

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

**Diversity and women's health and rights**  
Acceptance speech  
Doctor Honoris Causa, Hasselt University  
May 30, 2011

It was a real pleasure in February this year when I heard from Professor Ombelet, a colleague I have always admired before I had the privilege of knowing personally. For many years, I have been following his noble work to make the blessing and joy of motherhood accessible to poor unfortunate women in developing countries. Then it was a pleasant surprise to learn about the nomination, knowing that there are many others who richly deserve this recognition and honour, and also learning about the very distinguished scientists with whom I will share the honour. Then it was a particular pleasure to know the theme for this year's university celebration: the theme of diversity. In a long career, diversity has been a concern for me, and in three capacities. I had the concern as an advocate for women's health and rights. I had the concern as a health professional. And I had the concern as a citizen of the world. Let me share with you a perspective from these three concerns, each of which left me with a message.

Let me start as an advocate of women's health and rights. When I was much younger than I am, I was privileged to serve the health needs of women in a community in which people are mostly poor and women are the poorest of the poor. I came face to face with the reality of women's lives. I saw how women cope in a life that does not treat them fairly or well. I saw how heavy dust, accumulated through many dark centuries, has obscured the beautiful face of a woman-friendly culture, and reversed the progress of what was a great religious-inspired women liberation movement. I came to the conviction that powerlessness of women is a serious health hazard. When I moved into the international field, I came face to face with the diversity of our world. I realized, in this diversity, that powerlessness of women is much more pervasive. I realized also that women in different countries and in diverse cultures have much more in common than what superficially meets the eye. They have common aspirations, common concerns and common grievances. I also realized that the rights which women are still denied in some parts of our world today are the same rights which their now better off sisters only gained after a long hard struggle. Let me share just one example from my country. Last year highly qualified women lawyers were denied the right to sit as court judges. Now, let us not forget that in this great country of gender equality, Marie Popelin, the first Belgian female lawyer, was also refused to practice the profession for which she was highly qualified. She did not give up the struggle. The right of access to the bar was finally granted to women, although it was only after she died. The message to women in diverse situations is one of encouragement. What women have done women can do.

Let me move next to a perspective as a health professional. Because of the specifics of our specialty, I came face to face with diversity. I tell my students that it is our fate in the profession of Obstetrics and gynaecology to practice in a widely disputed territory, a part of the female body for which there are many diverse claimants. There is no culture or social system, no moral code and no religion that did not concern itself with sex and human reproduction and set their own very diverse values and judgments, values and judgments that are commonly not women-friendly. The message is that women still have a long way to liberate this disputed territory and to unify all their body. Our health profession has to stand behind them and beside them as they claim their right to have all their body as their own.

After more than 25 years in the international arena, I think I can make a claim for citizenship of the world. We live in a world of diversity and we will continue to live in a world of diversity. This is what God has ordained at the time of Babel, when we were scattered upon the face of all the earth. But, as a citizen of the world, I came to know that there is unity in diversity. We, all, are travelers together on board of one fragile spaceship, our little planet earth cruising in a vast universe. Some of us are on upper deck. Others, less privileged, are in lower deck. But, whatever happens with those of us in lower deck or in upper deck of this spaceship is a concern for all of us. We share a common destiny.

To us, people coming from another part of the world, Belgium stands as a symbol for one of the most impressive and inspiring experiments in human history: an experiment for unity in diversity. A diverse community of 500 million people, living in 27 countries and speaking 23 languages successfully comes together. And they do not come together just for themselves to lead a better life, but also to try to make a better world for the rest of us.

At the end of a long career as an advocate for women's health and rights, as a health professional, and as a citizen of the world, I can look back with some satisfaction. Progress has been made and is being made. True, women in many parts of the world, including the region that I know best, still have some steep mountains to climb. But women are not for turning.

What can universities, like your distinguished institution here, do about it? Universities carry the torch of knowledge. They can shed light for us to allow us to see the diverse world for what it is. We will see things in diversity that we should celebrate. But if light exposes things we are not happy about, and it will, so be it. We still need the light. God made light as first thing to create a world, saying "Let there be light". One of my favourite quotations is ascribed to a Belgian artist, Rene Magrittes. She said "We must not fear daylight just because it almost always illuminates a miserable world".

Let there be light.