



International Day of Families

Mothers and Families: Challenges in a Changing World

Statement by:

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- It is my pleasure to be here with you all today, in commemoration of International Day of Families.
- While there may be new challenges to motherhood in today's ever-changing world, an age old issue which affects the lives of mothers, to-be mothers, and their children, continue to plague us still. Decades after the international community committed itself to making motherhood safer, the relentless toll of mothers dying continues: every minute, another woman is taken from her loved ones. Every minute, a family loses its centre. A child loses a mother's love and protection. And the inequities are clear: in sub-Saharan Africa, a woman's risk of dying from treatable or preventable complications of pregnancy and childbirth over the course of her lifetime is 1 in 22, while that of a woman in a developed region is 1 in 7,300. Improving maternal health, Millennium Development Goal 5, is the goal with the least progress to date.
- Furthermore, more than 10 million women a year suffer severe or long-lasting illnesses or disabilities, from obstetric fistula to infertility, depression and impoverishment caused by complications of pregnancy or childbirth. The potential struggles that motherhood poses cannot be properly addressed without the talking about this fundamental human right.
- Strategies to prevent maternal mortality are well known. They start with providing quality maternal health care services, including family planning, skilled birth attendance and emergency obstetric care. But they don't end there: Maternal health is linked to many other issues, including gender dynamics such as power relations between a woman, her partner and extended family members; the existence of a strong cadre of human resources including midwives – referred to as the 'bridge between the communities and facilities'; health sector reform which aims to deliver quality care including universal access to reproductive health; and political will on behalf of leaders to push for implementation of laws, policies and frameworks such as CEDAW and Convention on the Rights of the Child for example.

- UNFPA, along with other sister agencies including UNICEF and WHO, supports safe motherhood initiatives in many countries across the globe. Programmes like the midwifery initiative, emphasize capacity development in maternal care, especially the strengthening of needed human resources. UNFPA seeks to make motherhood as safe as possible during crisis situations that compound women's vulnerability. And the Fund's work to prevent fistula is also making pregnancy safer by calling attention to health systems that are failing to meet the needs of women during the critical time of childbirth. In 2008, UNFPA along with a number of partners, established a Thematic Fund for Maternal Health to increase the capacity of health systems to provide a broad range of quality maternal health services, reduce health inequities, and empower women to exercise their right to maternal health. Other key initiatives to accelerate progress in making motherhood safer include the Global Programme on Reproductive Health Commodity Security and the Campaign to End Fistula.
- Part of the solution also lies in empowering women and improving access to reproductive health care more generally, especially women and girls who come from the most marginalized groups. Poor women have the greatest need while their families and society as a whole have much to gain from improvements in reproductive health conditions. Typically the ones with least access to contraception – these women are challenged with making the decision to determine the number and spacing of her children. Family planning allows women to delay childbearing so they can complete their education, participate in the labor force while acquiring skills and experience. This can have a profound impact on a woman's empowerment, as she is able to make free and informed choices about the timing and size of her family. Maternal and infant health improves as a mother is better able to look after her baby while the spacing of her children offers her more opportunities both social and economic.
- At the same time, mothers and children are greatly affected by gender inequality. Discrimination against women and girls - including gender-based violence and harmful practices – have far-reaching consequences.

Women and girls also bear enormous hardship during and after humanitarian emergencies, especially armed conflicts.

