

Bio: **Adrienne Germain** is the Senior Advisor and President of the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC).



Since her pioneering work for women's equality in the 1970s and 80s with the Ford Foundation, Adrienne Germain has reshaped global policy on women's health and human rights. A skilled strategist and negotiator on U.S. government delegations to world conferences on population, women, and development from 1993 to 2000, she helped revolutionize the way the worldviews population policy and funding by making women's sexual and reproductive rights and health central.

Under Ms. Germain's leadership, the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC) has created international policy innovations, led global advocacy for sexual and reproductive rights and health, and helped build local organizations in countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America.<sup>1</sup>

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An Interview with Adrienne Germain

Conducted by Leadership Scholar Nadia Khan, Class of 2012

Edited by Nicholas Salazer

**Nadia Khan: What were your first visions of women?**

**Adrienne Germain:** I guess my early visions of women, which I wasn't particularly conscious of, so this is definitely retrospective, my mother worked, I had a lot of girls only experiences, whether it was girls scouts, girls high school, or women's college. So, there were lots of strong independent women in my background, I was used to just having the expectation that as a female I could do whatever I choose to do. Not in an irresponsible sense, but I mean whatever I wanted to do, was open for me to do. There weren't things that men and boys did, and things that women and girls did. I could just do whatever.

**NK: In your upbringing, were you more socially aware perhaps because of the times you were growing up in or because of your family? What made you choose sort be able to think on this wavelength.**

**AG:** No. I mean I parents were both in what you would call social work. In other words they weren't business people or whatever. We lived in a very modest lifestyle; also, my twin sister and I were very sheltered. So it actually wasn't until I graduated from college and reached the University of California, Berkeley, just at the time of the Kent state Cambodia crisis, that I became political. When I was in college I tutored in Roxbury, I had the experience in Peru; so, I did those kinds of voluntary good works so to speak because I was raised to be concerned about

those less fortunate. But in terms of any kind of political stance, that only came when I sort of left my upbringing behind.

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<sup>1</sup> < <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/adrienne-germain>>

**NK: Who were the people in your life that really impacted you?**

**AG:** First and foremost these extraordinary women that I know and have worked with and some of them I know well enough to know their names, in so many different countries. Others I don't know their names, but I've spent so much time in their homes, with them during private times of the day when the work is done. And I can't over emphasize how important all of those women, of so many different ages and backgrounds, have been to my work. They give me the inspiration. They give me the energy. If I ever begin to feel like I am tired, I just say to myself, you know you don't have any right to be tired. So, when people ask me that question, that's generally always my answer. There was an amazing man who devoted his life to changing the lives of young people. He was a senior staff person at the agriculture development staff committee. His name was Abe Weisman and I was working on women and agriculture, and I don't remember exactly how we met. He decided that I had something very important to say, and that all the agricultural economist that he knew, had to pay attention. So, he took me all over Asia, and Latin America, and insisted that these economist here me out, which they certainly did not want to do. That was an influence, also on my own personal orientation, in wanting to support other people in my own work. He was really remarkable in that way, and if I could say so very female in that way. You know, really in the best sense of femaleness. He was very dear, very important.

**NK: Was there a moment in your life or a specific experience that triggered you to be a conscious feminist?**

**AG:** The moment that I remember was nine to twelve months after I arrived at the Ford Foundation. A new colleague was recruited; again, in the Ford Foundation there were only two other women in the international division. And nine to twelve months after I arrived, a male colleague was recruited to my office. And he was treated so dramatically differently than I had been when I arrived, and through those first nine months I couldn't help but notice. I was sort of flabbergasted. It was just a completely different kind of socialization process, and it didn't make me angry, I was just sort of curious and amazed by it. I came to realize that my male colleagues had little experience working with a young professional woman, but especially someone that was as young as I was. And in fact, I had been hired to do a job in the foundation in which, frankly, it was embarrassing even to me, in the sense that main clients, so to speak, grantees, were the heads of university population study centers, who were all men, considerably older than myself, twenty, even thirty years older than myself. I had some sympathy I think maybe forty years ago, for the situation that my colleagues were in. On the other hand, this new colleague that had joined us, was much closer to my age, and to see him treated with such camaraderie, to see him taken to lunch, to see him chatting with feet up on the table, long after office hour ended, etc, etc,

it was just a completely different socialization experience. So I was quite amazed actually. Fascinated really.

