

On Women's Health and Rights
Lectures, Speeches and Statements
Mahmoud F. Fathalla

Be brave and angry
Acceptance Speech
IPPF First Award for Outstanding Achievement in Sexual
and Reproductive Health and Rights
IPPF Governing Council, London November 22, 2009

It is a great honour to receive this prestigious award from IPPF Governing Council, and to be in the company of my distinguished fellow awardees, Mr Kon and Ms Dingle.

An old man cannot resist reminiscences, and I hope will be forgiven for it. The last time I have been at the IPPF Council meeting was in November 1993 in Washington DC, that is 16 years ago. For many years before, I regularly attended the Council meeting and had the honour to give the distinguished members a report from their International Medical Advisory Panel. Today, I am here not to give but to get. Sixteen years is a long time in the short human life. A lot has changed about the Council and about myself during those years. The Council asserted its authority and became a Governing Council instead of Central Council, while, myself, I lost authority and became a retired professor. I grew much older, while the Council grew younger, with the infusion of the fresh blood of its youth members. I lost what remained of hair on top of my head, while the Council became more pretty and beautiful with an appropriate gender mix. But one thing did not change in the distinguished Council: the unwavering commitment to women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

I accept the Council's award with gratitude and humility. I am very aware that there are many other individuals who richly deserve the award. For my award, I would like to give the credit to where it belongs. The credit really goes to the women I was privileged to stand behind as they claimed and struggled to secure their God-given rights. It is these women in all countries who deserve the award for their outstanding achievements towards their sexual and reproductive health and rights. It is true that in many countries, women still have some steep mountains to climb. But women are not for turning.

I take it that the distinguished Council in initiating these awards is sending a signal to the world. The signal is that we are making progress. While we know that the battle is far from being over, we see victory at the horizon. We have no reason for complacency but we have reasons to celebrate and we will celebrate.

In this speech, I want to talk with you only about the IPPF I loved, and I continue to love. In any long standing love relationship, as this mature audience of women and men well knows, it is not easy to define exactly a point when the love actually began. But I remember the time in the early 1970's, after I have been privileged for a number of years

to serve the health needs of women in a community where people are poor and where women are the poorest of the poor. I saw how women cope in a life that does not treat them fairly or well. I came to the conviction that powerlessness of women is a serious health hazard, and that health of women is often compromised not because of lack of medical knowledge or even services, but because of infringements on their human rights. I reached the conclusion that improvements in women's health need more than what the health profession and the health service can offer. They need societal action that has long been overdue to correct injustices to women. And, that was the time when I read a 1973 book with the title "Be Brave and Angry", chronicling 20 years of IPPF work. That was it. That was what the world needed and that was what I loved. I loved and I continue to love an IPPF that has been, still is and I hope will continue to be brave and angry. There is still a lot for IPPF to be angry about. There is also a lot where IPPF needs to command its courage, and to continue its just support for women's sexual and reproductive rights.

How can our IPPF of today not be angry when every minute or two a young woman in the prime of her life gives up her life to give us a new life? For many more women, serious morbidity leaves them as better off if they were dead. These women fulfilling their noble social function for survival of our species are not dying because of conditions we cannot treat. To put it bluntly, they are dying because their societies have yet to make the decision that their lives are worth saving. The inconvenient truth, and let us face it, is that the health scandal of maternal deaths is a question of how much the life of a mother and a woman is considered worth.

How can our IPPF not be angry when every eight minutes a woman has to lose her life because of an unwanted pregnancy and an unsafe abortion? Different views and beliefs about abortion are to be respected. But we cannot close our eyes and shut our ears to a global public health tragedy that should bear heavily on our collective conscience.

How can our IPPF not be angry when the AIDS pandemic is being increasingly feminized? Most of the women are acquiring HIV not because of their own sexual behaviors but because their partners engage in unsafe behaviors. A very recent study from UNAIDS reports that more than 90% of women living with HIV acquired the virus from their husbands or from their boyfriends while in long-term relationships, and that at least 50 million women in Asia alone are at risk of acquiring HIV from their intimate partners. We speak of intimate partner violence and it is receiving the deserved high level international and national concern. We should also be speaking, with equal concern, about intimate partner sexual transmission of infections including HIV. Even if less visible, it is much more serious, and can be a matter of life and death.