- The girl child and adolescent girls are increasingly at risk of missed opportunities. Girls aged 15 - 20 are twice as likely to die in childbirth as those in their twenties. Girls under the age of 15 are five times as likely to die. Girls aged 15 -19 account for one in four unsafe abortions – an estimated 5 million each year. Complications of pregnancy or childbearing represent the leading cause of mortality for girls aged 15-19 in developing countries.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, women and girls account for almost 57 per cent of adults living with HIV. In most regions, women and girls make up an increasing proportion of the population living with HIV, and rates of female infection continue to rise – particularly in Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America.
- Women take on multiple roles, especially given their productive and reproductive responsibilities. Yet their contributions both at home and in the public sphere often remain unrecognized and unpaid. While there is no doubt that HIV has a profound psychological, physical and social impact on the entire family, the caregiving responsibility, whether for orphans or support to family members living with HIV, falls mostly on the shoulders of the women and girls within the family. In countries hardest hit, most of the care for people living with HIV takes place in the home, and up to 90 per cent of that is provided by women and girls. Due to the demands of caring for others, many female caregivers have less time to look after their own health, earn an income, produce food, go to school, and maintain the rest of the household. This creates a vicious cycle, whereby women and their families are more likely to be malnourished and in poor health.
- Violence against women is a global crisis, a human rights violation and health concern which leaves no community untouched. Furthermore, the connections between gender based violence and family violence have been

iterated time and again in studies and reports. Children who are exposed to violence in the home, including violence inflicted on their mothers, sisters, aunts, or other women in their family, are more likely to repeat such behaviors themselves, later on in life.

- While it may be true that we have a long way to go before we achieve gender equality, there are promising recommendations that can be offered as solutions to address these challenges.
- In the case of ending violence against women for example, leadership and political will are among the most important ingredients for halting this human rights violation. The United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's Campaign UNITE to End Violence Against Women is an illustration of the type of strong and sustained leadership that can make a difference in garnering political will at the highest levels of Government. The Secretary General is committed to the issue of ending violence against women. He states "violence against women and girls continues unabated in every continent, country and culture. It takes a devastating toll on women's lives, on their families and on society as a whole. Most societies prohibit such violence –yet the reality is that too often, it is covered up or tacitly condoned."
- United Nations agencies – each with its own vantage point based on their mandates and comparative advantages – are working to drive efforts on the Secretary General's Campaign – which has an overall objective to increase public awareness, political will and resources for preventing and responding to violence against women and girls. The United Nations is taking leadership on the issue as evidenced by the multi-agency Task Force on Violence against Women's efforts to support Country Teams in Yemen, Jordan, the Philippines, Rwanda, Kyrgyzstan, Fiji, Chile, Jamaica, Paraguay and Burkina Faso to prevent and respond to violence against women.
- Promising tools for gender mainstreaming at the policy level, such as gender responsive budgeting, have been developed to decipher and alleviate

inequitable resource allocation for example. Gender responsive budgeting helps to trace the way that budgets respond to women's priorities and the way that governments use funds to reduce poverty, promote gender equality, reverse the spread of HIV and lower the rates of maternal and child mortality, particularly through effective and efficient service delivery. Tracking this resource flow allows one to see who benefits from public resources and how. It helps ensure government accountability to the commitments that were made to women and girls during the Cairo and Beijing Conferences as well as the Millennium Development Goals.

- Raising gender equitable children is a great challenge that parents and extended family members who are engaging in child rearing face. The preferential treatment to boys, sometimes even by mothers themselves, leads to persistent discrimination against girls, forcing them to miss out on opportunities including education and not to mention - time to be a child. Programmes and initiatives, either in-school or out-of school, which aim to reach boys and young men are critical as early socialization is key to reversing hegemonic masculinities which are harmful not only to girls and women, but to boys and men themselves. Efforts which aim to better ensure that these common and often destructive perceptions of what it means to be a 'man' are no longer inherited and passed down should continue to be supported and scaled up.
- Investing in the education of girls is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty. Daughters of educated mothers are more likely to attend school, while studies show that a mother's education also translates into higher immunization rates and better nutrition for her children. Every year of mothers' education corresponds to 5 to 10 per cent lower mortality rates in children under the age of five. At the same, education improves reproductive health as educated women are more likely to seek adequate prenatal care, skilled attendance during childbirth and to use contraception. Educated girls are more likely to delay marriage and childbearing, and instead acquire skills for their future.

