

Conference of the Rotarian Fellowship on Population and Development
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The Critical Role of Civil Society in Advancing the Health and Rights of Women

Introduction:

Good morning to all of you.

First, I would like to greet you all from Ms. Safiye Cagar, who unfortunately could not be here with you today as she was called at the last moment to attend another pressing business. She sends apologies and would like to wish you a fruitful and engaging conference.

It is my pleasure to be with you this morning and to talk about “*The Critical Role of Civil Society in Advancing the Health and Rights of Women*”. A topic of great importance, especially when talking about achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Since its inception, UNFPA has always worked closely with civil society in raising awareness among the public and governments on, as well as in mobilizing political and financial support for, population and development. And it has been through these partnerships that we have succeeded in putting the health and rights of women and youth and, in particular, their reproductive health, at the centre of the international development agenda.

In fact, civil society was instrumental in shaping the current population and development agenda as agreed to at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994. The Conference was of great importance to the international development debate, as it explicitly recognized that poverty reduction could not be achieved without acknowledging that population and development are inextricably linked and, furthermore, that empowering women and meeting people's individual needs for education and health, including reproductive health, is central to development and poverty reduction. Advancing gender equality, eliminating violence against women and ensuring women's ability to control their own fertility were recognized as cornerstones of population and development policies.

The Programme of Action emanating from this conference added to UNFPA's current mandate and influenced the outcomes of many succeeding international conferences, including the 2000 Millennium Summit, which was the cradle of Millennium Development Goals, or the MDGs.

The MDGs provide a time-bound, achievable blueprint for eradicating extreme poverty and promoting sustainable development by focusing on eight interrelated goals, namely

eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child death; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development.

At the 2005 World Summit, and in response to the pressing need to urgently step up efforts to save women's lives, governments also agreed to the integration of the ICPD-inspired target of "universal access to reproductive health by 2015", as part of the MDG framework, and in particular in relation to MDG 5, on maternal health.

Challenges:

But despite this significant progress at political level, major challenges remain. In fact, reproductive health problems continue to be the leading cause of ill health and death for women of childbearing age in the developing world, and particularly the poorest countries.

Each year, an estimated 530,000 women die from preventable pregnancy-related causes, and another 15 million women suffer complications from pregnancy, leading to illness and disability, including obstetric-Fistula, which is a devastating childbearing injury that causes chronic incontinence.

Many of these deaths and illnesses could have been prevented if appropriate reproductive health services, including family planning, would have been available. These cases also painfully demonstrate that without access to reproductive health services and information, MDGs, such as improving maternal health, reducing child mortality and combating HIV/AIDS, but also gender equality, are not likely to be achieved.

In 2005 alone, HIV/AIDS took the lives of almost three million people. About 40 million people live with HIV and, every day, another 14,000 people — half of them aged 15 to 24 — become infected. And HIV/AIDS is increasingly getting a women's face. Therefore, UNFPA stresses the need to do more to help make women **SAFER**. As such, it works towards promoting:

- S** - Sexual and reproductive health, closely integrated with all anti-HIV efforts
- A** - Access to prevention, treatment, care and support
- F** - Female-controlled methods, including female condoms and the development of microbicides
- E** - Empowerment and Education of Women, and
- R** - Rights—when the human rights of women are promoted, protected and fulfilled, women are less vulnerable to HIV infection.

Linkages RH-MDGs

Reproductive health, including family planning, is about empowering men and women with the information and means to make responsible, voluntary and informed choices

about their reproductive lives, including the number, spacing and timing of their children, as well as the right of young women to marry the men of their choices.

But what does this mean in terms of **poverty eradication**?

Poverty limits people's reproductive choices and, every day, millions of women and girls, as well as men and boys suffer the consequences of the lack of access to reproductive health information and services in their communities. Early and frequent pregnancies, lack of obstetric care, absence of midwives, lack of commodities and ignorance on sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, continue to obstruct the health and productive capacities of individuals and their families, as well as increase the pressure on social and health infrastructures of communities.

But beyond saving lives and promoting healthy lives, access to reproductive health is also key to the empowerment of women as it will allow them and their partners to decide if, when and how often to have children. By planning her family, a woman also increases her opportunities to obtain education or other skills, which will allow her to make better choices in life and to contribute concretely to poverty reduction and the development of her country.

Among these choices may be a woman's decision to find a paying job, or start a small business, perhaps with the support of micro-credit or work cooperatives. Economic empowerment of women will not only lead to an increase of the total household income, it will also positively affect her negotiation power, and thereby her raise her status, within that household. As women are more likely to save, and invest in the health and education of their children, -- all **key** ingredients to breaking the cycle of poverty, -- such shifts in decision-making power can have far-reaching implications for the well-being of families, and, thereby, the community and the nation.

