and they were the most powerful force, because they wouldn’t let the governments get away with saying, In my country this doesn’t happen, which is what you’ll hear in the UN often.
They would say, Of course, in my country it does happen and I know that it happens and in my NGO. So that’s how we came with this final document, which was, I thought, very progressive. It was a landmark in a sense that it went from a demographic policy to a people-oriented policy very much based on human rights and on the rights of the individual and particularly of women and the very strong links between women’s rights and reproductive issues, which were some of the things that the Vatican objected to very strongly. And there was, of course, quite a big confrontation. Also in the section on health, the reproductive health and maternal mortality, I included a whole section on abortion, which was—you know, in the staff they said, Oh, you will remember in ’84. I said, “Remember in ’84, we were talking about—we were not even talking about the problem of abortion. We were just saying that in countries where it was legal—it was just one sentence. This will be a whole paragraph talking about it and in the preamble we are going to say how many people—how many women die of abortion every year and why, and then our objective”—you know, I arranged the chapters by starting with what were the facts, then what would be the objective. So, in health, for example, to reduce maternal mortality by whatever and then the recommendation. So the facts nobody could dispute. The objectives they had to agree on and mostly you couldn’t disagree with the objective. So, it was how-to that you could debate on. Unsafe abortion had already been mentioned in the preamble as seventy thousand women die from unsafe abortion, so it obviously had to be addressed. And so, we had said unsafe abortion—I mean abortion is an issue for the health of women and had to
be addressed. And they wanted it not to be addressed. It should just say that abortion is not a method of family planning and that is it. And this was the big fight. I said, “If you take out abortion, any attention to abortion from the recommendations, then you have to change the objective. You cannot say you want to reduce maternal mortality. You want to say that you only want to reduce mortality of those women who agree with the ideology and the beliefs of some people, and the others must be condemned to die.” The Church said, “Oh, you are being very extreme and we are not saying that.” I said, “You’re absolutely saying that. I’m not even suggesting that you legalize abortion, but I’m just suggesting that you address abortion so at least you know the complications should be addressed, they should be recognized, they should be decriminalized, and then you should find out why abortions are taking place.” I said, “Women don’t want to have abortions. That’s not the norm and they want to prevent that pregnancy. So you must get them the means to prevent that pregnancy. And that means to prevent the pregnancy is not just the mechanical means of contraception. It’s also the environment in which decisions are made. If they’re not capable or not authorized or not enabled to make the decisions, it’s as good as coercing them into being pregnant.” So, [the Church] said I was making an extreme view: after all, societies have functioned. I said, “Well, but societies have to change. They function at the expense of women.” So, anyway, you know, this was a big argument but in the end, obviously, we came out all right. We had to restate that abortion is not being promoted as a method of family planning, but unsafe abortion is a problem. And I think all the women’s
organizations, and many men, were very happy with the outcome. In fact many governments asked me, How did you get us to agree to these recommendations? And I said, “The key was the NGOs. They were on the delegation. They got you to agree to the recommendations, not to anyone else.” So the ’94 conference was quite different from the ’74, and the ’84, and I think really progressive. And it laid the foundation for the Beijing Women’s Conference because, you know, Beijing was not really looking at reproductive issues because they also thought this was very controversial. Though in Kenya, in Nairobi, at the five-year review of the First Women’s Conference that had some recommendations on reproductive health, but in 1995, this went much further only because Cairo had already agreed to so many of the things. And interestingly, in ’94 the Vatican decided that they would join the consensus because they didn’t want to be seen as being totally isolated from the rest of the world. But, of course, since ’94 when we started to implement the Programme of Action, then when the five-year review of the conference, ’94 conference, took place in the UN in 1999, already the Vatican started to say that it was being interpreted wrongly. In Cairo, there was a section on reproductive health and reproductive rights. And there was a discussion on reproductive rights that no conference can decide on new rights. And I said that reproductive rights come from the right to reproductive health. It’s just shorthand for that, because the right to health is in the Convention on Human Rights. So, everyone has the right to health and life and whatever, whatever. In this case the right to reproductive health has to be an important right for women, otherwise they spend so much of
their life in—and so, the Vatican said in their opening statement in 1999 that it was not being stated correctly, even though the chapter was headed “Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights in the Cairo Programme of Action.” It should be stated as the right to reproductive health, which comes from the right to health. I said, “What idiots.” But the main thing was that they did not want to agree to reproductive health and rights and reproductive health services, because they felt that this could include abortion. And some governments made the statement, Of course, in our country it does include abortion, because abortion is legal; it’s in the law. And in the Cairo document it said that where abortion is authorized by law, then women must have access to safe and effective means and methods of abortion—or must have access to safe means. And the Vatican said, “Well then, this is the UN authorizing abortion.” You know, the argument was, No, the UN is not, we’re just saying where countries have declared it legal, then they should provide it for all their citizens, not just to the rich, as it is in the right to health. The right to health doesn’t mean—you know, everyone doesn’t get it just because it’s stated as a right. So anyway, the fight continues. And unfortunately, now, since last year, the U.S. has joined up with this, so in the Children’s Summit, in the Johannesburg Social Summit, reproductive health services came under huge attack. And in the end, we’re not even allowed to be included. And now we’re coming into the 2004 ten-year review of the conference. And in Bangkok last year, there was the preparatory discussion for the ten-year review and the U.S. wanted the whole—they said they wanted to rescind their agreement to the ICPD, so to
speak, and didn’t accept reproductive health as legitimate, or something like that. But, of course, since then they have denied this. The State Department has said that that is not correct. And in Bangkok, all the governments that—

they did not agree with the U.S.—they were busy—you know, they were all implementing the ICPD and would continue to implement it. So, they lost. But, you know, they continue with the result that I don’t think there will be a 2004 review officially in the UN of the ICPD, because everyone is worried that instead of going forward, they might go backwards, which is really an unfortunate situation.