**NK: How important was Wellesley in shaping your perspective. What was your experience like college?**

**AG:** I am very devoted to Wellesley. I've been very devoted all of these years, and I believe in having some single sex education. Women had that choice. I think for me, it was highly beneficial; to leave sort of a sheltered family situation, and having something of a shelter in a women's college, and be able to become something totally different than what my family had ever known, through an outstanding education, which is in the foundation for everything I've done, and been able to do in my life. My family had no international interest whatsoever, had never traveled anywhere. And so what I do, it was just completely foreign. So Wellesley was an amazing exposure. But oddly enough there was no particular professor and no particular course that was inspiring in that way, it was the overall experience. A chance to have a group of friends that were highly diverse, and eclectic in their interest, and had the opportunity to say okay, I'm not going to do a thesis in the library, I'm going to go to Peru. It was a place where that allowed you to do that kind of thing.

**NK: How would you describe your part in this work and what is your role?**

**AG:** Mostly, I see my role over all these years as facilitating others. I was fortunate very early in my professional life, to join an organization, whose work it is to fund the work of other people, and that was the Ford Foundation. And so, in that role, I had the opportunity to identify a group of women in an enormous range of countries, working on all different aspects of women's lives and to provide the resource and the money that they needed. Also, back in those days, because there was so much opposition to that kind of work, we became real partners and colleagues. And then when I left the foundation in eighty-five and helped to create the coalition, that also was really a facilitating partnership kind of role. To first find those women who saw what needed to be done in countries and had a strong idea of what was needed, and how to do it, and to support them from the time that they first had that idea, nobody else would support them, but we could do that. Then as they got stronger, then others could come in: The Ford foundation, or Macarthur or Hughlet and others. So, that's mostly how I see my role.

**NK: Can you speak towards the challenges that you've had as a woman in your field, about being taken seriously?**

**AG:** I started my work in a field called population, and it was a field over forty years ago that was defined and led largely by men. In terms of the part of it that I worked in were those people who funded, designed, and delivered population programs, meaning family planning contraceptive services in poor countries in Asia Africa and Latin America. They were motivated by an ultimate social good, in their minds and they felt that if the population growth could be slowed then the people would be better off. But they were not really motivated by the health and human rights of the individual. The woman was the focus because it's women who get pregnant,

not men. And so that focus was there, but the woman herself as a person, as an individual who is endowed with rights, who ought to have choice who can make reasonable decisions with the right conditions, wasn't part of the construct. So, when I came into the picture, not being yet a conscious feminist, but having a very deep sense of social justice, I just couldn't understand, and could not accept, that all of the talk, of users of contraception or patients in those days, the word woman was virtually never used, and that was just an indication of how women were really an instrument, a means to an end. The idea was to get as many contraceptive users as possible. So, that doesn't sit right. Another problem was, the purpose was to get users, and there wasn't as much attention to issues such as choice of methods. Back in those days there was no such thing as a counselor in the staffing structure; all kinds of issues around quality of care were just not on the agenda. And then where I really ran head into difficulty was when, forty years ago, contraceptives were less perfect even than what they are now. And there was a lot of failure. There was a lot of unwanted pregnancy. And I felt, that at the very least we needed to offer women safe abortion as a back up. I mean, population council didn't agree with me, and I just thought, that was so unjust. We had a real struggle. There were only about three other women in the population council at the time. So, although I wasn't feminist in my consciousness, as a human being, it was such a distinction. I had never been in a circumstance in my life where I was such an extreme minority. So I began to be conscious I guess. And here were all these men, and presumably dealing primarily, with women but, not using the word? So I think my consciousness sort of began to develop.

**NK: What is at stake if women's sexual and reproductive health is not addressed? So why should people do something about it?**

**AG:** Well what I learned so many years ago, before I had actually learned it personally in my own life, I learned in Peru, that if a woman doesn't have the right to control her own body, like when she gets pregnant or whether to have a child or not, then she really has no control over the rest of her life. If she can't make those choices, if she can't get an education or she has to stay at home to take care of children, rather than work to earn income, there are so many things that can happen to girls in this life. Then, her life is forever restricted. So, she has no human rights if she can't control her own body in that way. Who touches it, with whom she has sex, whether she marries or not; if she can't control those decisions herself, then basically the rest of her human rights are meaningless. She has no effective citizenship. And the consequences, that I think society's failed to realize and families failed to realize are not just for her, she can't be the strong member of the household either, the strong helpmate to her partner, or the strong mother to her child or children she chooses to have, or the income earner, all of those other roles. Then outside the house and the community, she can't be there forcefully helping to lead the country, to govern the country, or to have a stake in what happens. So, this is why women go into the street. Whether it's driving a car in Saudi Arabia or it's protesting in Tahrir square Egypt, or all of these things add up to just being an autonomous respected human being. And I think what happens is that you can't have all of those values in this country and increasingly others aspire to democracy and human rights, if half of your population is not treated equally.