As *The Economist* in its April edition noted, "Forget China, India and the Internet, economic growth is driven by women". In this very interesting edition, the author highlights how the increase in female employment in the rich world has been a major driving force of growth in the past couple of decades.

In other words, poverty eradication cannot be seen separately from reproductive health and women's empowerment as they are inextricably linked and interdependent.

Role of civil society

However, political agreement alone is not enough to advance the development agenda; it must be followed up with concrete actions and resources.

And it is here that civil society, parliamentarians and the private sector can play a tremendous role. Through networks, concrete activities and campaigns at national, regional and global levels, civil society groups have an important role in informing citizens about policy choices, can influence policy debates and can open up public space for discussions. Over the years, civil society has assumed an essential role in the setting

of norms and standards. Increasingly, they have been keeping governments in tune with public opinion, whether at national, regional or global levels.

To demonstrate, the ICPD, as well as the inclusion of reproductive health as part of the MDG framework would not have been thinkable without the consolidated and persistent effort of these groups at national, regional and international levels to sensitize their governments, as well as their constituencies, on the critical importance of advancing the women's health agenda as part of the MDGs.

As such, many of the prominent issues of our time have been advanced and shaped by civil society movements, propelled by the power of public opinion which they help shape. Take gender relations, human rights, the environment, AIDS treatment, child soldiers, debt relief and landmines, --- all extremely encouraging examples of how great the influence of citizens, through organizations, can be in the international development debate. Just to mention, for example, how Amnesty International helped to put human rights at the heart of the international agenda, and the Landmine Campaign led the fight against landmines.

And being an organization of such great magnitude, deep social ties, and political and financial power, Rotary International has a unique opportunity to use its influence to confront one of the most important and difficult challenges of our times and to champion the efforts to save mother's lives in developing countries. I therefore invite you to use your skills, networks and good hearts to launch a major initiative in all Rotary districts aimed at the prevention of maternal death by making motherhood safer.

Without the necessary resources and support, women and their children will continue to face easily preventable death. There is an urgent need to work together to ensure that appropriate resources are allocated to reproductive health and saving women's lives in the fight against poverty as part of the MDG framework.

UNFPA- Rotary International

UNFPA and Rotary International signed their first Memorandum of Understanding in 2001 as the framework for collaboration in achieving the mutual objectives "to alleviate human suffering and to empower all persons to develop to their fullest potential". The memorandum, which was recently extended until June 2008, aims to promote sustainable human development and poverty reduction by addressing issues related to reproductive health, safe motherhood, HIV/AIDS prevention, gender equality and the education and well-being of young people.

Over the years, this agreement has led to several interesting initiatives, including in countries such as India, Mexico, Nepal or Nigeria, where UNFPA and Rotary Districts and Clubs and the respective governments have been working together in providing health services and literacy training; fighting the spread of HIV; promoting human rights; and raising awareness on population and environmental issues.

While encouraging, much more needs to be done if we are to live up to our common goal to alleviate human suffering and prevent millions of women and girls from an unnecessary death. And, as the needs are the greatest at grass-roots level, there is a lot that you, as Rotarians, can do to make a difference in your respective countries and communities.

To name a few, practical interventions such as providing necessary equipment to health clinics, midwifery schools, and emergency obstetric care facilities, or providing communications and transport for remote rural communities to ensure that pregnant women can get to the nearest clinic or hospital, can make the difference between a mother and her baby's life or death.

Also, through stimulating income-generating opportunities for women, you stimulate women's empowerment, and, therefore, the well-being and health of family's health. Similarly, promoting and supporting girls' education will have long-lasting societal and health benefits. Another suggestion would be to reach out to men to increase their participation and support in reproductive health, as an essential step to improving gender equality and better reproductive health.

Another idea would be for Rotary Clubs in developed countries to partner with a selected Rotary Clubs in developing countries to support advancing women's health, empowerment and girl education.

The UNFPA country offices in your respective countries are well equipped to provide you with information on these issues, as well as technical guidance in identifying appropriate partners for collaboration to implement your initiatives.

In line with the agreement with Rotary International, we encourage all Rotarians Clubs, as well as fellowships or groups, which are interested in approaching UNFPA to work through their respective Rotary International District Governors or their representatives. This will help us focus our efforts and maximize our collaboration.

Rotary International has proven to be able to move mountains; the Polio campaign is a beautiful example. It is my wish to see Rotary do the same for the health and rights of women worldwide – *the* challenge of the 21st century.

I wish you a wonderful session today and thank you for your attention.