**Sadik**

Very much so. That’s a lot to think about.

**Sadik**

All the conferences, yeah.

**Sadik**

Yeah. When you were appointed secretary general of the ICPD in Cairo, what were you thinking about it? What was your first impression when you were going to be given this huge task?

**Sadik**

No impression. I had thoughts and ideas already. I thought I would be nominated. And my thoughts and ideas were, How do we move the agenda forward, and what were the issues, and how was I going to address them and how was I going to build coalitions with the governments and with NGOs and with professional organizations. So I traveled incessantly all around the world, meeting hundreds of people—parliamentarians, professional groups, environmental groups, I mean, all kinds of groups—to try to get as many people to give me ideas and also to be on board on the conference. So I think we did quite well. UNFPA was quite established itself, and I think we managed to at least get a lot of dialogue at the world level going. There was a
lot of media attention to it, largely also because the Vatican made such a strong opposition. I made a great effort actually to get the Vatican on board. I spent a lot of time with them here. They sent people from Rome and whatnot. I wanted them to—and I never thought about this couples—I wouldn’t think about it in retrospect, because at that time, in the chapter on family planning I said, “Well, if you don’t mention any method of family planning, then the Vatican should be very happy.” So in that chapter we don’t say anything about methods of family planning, we just say that everyone must have the information, the education, and the means. But the choice of what, if to use, what to use, and when to use, should be left to the individual. And I said, “This should satisfy the Church, because it includes natural methods or whatever, all methods.” But that they should not be denied information and they should not be denied the means if they choose—whatever method they choose, which is scientifically proven, then they should be enabled to exercise that choice. And I think even, to be honest, the Vatican—the representatives [here] thought that that would be quite acceptable. But in Rome, it was not acceptable. When I went to see the pope, he was quite shocked that I had taken this approach instead of I should have couples’ rights, not individual rights. And I said, “Well, the individual rights have always been there. There are no other rights except individual rights. There’s no such thing as couples’ rights.” So he was quite—I mean, that was one of the issues—and I think to do also with the fact that women were given these rights. So my thoughts were to get some of these difficult issues, which have always been shoved under the carpet—
like abortion, like the rights of women, like reproductive health as a right for women—all these on the table and to get the gender issue much more in focus on reproductive issues. And to try to make family planning and population issues part of the development agenda. Somehow it was always seen like development or family planning. And I kept saying that this was all part of development, so this would all be part of the development agenda. I mean, gender is a part of the development agenda. It’s not something separate. It’s half the world’s population. So I tried to do that at that conference, and then all my public discourse and all that, not just on UNFPA, or population, but in other forums. This was my question: Why do we always have to deal with women as if they’re some extraneous group? When we talk about a program, it should be addressed to all the population, which includes all of them. I said, “Half of the population should not be excluded and have to have a special program.” And that plea still has to be met, because it’s still not happening.

**Sharpless**

And that brings to mind two questions that I have. First of all, in your opinion, why has gender been so marginalized over the years?

**Sadik**

Well, gender is—politically, it’s talked about very correctly. And everyone says the right things. But the actions have just not followed. And I think that these are such deeply ingrained things in people’s psyches and especially the political leadership—the leadership and I think maybe the women’s groups have made a lot of noise about issues, rather than on some principles and strategies that would bring women into the mainstream. And some women themselves are scared. They don’t really want to be in the mainstream. But I
think you have to get more women at the political negotiating table. You
have to make your biology an advantage, not as it is seen in the economic
area, as a disadvantage. Because I notice even western women or northern
women, they have to choose a career or a family. And why should you have
to make that choice? I think that that’s very wrong and those are issues that
are not on the table. And I tell my women’s groups and the feminists groups,
I said, “These are issues you have to look at.” You know, in spite of all the
progress, I wouldn’t say that western women were so liberated. They might
be liberated but, I don’t know, they have to suppress something in order to
achieve something else, while men don’t have to do that. And parenting is
both a woman and a man’s responsibility, but somehow because of the
biological function of the woman being pregnant and delivery, it becomes
totally only her function and therefore only her role, so then she’s totally
dismissed from the head up. I mean, the head doesn’t exist anymore, only
the uterus exists, if you look at it in rude terms. And I think that’s a battle
that has not been fought, or that’s a debate that has not taken place. So the
women’s agenda keeps expanding because you want to participate and we
fight to participate, but all the rest of the load that we carry continues. So
you just add to your load, you don’t distribute the load. When we talk about
gender, the whole idea was to have an equal sharing in society of all
functions, and whatever to do with the family is the responsibility of both
parents, or both the members, the father and the mother, not just of the
mother. But that debate has not taken place and most of the religious
groups, religious leaderships, all are against women, as far as this agenda is
concerned, including the conservative groups in the Christian church, in the Jewish church, in the Muslim. I mean, we keep talking about Muslims but I think, in a way, the worst groups may be the Christians. They are very extreme in the way they think about women. I think that debate has to be put on the table. I think that feminist groups—we made certain gains, you know, like the right to education and the right to work, et cetera, et cetera, but that’s not the real issue. The real issue is how to share all the responsibilities that make a society function. You see the society doesn’t function just by a man working or even a woman working. Society functions when children are socialized, when they are brought up together, and all those roles have to be discussed and they’re not. We haven’t found a way to discuss it without becoming polemic and without it becoming confrontational. It can be confrontational a little bit, but I think somehow the merits of the case have to be—and I don’t think there are enough anthropological research and studies on why these attitudes towards women have continued through the ages. I mean, that’s a huge thing.