- Harmful practices such as child marriages, female genital mutilation/cutting, too many childbirths and violence also diminish girls' ambitions and dreams of leading fulfilling and prosperous lives. Through advocacy and community mobilization, using a culturally sensitive approach to programming, change is possible. Achieving the Millennium Development Goals and abandoning harmful practices for example, depends largely on the ownership of local communities. Efforts to develop and sustain an enabling environment for the achievement of development goals, including universal access to reproductive health, necessitates that local resources are harnessed and mobilized.
- Building bridges between universal rights and local cultural and ethical values is a key strategy to provide the motivation to individuals and communities to understand and own these universal rights. Through culturally sensitive approaches an effective mix of tools for building such bridges is possible. UNFPA uses the 'culture lens' which facilitates positive negotiation environments in which universal rights can be explored and understood by local communities and their traditional and religious leaders, who are often perceived by communities as the custodians of their culture.
- UNFPA, since its inception, has been tasked with implementing these goals which reside in the most sensitive and intimate spheres of life, such as reproductive health and rights, including as they relate to adolescents and youth, gender relations and population issues. To face these challenges, the Fund has been examining its programming strategies to develop more inclusive programming approaches that encompass culture and religion and the roles played by local power structures and institutions in mobilizing communities to become active partners in development.
- Collaboration and partnerships with faith based actors, community organizations, indigenous groups among others, have proved instrumental in neutralizing resistance and creating local ownership of the ICPD Programme of Action.

- On this occasion of International Day of Families, it is important to underscore the notion of fatherhood and the role of men and boys in gender-equitable families.
- Men's participation in domestic chores, including child care, and their participation in child and maternal health is positive for women, freeing up time for them to work outside the home, to study or to pursue activities for themselves and their households.
- Research shows that when fathers are involved in the lives of children, children's social and emotional development benefit and they often perform better in school and have healthier relationships as adults.
- Experience reflects that positive engagement as caregivers and fathers is good for men themselves. Men who are involved in meaningful ways with their children report this relationship to be one of their most important sources of well-being and happiness.
- Connecting with boys and young men offers the greatest opportunity to instill gender equitable values early on. Boys who grow up around positive male role models are more likely to question gender inequities and harmful stereotypes. Ideas about manhood are deeply ingrained as boys - at an early age - may be socialized into gender roles designed to keep men in power and in control. Many grow up to believe that dominant behaviour towards girls and women is part of being a man. At the same time, these perceptions are detrimental to their own well-being. Males between the ages of 15 and 24, have the riskiest behaviours related to HIV transmission, including having multiple sexual partners and injecting drug use.
- Clearly men and boys need to be involved if gender equality is to be achieved and development programmes are to succeed. In doing so, we must recognize that gender roles and relations are dependent on social contexts in which cultural, religious, economic, political and social circumstances are intertwined. UNFPA, along with other members of the UN family, are part of the

MenEngage Alliance, an alliance of NGOs and UN agencies that seek to engage boys and men to achieve gender equality.

- As we all continue to work through our diverse and varying ways, towards ensuring that every man, woman and child can exercise their human rights, the need to harmonize our efforts emerges. The bridging of various partnerships including the global women's movement with non-traditional groups and actors such as civil society organizations including faith based organizations, human rights networks, and men's alliances will be necessary. These challenges can be worked through by engaging in effective negotiation and employing an understanding of the interests of these diverse stakeholders – for the sake of families across the globe.
- In closing, I would like to emphasize on this occasion of International Day of Families, that a mother's love and nurturing are the foundation of many families in every corner of the Earth. Let us work together to ensure that every mother has the support, resources and opportunities she needs to fulfill her role as a mother, partner, and individual exercising her human right to lead a full and promising life. Safe motherhood, positive fatherhood, and gender equality are pillars for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and for existence of happy and healthy families the world over.

Thank you.