How can our IPPF not be angry when the world, privileged to have the largest generation of young people in its whole history, past and future, is squandering this fortune? Short sighted governments, not taking advantage of this demographic bonus, which will not be there forever, are missing a great opportunity that will not come back. Young people, a major asset, are being turned into a liability. Instead of harnessing the powers of youth, ways are being sought to disempower them and deprive them of the information, skills

and services they need. By any unbiased economic assessment, investment today in the girl child and adolescent, in particular, is an investment with high return.

How can our IPPF not be angry when a world expresses major concern about population growth, and unjustifiably blames women for it, when more than 200 million women are left with an unmet need for family planning? IPPF is angry when women are coerced into contraceptive use or sterilization. But IPPF should also be angry when women are coerced into motherhood. Women are coerced into motherhood when they, or subgroups of them, are denied access to information and means to control their fertility. More important and more pervasive, women are coerced into motherhood when they are denied any choices in their lives apart from childbearing and child rearing, and where children are considered the only goods which women are expected to deliver.

Our IPPF is right to be angry when some governments are short sighted not to see that when women, even the poor and illiterate women I know best, are given real choices in their reproductive lives, are provided access to the information and the means, and are empowered to implement their choices, they will make the right decisions for themselves, for their families, for their communities, for their countries and for the world at large.

The IPPF I loved, I continue to love, and the world continues to need is not only angry but also brave and risk taking.

Our brave IPPF does not trail in the path of governments. It does not go where the path may lead. It ventures where there is no path, and leaves a trail for others, including governments, to follow.

The IPPF I love, and the IPPF the world needs, does not chicken out in front of imaginary red lines. It continues its brave march, armed with evidence-based advocacy, and pursuing culturally sensitive approaches that respect people, understand people and work with people, and above all never gives up.

Our brave IPPF stands firm in the face of the rise of so-called “fundamentalism” in our world. A small but vocal minority is spreading within every continent, every race and every religion. With a tunnel vision, a strong belief in an exclusive ownership of the truth and the illusion of a mission to force their vision on others, their favourite target has unfortunately been women and women’s rights.

Our brave IPPF is more than a good match to face the challenge of the war against woman. With 147 Member Associations, unified as represented in this distinguished Council, IPPF has the power and the courage to be the loud voice of the voiceless. In Addis Ababa last month, in addressing the 4th International Parliamentarians’ Conference, Dr Gil Greer cited an African wisdom that says: “To go fast, go alone; to go far take others with you”. Our brave IPPF has its sight on going far, and, united, it will go far, and will take others with it. I want to end by citing another piece of African wisdom: “Even spider webs when they unite, can halt a lion”. Our distinguished Member Associations are not spider webs, and our cowardly adversaries are not lions. United in

IPPF, we stand. united, and we are gaining ground. Our adversaries are on the wrong right side of history. We are the future. God willing, we will prevail.

Long live a brave and angry IPPF.

**IPPF award for individual
contribution to sexual and
reproductive health and rights
Mahmoud Fathalla**

Professor Fathalla is a social leader who has taken decisive action in promotion, realization and defense of sexual and reproductive health human right and who has demonstrated a positive impact on the IPPF mission and vision.

Professor Fathalla is a son of the Arab World, but is a true global citizen, outstanding professional, and one of the world's leading obstetrician/gynaecologists. His pioneering work in associating maternal mortality with medical ethics and human rights ensured that the world saw the human face behind the global maternal mortality statistics. In large part due to his efforts, we all know that more than 536,000 young women die each year of causes related to pregnancy and childbirth, but his exposing maternal mortality as a human rights problem has been phenomenal in raising awareness. He has a magnificent ability not only to master difficult issues, but also to turn them into issues that everyone can understand and care

Professor Fathalla has not shyed away from difficult and awkward issues in a particularly challenging area of the world. His professional standing, vision, courage and intellect, have resulted in professor Fathalla being an effective advocate for Women and women's rights over a prolonged time. IPPF were extremely fortunate in that Professor Fathalla was a founder of IMAP (International Medical Advisory panel) - later chairing the organization. In addition, he has recently written a ground-breaking book entitled 'Issues in Women's Health and Right- International, Arab Regional and Egyptian perspectives', which he has allowed IPPF to distribute.

This groundbreaking and compassionate work was recently recognized and rewarded by the award of the United Nations Population Award, Individual Category.

Consequently, in recognition of the above years of dedicated service for reproductive health and rights. IPPF presents Professor Mahmoud Fathalla with the award for Individual Contributions to Sexual Health and Rights.

Dr J S Sharpe
President
International Planned Parenthood Federation
21 November 2009