Sharpless

What it is that men benefit by keeping women—let me change the tape.

*Tape 1 ends; tape 2, side 1, begins.*

Sharpless

Okay, this is the second tape with Dr. Nafis Sadik, on July 25. My second question, about the specific gender issue is, when you came to the United Nations, how much thinking about gender per se did you do over the years?

Sadik

Well, I think that, you know, when I first came, starting in my recruitment, I mean, the question about what level I should get, I think—because I was a woman. I remember doing a radio interview in the UN with someone, a
male member, and one of the questions asked was, If there was one job available and a male and a female applied, who do you think should get the job? So my fellow panelist was a male and he said, “Oh, well, of course, there’s just one job.” He said very matter of factly, “Of course, it should be a man.” And I said, “Excuse me. Why should it be the man? It should be the person who is more qualified.” He said, “But don’t you agree that the man has to be the bread winner?” I said no. So this was in the UN. And it was like a dialogue that we had on UN radio or something. So, you know, I’ve never forgotten that exchange. And at the UN, I remember myself, first though I knew already a lot of people, but when I went to a meeting where I didn’t know very many people—and I was often the only woman—nobody would pay any attention to me. They always used to compliment me on my beautiful sari and how beautiful I looked and all this. But whenever I said something, it was like, My goodness, who is she? Why is she speaking? And they would totally disregard me and finally you learned, well, someone else says the thing and they say, What a good idea. Then you start to say, Well, I said it first and—you know, it’s such a horrible way to behave, but you learn how to push. And it really took some doing, because in the beginning you really felt sort of like you were a nonexistent person, you know, the kind of person that sits quietly by. But you learn to become more aggressive, and surprisingly, I didn’t come across this in Pakistan, which people here found very unbelievable. In Pakistan, when you’re a physician or you have a certain status in whatever your position is, then people talk to you because you hold that position, not because you’re a woman or a man. It doesn’t matter.
So it’s more of an issue of class.

I think, probably, yes. Though usually when I go to a rural area in Pakistan, I dress differently but, you know, when they found out who I was, it wasn’t like the head of the union council—who was a local villager, never been out of there—that he felt he couldn’t talk to me because I was a woman. I mean, I never came across that kind of thing, whether it was from a mullah or anyone else. You know, maybe it’s become different now, but when I was working there I didn’t feel like, somehow, I wasn’t accepted. But in the UN you really did get that feeling. And the UN also had this thing of class in itself, you know, levels. One of the things—when I joined at the end of October ’71, one of the things Salas asked me to do—the executive director—was to arrange that conference. Second, he said to me, “You know a lot of people. I think we should get a contribution from one of these European countries. So go to Yugoslavia, and see if you can get a contribution.” Well, you know, I was this P5, so I went to Yugoslavia, arrived in Belgrade, and there was no one to receive me. The UN didn’t bother to send—so, it just happened the ambassador of Pakistan was at the airport and he said, “Oh”—I knew him quite well, “What are you doing here? Where are you staying?” I said, “I’m looking for a hotel.” So he said, “Oh, come and stay with me.” And so, I went off with him. The next day I went to the UN office so then the UNDP representative wanted to know why did I want to see him. So, I said, “You know, I’ve sent you the letter why I’ve come.” “Yes, this is done through the secretary. But what is your level?” “I’m a P5.” “Oh, well, in that case, see my deputy.” And then when I
told the deputy that I had come to see if I could get a contribution and I
wanted to see the minister of finance—I also, of course, minister of finance,
minister of foreign affairs, and I knew some parliamentarians and they
perhaps could arrange it. He said, “Oh, but it doesn’t happen like that. We
have to ask”—and he was right. I mean, I just thought I’d go there,
telephone, and I’d get my appointments. He said, “No, it doesn’t happen like
that. Anyway, it’s not your level to see any minister.” I said, “Well, whether
my level or not, I’m going to see them.” So I got this friend of mine, a
couple of friends in the parliament, who were in the Family Planning
Association. So I rang her up and, oh, she was thrilled, “Come and have
dinner,” whatever. I said, “No, I don’t want to have dinner. I want you to
take me to the minister of finance and to get me a contribution.” She said,
“Oh, that’s a tall order. It’s not done like that, but let me see what I can do.”
Because I knew she was quite influential. So anyway, she arranged for me to
[see] the minister of finance. She arranged for me to see the minister of
foreign affairs. This resident was quite shocked. He said, “But you can’t go
there.” I said, “I’m not going with you, I’m going with a friend of mine.”
And I did get the contribution. They gave me like five thousand dollars or
something. And Salas was thrilled and very happy and I think he thought
from there that maybe I could get things done, because I just—it just
happened that, you know, I knew somebody there. And he did ask me did I
know anyone there, so I said, “Yes, I know a couple of parliamentarians
from my past at meetings and conferences and so on.” So, my whole career
in the UNFPA is because Salas became, in a sense, my mentor. He told
General Draper, one of the times that Draper went to see him, he said, “Oh, she will be the executive director of UNFPA after me, if I have anything to do with it.” Unfortunately though, he just died suddenly in March ’87. He was found dead in the hotel room in Washington. Then, you know, this thing about who would become executive director began. Then the secretary general was Javier Perez de Cuellar. And there were many candidates, including a Canadian. The Japanese wanted it, the German—there was a deputy executive director of UNFPA, a German, who wanted it. In fact, I asked him, I said I would like my name to be put in. He said, “Oh, it looks very wrong, very crude for us to be seen running for”—and then I discovered later that he had been to see the secretary general about himself and told me. So, one day I just decided to ring up the chief of the office of the secretary general, who happened to be an Indian. I said, “You know, I just want some advice. Do you think I should come and see the secretary general?” He said, “Of course you should. I’ve been waiting for you to ask. Everyone has been to see the SG except you, who I hear is interested in the post.” I said, “Well, I was told not to.” He said, “What do you mean, not to? He’s been to see him twice, already.” So, you know, people do these things. Anyway, so I did go to see him and then, you know, there was this big race and whatnot, and Javier announced in Washington that, “I will announce my decision tomorrow”—and this was in April—“and it will be a woman.” There happened to be two women candidates, myself and this Canadian lady, Maggie Cathy Carlson, was a candidate. And he didn’t say from where, so every developed country or developing country—he said, “That will be
the mystery [that] tomorrow will be announced.”

