

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

Highlights and challenges of safe motherhood

Safe Motherhood: Progress and Challenges
Symposium on World Health Day
World Bank, Washington D.C.
April 7, 1998

In this talk I want to share with you few thoughts as someone who has been involved, professionally and emotionally, in the initiative of safe motherhood, from its beginning and before its beginning, and also as an obstetrician who had the privilege to serve the health needs of women, mostly poor women, in an underdeveloped region of a developing country. For us obstetricians and midwives who have practiced in developing countries, maternal mortality is not about numbers and statistics. It is about women who have names. It is about human faces seen in the throes of agony, distress, and despair, faces which continue to live in our memories and continue to haunt our dreams. This is not simply because these are young women in the prime of their lives who die at a time of expectation and joy. It is not simply because a maternal death is one of the most terrible ways to die, be it bleeding to death, unbearable bangs of obstructed labor, convulsive fits of eclampsia, or the agony of puerperal sepsis. It is not simply because of this that maternal mortality is such a human tragedy. It is because, in retrospect, almost each and every case of maternal death is an event that could have been avoided and should not have been allowed to happen.

This is a great event and a great day for women and mothers. I take it that the World Bank is not just hosting this big event, with this high level participation. I take it that the Bank is sending a powerful signal to governments and to the international community. It is a signal from their knowledgeable and honest investment broker, advising them to invest in safe motherhood.

When the safe motherhood initiative was launched, we had three major challenges. The first challenge was to make the case that motherhood should be made safe. The second challenge was to demonstrate that motherhood can be made safe and that we can afford to make it safe. The third challenge was to build up and sustain the political commitment and to generate the resources necessary to make motherhood safe.

Motherhood should be made safe for women. I do not want to take time preaching to the converted. But I want to share two thoughts with you. The first thought is from biology. Biology teaches us that motherhood was one of the greatest inventions in Nature. The evolution of what biologists call maternal behaviour, or M.B. for short, revolutionized reproduction. Biologists remark that species which mother their offspring have dominated every ecological niche in which

they dwell. They go further to suggest that mothering was an essential prerequisite for the evolution of higher intelligence. Biologists say we are classified in the distinguished category of mammals because we have mothers to mother us. Unfortunately, not everyone has. Children of the world are saying we need our mothers; we need them alive; we need them healthy.

For my next thought about why motherhood should be made safe, I want to refer to language. I always applaud the English language for using the word "labor" to designate what women do in giving birth to a child. My old edition of the Oxford dictionary defines labor as "exertion of body or mind", which is what women do in pregnancy and childbirth. Unfortunately, it is a labor that has never been unionized, or maybe is yet to unionize. Nevertheless, women have a right, a basic right, to be protected while they labor for us in the risky task of giving a new life.

The next challenge was can we make motherhood safe. Since the safe motherhood initiative was launched in Nairobi in 1987, the work of the agencies assembled here, with high representation, has demonstrated that motherhood can be made safe. The report of the technical consultation convened in Colombo last year sums for us the experiences and lessons learnt in a decade of hard work on how to make motherhood safe.

Not only do we know how to make motherhood safe, but we can afford to make it safe. The World Bank report in 1993 on Investing in Health has shown that the interventions needed for safe motherhood are cost-effective. We can add another dimension to this. Typical of mothers, anything they need for themselves will also benefit others. For their safety, women need to be able to plan their births; the whole world will benefit. Mothers need community-based primary health care that includes prenatal care and delivery by a trained birth attendant; the impact of these services is much more on infant survival than on safe motherhood. Mothers need essential and emergency obstetric care to be available and accessible at the first referral level; the facilities and skills needed to provide these services are not unique for women; they will be used to save many other lives.

We learned a hard lesson in the past decade. Motherhood cannot be made safe without essential and emergency obstetric care. Pregnancy and childbirth are a risky business. Unfortunately, the risks are often neither predictable nor preventable. It is a risk that unites women, all women, and does not discriminate between the rich and the poor. While the risks are not predictable or preventable, they are all manageable. To make motherhood safe, essential and emergency obstetric care should be made available and accessible to all mothers when and if the need arises. For this, there is no alternative. The International Federation of Gynecology and obstetrics, with support from UNFPA, Pharmacia-Upjohn Company and hopefully the World Bank, is now mobilizing obstetricians worldwide to meet the challenge of organizing maternity care services, and making the best and most efficient utilization of available resources.

The third challenge is about commitment and resources. If motherhood should be made safe, can be made safe, and we can afford to make it safe, what is hindering the will, the will to make it safe and to commit the resources necessary to make it safe?. I submit to you, with sadness in my heart, that it is a question of how much the life of a woman is considered worth. A painful lesson I learnt from colleagues in economics is that, consciously or subconsciously, society sets a

monetary value for each human life, and this will in turn decide how much society is willing to spend to save that life, in other words, deciding who shall live and who shall die. My colleagues in economics taught me further that the invisible price tag on human life is set on the basis of two considerations: how much society has invested in you and how much society expects from you and values your product. Applying this cold and cruel logic to the reality of women's lives in the world today, it is clear that the investment in girls is very much lagging behind, and that the product of women's work, much that it counts, goes mostly uncounted.

I submit to you also that an additional factor not helping in getting the will and the wallet for safe motherhood is that few women are in the position of decision making about the allocation of resources, particularly in countries where these resources are scarce.

Women, worldwide, should mobilize for the right to safe motherhood, basically the woman's right to life. It is true that women in the North have mostly forgotten what maternal mortality is. But for their sisters in the South, the journey of pregnancy and childbirth is still dangerous and many do not return.

I want to conclude by leaving you with a scene from the Bible which always comes up in front of my eyes when I think about women, motherhood and the world today. It is the scene of the Egyptian maid, Hagar, bearing the child of Abram, sitting lonely and desperate in the wilderness, where the Angel of the LORD found her and said unto her: "thou art with child and the LORD hath heard thy affliction." In today's world, millions of women are to be found lonely and desperate in the wilderness of neglect and the darkness of social injustice; and when they are with child, their loud screams often go unheard. Let us pray together today that the Angel of the LORD will find them all and will tell them what the Egyptian maid was told: You are with child and GOD has heard your affliction. And let us vow together today, before GOD, that we will see to it that no woman with child will be left alone in the wilderness of neglect. We all will help.