**NK: Have you felt that you've seen change since you started? Are we any better off today than we were some years ago?**

**AG:** There are certainly many women and girls who, over the years, have done a great deal. We see changes and all kinds of indicators: education rates, employment in some countries, it varies a lot by countries. We've seen more maternal mortality go down in many places. When I started, we really had a hard time finding women's organizations that would fight for women's rights, women's health and women's development. And now there are lots of them. But forty years ago it was challenging. My first visit with IWHC there was only three feminist organizations. And we've stayed close to all of them ever since. They've not only grown and flourished, but through all these years, and through consulting them in all these years, the women of Brazil have built an entire movement, and a nation wide network of women's organizations. They've had a dramatic effect on policies, on laws, on health services, on rights protection. It's really amazing. Now, not every country has been able to accomplish that much, and there are still hugely disadvantaged women and young people, in parts of Brazil, so we still have a long way to go. There are lots of examples I feel like I can give to try and encourage younger women because it looks pretty discouraging still.

**NK: Have you changed through this whole process? Has being involved in this work made you reflect on your life differently?**

**AG:** I probably have not changed enough. I get more passionate, not less. That leads me to be very demanding, not only of myself but also of others. It's very hard for me to accommodate to anyone or anything that isn't as passionate and determined to change the world for women and girls. But I think that sometimes you can be more effective if you are not so demanding. This has been my life's work, and I did marry twice, I found that marriage just was not compatible with this passion. This really is a life work for me, and I tend to forget that. And I love it, it's my choice what I've decided to do with my life. But that's not true for very many people. So that's what I mean, I probably should have changed more than I did change.

**NK: Are you hopeful about this new generation? What are your dreams about the possibilities of what is to come? If you could have it your way what would you want to see happen?**

**AG:** I'm not sure I should even comment if I could have it my way because, the problem is, I've been trying to have it my way for too long. I vacillate in regard to what I think is possible. For quite a while I felt we almost had a lost generation or two. Many of those who are my age are wondering, where are the leaders? Because that age group would be the ones to take institutions forward or, maybe initiate new ones, although these days with the economy, it's not only hard but probably fool hardy to initiate new institutions. In our field, in the international arena, that age group, who are really feminist and on the cutting edge, and are willing to compromise to get some things done, and at the core are absolutely committed to the human rights of women, its missing. So, where the hope lies is in the next younger group. There is a whole new group of younger women, new from my perspective, that I have come to know, who

are highly energized and very committed, whether they call themselves feminist or not. Devoted to the core human rights of women, and devoted to working for those rights, especially in their own countries for as long as they can sustain themselves. And all young people these days have to earn their own livelihood, so, most have to. The challenge then is to find ways to enable those devoted younger women to do this movement, or work, and still be able to earn a livelihood. That's very challenging. But I'm encouraged by the younger women because your generation has such a strong education, plus you have these amazing technologies which you use very easily, which means you can mobilize and do things that took so much more time, and effort, and money, for us to do. For us to mobilize for the nineteen ninety-four population conference in Cairo, it cost the coalition a million and a half dollars. It took us two and a half years. Now, I think your generation could mobilize in all kinds of ways. Far more people, through these technologies, [can] make an impact without having to get people together in real time, and then just a few of you could do the lobbying and the negotiations. I think there are new concepts and new ways of acting, because of the technologies that you have. It transforms capacity for people to do things.

**NK: What is your advice for young people that want to change the world, but don't know where to start?**

**AG:** Well in the advice category, I can only draw on my own experiences. This is probably a mixture of advice and hope, and that is, I hope as many as possible of the younger generation can, not only have the opportunity, but, just keep the determination to follow your heart. Very few people do. And yet the most possible rewarding life comes from following that passion. And that leads to, first of all, finding what it is. For me, I didn't know when I went to Peru, that that's where I would find it. And I didn't even know that that's what it was, until two or three years later when I [was] studying graduate school. All hell [was] breaking loose [with] protests, the Vietnam War, and God knows what, when somehow things clicked. Things just came together at a moment in time and my memories of the women that I had met, and spent time with in Peru, came flooding back, and it just made sense to me. So, it wasn't deliberate, but it was because I had an open heart that just really made it possible for me to understand that this was something I really deeply cared about. And then I had to be practical. And that [meant] setting up course work and getting skills development, a degree, [that] would enable me in the job market. I didn't get the perfect job the first time out that's for sure, but took a job that would lead [me] in the right direction, and then went from one to the next. But, in every case, [I] had the courage of my conviction, to speak out, and in the end, it turned out okay. I didn't always have to shout it, [I] had to be more diplomatic and discreet at times, although I've been branded as otherwise. You can always moderate how you speak your convictions, while still keeping your convictions, in order to influence people. And that would be really my best thought.