**Sadik**  
Now, you had been with the agency for fourteen years at that point.

**Sharpless**  
Did you know ahead of time?

**Sadik**  
No. The next day he called me by the evening so, you know, everyone is on tenterhooks in the evening. He called me, so it could be that he was calling me to tell me sorry, he wasn’t giving it to me, or that he was giving it to me. So it was that he was appointing me and before being—here he had already told the others that he was not appointing—that he was not going to give it to them. So that’s how my appointment was announced.

**Sharpless**  
Now, you had been with the agency for fourteen years at that point.

**Sadik**  
From sixteen years, seventeen, up to about—’71 to ’87, April ’87. So almost sixteen years.

**Sharpless**  
What did you dream of for the agency?

**Sadik**  
To make it much more efficient, because a lot of things—Salas had been a very skillful leader of the UNFPA, had done the (unclear) extremely well. We had become quite a largish fund, I don’t remember, at that time. Maybe we were a hundred and something million dollars—with the U.S., we would have been a lot more. But I wanted to strengthen the technical work of the UN and make its intellectual capacity, which was not recognized as much, to be recognized a lot more, and to be a real leader in the population field, and accepted as a leader in the population field, because I had the technical background and I could do that. Salas had left, in fact, a lot of the programs only to me. He never dealt with the programs. He did the fundraising and the political part, but left all the programming to me. Now I had to do both—not the programming itself, but had to make an organization that
continued—and became much more focused on its program. Also to try to limit the scope of our work, to try to get some priorities established, and to make it more field-oriented, because a lot of people that came to the headquarters never went to the field. I wanted more of a movement between headquarters and field, something that I didn’t—did to some extent, but didn’t ever fully accomplish, because it was difficult to move people from headquarters to the field who had been there for some time with their families and all were all in constant—and I learned that you must do the rotation early enough so people don’t get set in what they’re doing. And also I had this idea of how to—you know, we had all these technical resources that we farmed out to all the different agencies. And I thought that if we could pool all these together in one place and have them under one direction, even if they came to the agencies, we would be able to get much better advice. It was the same phenomenon as when I described the Pakistan program. We had some ILO advisors. We had some UNESCO advisors, some WHO, some FAO, and the UN, and some NGOs as well, but not together, and so therefore they were all each giving different advice to the same government. So I managed to get that done. And established regional technical teams to model the others—the UNDP was following totally, and then the ILO followed it. And it’s still not working perfectly and UNICEF also has it now. But it could be improved greatly and if we could, in fact, bring interagency teams together in the same disciplines, because UNFPA has health advisors. If we could pool them together, we could give the same advice to each country and have one program, rather than three and four
and five programs. But that I was not able to do. But at least the UNFPA managed, with great difficulty, to pull them out from the various agencies and put them under UNFPA—a team leader—and then locate them in the region. So we now have I think eight technical teams, pulled out from the various agencies. The advisors come from the agencies, so they bring some advantages. I mean, in theory, they know the programs that the agencies have where population issues could also be put in, and then they have clientele that they have access to, like ILO has to the employees, trade unions, or FAO has to the agricultural sources. So it’s a huge pool. And you can bring population, education, information, and maybe even services in many of these. It doesn’t work perfectly as it should, but I think this was a great accomplishment, to get them all together. I think we didn’t realize how difficult it would be. So my mission of the UNFPA was to make it into an efficient organization whose leadership would be recognized, and to become a strong advocate for issues which were difficult to advocate for.

