by Thais Corral

I am here on behalf of REDEH or Rede de Desenvolvimento Humano, a non-governmental organization in Brazil that promotes gender perspectives on health and environmental issues. I carry the message of health activists to express our support for the WHO initiative and the passage of a strong Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Since 1986, REDEH has worked with the international women's movement to use the Plans of Action of UN Conferences and apply conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women to change our lives. We can testify that international treaties can make a difference.

My most important message to you is that countries like Brazil that have economic investments in tobacco growing can and must support the treaty on tobacco control. It is a matter of confronting vested interests. The Brazilian tobacco manufacturing industry is dominated by two multinational tobacco companies, one with 83% of the market and the other with 15%. Since 1993, Brazil has been the world's leading exporter of tobacco leaf. Manufactured cigarette exports have increased by more than a hundred fold from 0.61 billion in 1981 to 63 billion in 1996, placing Brazil firmly among the world's top ten cigarette exporting nations with increased sales to Central and Eastern Europe.

Most tobacco in Brazil is grown on small family farms. In 1994-1995, there were about 130,000 tobacco farms in the country, providing employment to about one million people. These people are being exploited by a multinational corporations who take most of the profits. The exposure of women and children to dangerous pesticides makes their work hazardous to their health. The poor suffer the most.

Despite tobacco's role in the economy, the Brazilian government deplores tobacco as the cause of dreadful diseases and death and has mounted programmes to discourage its use.
There are remarkable advancements in the area of legislation with 207 laws at the municipal level and 47 at the state level. The first Federal law was approved in 1986 establishing National Anti-smoking Day. In 1999, the National Agency of Sanitary Control was given the right to regulate tobacco. The tobacco industry is obliged to report periodically on the substances included in the cigarettes. Also cigarette companies are required to advertise warning on smoking damage to health and smoking in national airlines is banned.

Redeh joined with other organizations of civil society in Brazil to raise public awareness and apply pressure for change from the bottom up. One of our activities has been to mobilize a network of 350 women’s radio programs all over the country to promote campaigns and debates on the issue of smoking for women. If we can find funding, we hope to expand our efforts to reach young people, the group with the highest increase in smoking. In these efforts our partnership with the National Coordination Centre for Tobacco Control and Primary Cancer Prevention (CONTAPP) of the National Cancer Institute (INAC) have been most productive. Cigarette sales nationally dropped dramatically from 164 billion in 1990 to 119 billion in 1996. Some of this can be credited to these cooperative efforts.

Why do we need an FCTC? The tobacco industry in Brazil has great economic power and influence. Contraband cigarettes are a growing problem in Brazil, accounting for up to 15% of cigarette consumption. Therefore, we need an international treaty that will help strengthen national efforts and reinforce them through international jurisprudence. We also need a tobacco treaty that regulates transboundary problems such as smuggling and mobilizes global consensus. Even if we can overcome vested economic interests, we are still faced with a major epidemic among youth and high demands for tobacco. According to WHO estimates, approximately 40% of men and 21% of women in Latin America and the Caribbean smoke. An FCTC that helps reduce demand sends a message to the public that tobacco is a killer.

We propose that in the negotiations, none of the related protocols should in any other way diminish existing tobacco control initiatives or regulations in any signatory country. The Convention should set a foundation on which to build and further advance national efforts. The FCTC should provide strong international measures to control problems such as advertising on the internet and satellite television advertising. And it should ensure that women's leadership and gender equality are integrated into all provisions.

Finally, it is imperative that during negotiations, governments support the principles of the human rights, international agreements and specific recommendations already undersigned by them during the UN Conferences on Environment and Development, Human Rights, Population and Development; Social Summit, the Fourth World Conference on Women, Habitat and the Food Summit. These establish the right to health and a safe environment irregardless of gender, race, ethnic, economic or social differences.
No matter how difficult, we should never give in to political pressures. In the future, governments, scientists and civil society must be committed to strongly enforcing the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. We pledge to do our part.