Agreements had been reached at the international level—not to shy away from wishing for the implementation of those agreements and recommendations or conventions. And I think that took some retraining of staff to do that. The staff were not used to pushing governments or advocating with governments. Secondly, to get gender issues really into the organizational thinking. I remember going in a bus somewhere with many others. They didn’t know I was at the back of this transport and so I heard two of my staff members say to each other, Have you been genderized yet? And I realized then that they made this into a frivolous thing because I was
doing this training and retraining. So, I told them the next—at one of the staff meetings I said, “You know, obviously people have not been genderized yet. And I think they will only be genderized when we start to look at their performance in relation to what they’ve done for gender. So henceforth, everyone’s performance review will be based on this one question particularly. What have they done for gender issues in their programs? And regardless of where they were and what level they were, this would be a criteria.” That changed a lot of thinking. But many people were very much—they do it pro forma, but they have not internalized it. And I thought to myself that if I’m the head of the organization that talks all the time about the importance of looking at gender in relation to our issue where it is very important, how much more difficult must it be in political affairs and elsewhere, where people actually don’t care? The third vision I had for the organization was to make itself more gender sensitive, and that we should have equal numbers of women and men professionals. And I had a little subcommittee to advise me on how this should be done and what period of time. They came to me with the most timid observations—25 percent or 30 percent. I said, “I can’t believe that any committee would advise 25 or 30 instead of saying 50 percent. I mean, you could say 50 percent and say when, but you can’t [offer] 25 percent as a recommendation.” I said, “To me, you’re a non-committee.” So they were quite taken aback. I said, “Please say 50 percent by when. You might say by the year 3000, but at least look at 50 percent as a goal.” So anyway, then they came back with really bold recommendations, some of them not doable. But
one was very doable, [which] was to find good candidates and to encourage women candidates to apply, because in the UN many good women candidates just didn’t bother to apply, because they didn’t think they would be selected. So I said, “For every post we have to go out and look for women candidates and all the field is advised to search for good women candidates. List their names. Put them on the roster. And when opportunities—we can then ask them if they are interested and apply. And with all things being equal, then we will select a woman. And the same with promotion: we should try to promote the best person, but if it’s a man or a woman and they’re both equal, then I will select the woman.” Men, in fact, came to me [and asked, Does this mean] we are not going to get promoted? I said, “Well, I mean, [if] every woman is as good as you, if that is so, then you won’t. But there must be some women who may not be as good as you; then you will. So, you have to try to be better than all the women, which is what we have to do today. We have to be better than all the men to even be considered and even when it’s said that they’re equal, in fact, women are better.” They said, “Are you biased?” I said, “No I’m not at all biased, but you will see in my own actions I also know people. I’ve been here so long that I know everybody. So, when recommendations come to me which I think are biased, I’m not going to accept them.” So anyway, we never had any real problems inside. I mean, that was the initial reaction of some men that came to see me. But, you know, in the functioning of the system, it functioned very well. And we ended up, in fact, 50 percent women and 60 percent at our executive level—in our executive committee, we had 60
percent women for a while. I mean, that was myself and I had a deputy who
was a woman as well and several division chiefs were women, and we were
held up as the model for the whole UN system. And always [people would
ask], Well, how did you do it? I said, “By actively telling everyone that we
were going to look for good women.” And I said, “There’s no dearth of
good women, if they feel they are going to get a fair opportunity. That’s all.”
I said, “I can tell you that all the women I have are excellent. They can
compete with any man—better than probably most men.”

Sharpless  Okay, other things about your vision for the division?
Sadik  Well, the organization?
Sharpless  Yes.
Sadik  Well, those were some of the visions. Mainly, it was to get it on the board. I
decided also, in the beginning, that I didn’t want staff to talk about UNFPA.
I wanted all our speeches and our discourses to be about issues and then the
issue would relate it to UNFPA, so we should be known for issues that we
are pushing. So if we are pushing for the reproductive rights of women [or]
we are pushing for adolescent health including the rights of adolescent girls,
we should be known for that. And we did that so much that, you know, we
were known for all the issues, and then UNFPA was getting lost. So then we
had to, after three or four years, get UNFPA [to be more widely] known. My
idea was that these issues are important. We are not important. We are
supposed to advocate for changes on how to address these difficult issues
and problems. And if our government starts to listen on how to do this,
that’s our success. And that will get us more money and I think that did get
us a lot more money. The government started to see us as strong advocates for certain issues that nobody else in the UN system was willing to take on—sometimes not even NGOs were willing to take on.

**Sharpless**

How did the funding go?

**Sadik**

Funding actually went quite well. We came like two hundred—I think it started with a hundred and something. In ten years or something I think we doubled our income. So I think now we are like $240 or -50—I mean, [when] I left, I think we must have made like $240 or -50 million.

**Sharpless**

So the United States withholding funding is not a serious issue?

**Sadik**

It was. I mean, we would have had so much more. We would have had another $200 million to have allocated to countries. We went up to 200, then the U.S. came back during the Clinton administration. And now again it’s gone down, but the funding is still at 240 or something million. So, you know, it’s quite good. But, with the U.S. we should be 300. In fact, the goal of the ICPD conference was that UNFPA should be at 500 million dollars at the year of 2000. But, of course, we never reached that.

**Sharpless**

Uh-huh.

**Sadik**

When I became executive director, every year a newspaper reporter that came to interview me—I don’t know, there are hundreds, it seemed to me—they all asked me, How does it feel to be head of an organization—to be a woman and head of the organization? And, you know, first I think of answers and then I said, “I don’t know. Never having been a man, I can’t really answer that question.” So I think [that] shut them up. I wish I had thought of that from the beginning. I mean, what a silly question to ask me,
What does it feel like, a woman being head of an organization? I said, “I suppose some people have sent me flowers. Maybe they don’t send men flowers. I don’t know how does it feel different.”

**Sharpless**

Well, thinking about other difficulties, you mentioned the North-South dichotomy. How much was that an issue during your time as executive director?

**Sadik**

Executive director, not so much of an issue. These were issues earlier in the life of the fund. And so, as director of projects and later as director of programs, they were issues. That’s when we had to work with governments to explain to them what we meant, how we were neutral. We weren’t suggesting a policy of reducing the population, but that the rate of growth be reduced to be in line with what their possibilities for social economic development were. And if their socioeconomic development was like 2 percent or 3 percent, it’s not going to be by their population groups. You needed a 9 percent growth rate to improve your level of living when you had a 3 percent population growth rate, including provision of jobs and all that. I think they started to understand that gradually. But in the beginning it was like, I mean, What’s the problem? We have all this land. They think just land, and if you could grow food that was enough that you would be prosperous. And it took a while for countries to understand that prosperity and progress didn’t mean food, and that with the numbers of people that they were adding it meant also not enough food as, you know, shown by the famines in Africa and all that, later on. And it took a lot of time and effort. You had to go about it in a very systematic way. The data analysis—to include nationals,
also, in the research and analysis, not just have it done by external people, because if you had it done—in the beginning, the UN used to send all the data to universities in the West to analyze, because there were no people there and I said, “No one will just send data. Let’s say if there were no facilities in a country, then we must have a person from that country to work on that data, so that it becomes credible—that it’s done by the country.” Also, you know, I found that it’s better to spend more time developing programs and projects at the country level by involving people who are actually going to implement the programs, especially local people. And it takes much longer. I remember in one debate in our executive board, in ’89 or something, they said, oh, they would give me more money, but I wasn’t spending it fast enough. I said, “You know, it’s the easiest thing to spend money, if that’s what you want me to do. But if you want me to spend money effectively, that’s something else. And it takes some time. So, from the start of a program you can’t expect immediately—I’ve approved the program, now next year it will all be spent. It doesn’t happen like that.” So we had a lot of debates within our executive board on this, and I didn’t—I don’t know what the word is. I decided to be very up front with the executive board. If they asked me to do something that I thought that I could not do, I said, “You could ask me to do it, but I can’t do it for these following reasons. And if you insist, then I’ll try, but if I fail I want to put it down because of these reasons.” And then they would back down. I said, “There are many things that you suggest that I accept which I haven’t thought of myself. I mean, that’s the whole idea for a board and dialogue,
not that you just dictate and I should just say yes to everything, including not—I mean, I have no desire actually to implement it. I’m not really going to implement it. I see many executive heads agree, but they’re never going to implement what they agreed to and you don’t even know whether you—but whatever I agree to implement, I will implement. I don’t want it to be just an empty promise.” And so, it’s better to have an open dialogue and be frank and discuss problems. So, for example, one of the things I said, “You can’t ask me to do more than two reports a year—I mean, in-depth report of something, because I don’t have the staff. I then do reporting to executive board or we implement programs.” So, I think the thought in the beginning there is a bit dictatorial, but gradually that’s a bit—“I’m just telling you the limits of what our staffing can manage. And we are much smaller compared to all the other organizations, but the expectations are the same, whether it’s UNICEF or UNDP or UNFPA. You ask for the same reports and it’s just not possible for us. So, we need to use our time efficiently and in the most effective way and it’s not to write reports”—(tape fades for approximately one minute)

_Tape 2, side 1, ends; side 2 begins._

**Sharpless**

—is there any end?

**Sadik**

We had a very good relationship with the executive board. In fact, the UNDP used to always be quite envious. They said we just walked into the board imperiously, as one of them told me—and talk and reign on the executive board. They say I come in like a queen, reign on the executive board, and leave with my subjects eating out of my hand. I said, “That’s not
exactly so, because I sit there and listen to everything that whoever is in the
executive board says. And, you know, I listen very carefully. I sometimes
even supply the answers to my staff, because they don’t know the answers to
the questions that are being asked, because I don’t want to be seen
answering every question. But on the other hand, I pay a great deal of
attention to the executive board, unlike many executive heads who just walk
off and then be somebody else sitting there.” So, I sit there, often for hours,
and listen to the questions and think about what they’re saying and [ask
myself], Are there things I can do better than I’m doing? You know, I
genuinely desire to improve UNFPA and I’m quite willing to listen to
criticism. In fact, one of the things I told staff in the beginning was, “Don’t
tell us all the good things we have done, and never praise me. Don’t tell me
what I’ve done well, because I know what I’ve done well. I think we have to
discuss our problems, what are things that are not being done, and only then
can we improve ourselves.” And I think that was a good—so our evaluations
were quite independent, quite open and the executive board, in fact, used
those as examples of independent and frank evaluations and helped them to
established confidence. But it took a few years to do that, because in the
beginning I think they were a bit suspicious about whether I could manage
or could not manage and all that.

**Sharpless**

Uh-huh. Well, in our last half hour today, if we could go back to Cairo and
talk about the implementation of the recommendations: you had a broad and
ambitious set of recommendations.

**Sadik**

It was actually—in fact, many countries had to change their policies. In fact,
after Cairo, which was in September 1994, I was going to take a month’s holiday after all the work, but then I decided that, you know, there was such a momentum built up that maybe it’s better for me to travel around the world and at least select some of the key countries to see how they were going to actually implement the program. So I started to visit immediately. Like two weeks later I went to India, to China, to, I think, to Nigeria—to several countries around the world trying to help them to think through the Cairo Programme of Action. And India, for example, had incentives and disincentive programs and decided to drop all those. They had decided to have a big conference on how to implement the Cairo agenda and then instituted many pilot projects on new designs for monitoring and evaluation and content of the reproductive health package that they would provide at the local levels and that each state had to design its own program, because health is a state subject. And central government, union government, as they called it, would supplement the budgets depending on the kinds of policies. And it was a big debate on dropping incentives, for example, for sterilizations and some methods. But they did manage to do that, so that was a great thing, because India is one of our biggest programs and had some of these issues. So once they did it, many of the other countries in fact followed. In China we negotiated a program after some years of a gap in the program based on the Cairo principles—that there would be, you know, mainly on freedom of choice. So we agreed—they said they were not going to change their one-child policy, but we said, Where we have our program there, this policy has to be suspended. And so, they agreed that in the thirty-
two counties that we had a program, all these policies would be suspended. There would be no incentives, disincentives and that, but we had to have some guarantees that the provincial and the local governments, while on board, that we would inform them with their decree that this had happened. So, you know, the whole thing was trying to get this principle of freedom of choice, choice as the means to promote family planning and gender issues and the connections promoted at the country level. I think that we managed to get many of these things done in many countries. Female genital mutilation, which was, for the first time, on an international agenda—we had a conference of all the countries where this was practiced and then had them all agree that they would institute programs to eliminate it. And seventeen countries in fact already passed laws and maybe now it’s more. And all of them, with the government, NGOs and the donor community, all agreed to work together to eliminate this practice. Also, there were other recommendations in the Cairo Conference, like looking at laws on rape, incest, you know, all the things to do with reproductive rights and violence that would be implemented. And so we helped countries with those kinds of things, also looking at, you know, the laws on rape, for example, making them consistent but also how to apply the law uniformly, because they don’t apply the law. The laws exist in many countries. But many countries—I think we did the review in the five-year review of the implementation which was quite a good study. We showed quite a lot of progress within five years of what percentage of countries had already reviewed the laws—I think 40 percent in Africa. Even inheritance laws were looked at. The reproductive
health became part of the agenda and not just family planning. Family planning was one element in the reproductive health program. To the extent that countries have put all the elements, like maternal mortality reduction, family planning, violence, in the agenda, that is still far from completed. They have agreed or accepted and embraced the agenda. Even a country like Sudan talks about reproductive health. So I asked the minister what does he mean? He gave me a very good explanation. He said, “It means that the right of women to determine their own reproductive decisions has to be respected and implemented.” So, I said that was a good explanation, but it also included other things. He said, “Well, that’s the basic principal that you are pushing.” So, I was quite happy to see the reproductive health agenda is accepted by everyone—not to the extent that they—because in the beginning people—many countries didn’t—the term reproductive health doesn’t exist in many languages, so how to translate it was difficult. So most countries actually just used the word reproductive health—even Japan, for example, otherwise they used to translate it into maternal health, which was not the idea. It was more than that.

Sharpless

Yeah. There was—it may be fair to say there has been some opposition.

Sadik

Oh, yes. Quite a lot of opposition, especially on—and maybe even slight backlash on the women’s agenda, because many of the countries feel that giving women, especially girls, the right to reproductive decisions is somehow—they’re not equal to it and they must be controlled by men. Of course, the reason for control is something different, but they feel that this is not in the interest of the family. So you get opposition and you have strange
coalitions like Sudan, Libya, and I don’t know, some Catholic countries [that] get together on this. And maybe within countries there’s also opposition to this agenda, because, I mean, it’s going to change the whole social fabric of the society. It will enable women to exercise choice for themselves and be independent and within marriage be independent. So, you know, these are very basic, fundamental issues of social relations and social relationships. And even many women are opposed to this agenda. And sometimes, of course, they say it’s a western agenda. It’s not a western agenda, because western women don’t necessarily also have this. And again, the issue of the role of women and men is still not sorted out, as we were discussing earlier. It’s still—women have the reproductive role, but they have all these other roles as well. And in the role of reproduction, even that they are not very well supported in most of our societies. They’re not supported well during pregnancy. Women still don’t get the proper nutrition. They’re not supported well during breast feeding, which is, you know, the fad, and everyone pushes breastfeeding and only breastfeeding for nine months, or one year, or whatever. But women are not supported in that. They still have to do all the hard work. They still don’t get their proper nutrition. So the role is glorified but not supported. So I think there are many difficulties in our societies that we really have to address very—even in this country. I mean, it’s so modern and so advanced, but, for example, a woman who is breastfeeding doesn’t get any support in this society. Even maternity leave is very uneven. And in the Nordic countries they have parental leave, but not in all of the western countries do they have parental leave. So, you know, the
societies have not come to grips with how to give women and men equal roles in all areas, and that is something that really has to be addressed. And I think we need to get some religious leadership on board on this issue as well. And most religions seem to segregate women’s roles as the role in reproduction and child-rearing. And I think that that’s not very fair. I think that that has to be—and even if you say [that] in the home child-rearing is, let’s say, the role of women, well, then housekeeping should be in someone else’s role. It’s not. That also is a woman’s role. And in our parts of the world, men have as much difficulty—they start to do child-rearing, housekeeping, cooking or whatever, and they’re looked down upon by their peers. So they have the same kind of pressures on them as women have in our societies to bear children. And again, I don’t want to be repetitious, but I think that these gender issues have to be discussed a great deal more, with some more scientific research or some research, not necessarily scientific in that sense, but anthropological type of research, of how the roles evolved and why are they so entrenched and why women are not allowed to play their proper role except by having so many other burdens put on them and why males then also look down, because male roles are also allotted to them by all societies. And I think these are issues that really have to be addressed before we can really develop the full potential of all our societies.

**Sharpless**

What was the reaction of the established population field? The demographers—

**Sadik**

I think some of the demographers were very unhappy with the Cairo agenda. They think that the importance of demographic issues was downplayed and
the importance of gender and health and rights issues were overdone and that the demographic issues should get more place, especially like population control. I mean, the word is just not being used anymore. And my discussion with them was that, in fact, Cairo pushes the demographic agenda in a different way. It pushes the demographic agenda through individual rights, rather than the nation’s rights or someone else’s rights. And the ultimate goal—the end will be the same. If women have the right to decide freely on the number of children they want to have, most women, in fact, want to have much fewer children then they actually have. They may not want only two children, but nobody—I think no survey showed more than four children and most of them say two or three. So, in fact, you will achieve your demographic goal if you allow women to make choices for themselves. And so, in fact, to me there was no difference. The only difference was that this became a more human rights approach and addressed all the related issues in order to achieve whatever a country wants as prosperity for itself. Though one of the means is to have a match between the demographic growth rates and its social economic growth rate. But rather than imposing it, do it through giving choices to individuals and making sure that those choices can be implemented properly by them. So the debate continues. It was even—a couple of years ago in the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, though they gave me a big award, the Union. But there was a big debate on the Cairo agenda: has Cairo moved us forward or taken us backwards or something. So, you know, there were equal numbers of people, I think many more for the Cairo agenda, because [the] human rights–based
[approach] is very much supported by everybody.

**Sharpless**
You decided to retire in 2000.

**Sadik**
In December of 2000, yeah.

**Sharpless**
Okay, what have you been doing since then? I know you haven’t been sitting still.

**Sadik**
No, I’ve been—I was appointed special advisor by the secretary general, and
in the beginning I did various things that he asked me to do, like helping him with the human rights conference with the UN Volunteers Program and things like that. But I also joined the board of many population and women’s and health-related organizations. I think maybe not too many, eight or nine or something like that. Also, the board of some organizations, like the Asia Society, which wanted to introduce social issues in their program. You know, before, they did culture and art and this, that, but they wanted now to include social issues, because they had many political and business groups, but not social issue groups. So that’s interesting, because it’s a different group altogether. And I joined Ted Turner’s Nuclear Threat Initiative, NTI, which is trying to eliminate the world of nuclear, and especially with the new nuclear powers India and Pakistan. So I’m quite happy to be on that board, which does some very good things. But, you know, many other boards, like EngenderHealth, Pathfinder, Population Action International. I’m on the technical advisory committee of the Packard Foundation. And the Gates Foundation asked me to be on some health evaluation committee up there. So, you know, lots of things. And I’m asked to do a lot of speaking at universities and places, so I’ve done some lectures at Columbia, Stanford, at Harvard. I’ve done several lectures at Harvard, twice a year. I’m pretty busy. And now, from last year, I’ve been appointed special envoy of the secretary general for HIV and AIDS in Asia and the Pacific. The idea is to advocate with high-level policy makers, high-profile people, parliamentarians [the] importance of doing something about HIV and AIDS now, while it’s still at the low prevalence level and, you know, to get them to break the silence and try to remove the stigma that’s attached with the disease and to address it, rather than pretend it doesn’t exist and it’s such a low level that—I have to go to the bathroom.
Okay, well, let’s stop. Thanks. I was just going to say that I’m very grateful that you’ve made time to visit with me.

Oh, are you finished?

Yes, I think we’re finished.


Well, that’s what I was thinking, actually. So let me just say thank you and we’ll be in touch.

Thank you very much.

end Interview 2