

On women's health and rights Statements from speeches and lectures

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Women's health and rights

FIGO stands for women

"Delivering babies and cure of pelvic organ disease are not all what our noble profession is about. Our profession is the profession of women's health care. And we are fully aware that women's health is not simply determined by their biological destiny but also, and even more, by how societies view and value their role. FIGO is committed to stand beside women and to stand behind women in their struggle for their human rights. Women can rely upon us when they look for supporters of their just cause. We will always be there standing up, ready to be counted."

Obstetrics: A definition

"To my knowledge, the word "obstetrics" was derived from the Latin "obstare", meaning to stand before. We, obstetricians, are defined as those who stand before the woman. I submit to you that our role should not be only to stand before the woman, but to stand beside and behind women in their just struggle to take back their God-given rights and status."

Ours should be a woman- friendly service

"I have been in the profession of women's health for half a century. I have seen great scientific advances in our field, but I, among others, have been questioning, from time to time, whether we are taking into consideration women's perspectives and expectations in the services we are offering them."

A profession of care and cure

"The health care system needs a change in psychology, and not only in anatomy (structure) and physiology (function)."

"Throughout human history, medicine has been recognized as a profession for both care and cure. Unfortunately, the supportive pastoral aspects of medical care tend now to be squeezed out by our pride in the application of scientific knowledge and biomedical technology. The loss of the caring function is no more evident than in our obstetric practice. Women in normal labor need care more than cure. They may be getting instead a depersonalized, mechanized, mystery-clouded medical service. Women are right if they resent being objectified in one of their fundamental physiological roles."

“There is a need to look at the health care system with a woman’s lens, and for the system to change from being Hyper-medicalized, Impersonal, and Sub-specialized (HIS) to being Humane, Equitable and Rational (HER).”

The lust for technology

“Unfortunately, the pride in the application of scientific knowledge and biomedical technology is now creating an "emotional" gap in the care of patients. Machines now stand between physicians and their patients. The humane physician is becoming an endangered species.”

Let us not bury our heads in the sands of biology

“The exciting developments in biological sciences are giving us a much better understanding of the cellular and molecular mechanisms in health and disease, and are opening completely new frontiers in medicine. But, in our excitement, we are liable to forget that these chemical molecules and these cells are parts of a whole human being.”

Women are ends and not means

“The societal attitude of looking at women as means and not ends is quite pervasive. Services offered to women often have something of a veterinary quality about it. Proponents of the education of girls cite the advantages that such education will have for the survival and health of the children, and the impact it will have on reducing birth rates. Nutrition of women is justified because of the needs of the foetus and the breastfeeding infant. Women were considered as means in the process of reproduction and as targets in the process of fertility control. Family planning services offered to women are often a means for a demographic objective. Even with the tragedy of maternal mortality, a justification put forward for investment in keeping mothers alive is that their survival is critical for the survival of the children. We forgot that there is a woman in the mother, who also has a right to health and survival.”

Women’s health needs more than our medicine

“Future improvements in women's health will need more than the science and the healthcare profession. They need societal action that has for long being overdue, to correct injustices to women.”

A universal prescription for women’s health

“After I completed fifty years in the noble profession of women’s health, I was once asked what is the one prescription which I think women need most for their health. My answer was “power”. Power is what women need to enjoy their right to health. Powerlessness of women, in my professional experience, is a serious health hazard, and particularly in maternal health. But women have to fill that prescription themselves and to keep a sustainable supply of it. No pharmacy will dispense it for them. When asked about the

dose, my advice was to take as much as you get. There is no risk of over-dosage, and there are no reported side effects”

A woman is not a womb

“A woman is not a womb; a woman has a womb. We are witnessing the final emergence of the woman, everywhere, from behind the mother. This is a major challenge to which societies have to adapt. It also has vast implications for the science of human reproduction and for the profession of women’s health.”

Millions of women are missing in the world population

“The female deficit in the total population is a result when the biological advantage of being a female is more than counterbalanced by a social disadvantage of being a female.”

Beware!:The Homo dogmaticus

“The human species has been designated the “Homo sapiens”, which literally means in Latin “wise man”. Of course, only few of us really deserve this designation. But what is more serious and more dangerous is the emergence of a spreading mutation of the “Homo dogmaticus”. Our knowledge of its epidemiology is limited. But we know that it is a vocal small minority, not confined to any continent, country, race or religion. Diagnostic criteria are well defined. They include a tunnel vision, a sense of exclusive ownership of the truth, a self- given mission to force its own vision on others, and very unfortunately abuse of the name of GOD to target women’s rights.”

A prayer

“I sometimes pray that GOD issues a thunderous disclaimer from heaven about those who use his great Holy name to oppress the woman he so wonderfully created and trusted with the noble mission of the survival of our human species.”

Emergence of the woman from behind the mother

“At a great cost to their health and life, women have already fulfilled the divine obligation to replenish the earth. Reproduction has now become a function of women, not the function of women. Women became producers and not only reproducers.”

“In modern human life, production does not need the muscle of the hunter gatherer. It needs brain rather than brawn.”

“A women- centered medical and social research agenda is needed to help the woman to finally emerge from behind the mother.”

Women are not for turning

“Women are making advances, in strides and in all parts of the world. They are claiming and gaining back their God- given human rights, and they are asserting their real worth. They have abandoned the language of silence and are making their voices heard. True, in several parts of the world, women still have some steep mountains to climb. But women are not for turning.”

“There will continue to be those who cannot accept a role for women, other than being satellites that have to move around men. Women still have an uphill struggle, but there is no turn back”.

Violence against Women

“Violence, in general, is pervasive and we all may be exposed to it. But you can protect yourself if you go inside your home, close all doors, shut all windows, and feel safe in the company of your close family. For women, violence occurs behind these closed doors, hidden from the public view, and the aggressor is one who is supposed to be your loving protective intimate partner.”

“The psychological impact of violence against women cannot be over-estimated. Wounds of the body heal sooner or later, leaving only scars. Wounds of the soul take much longer to heal and can bleed again any time.”

The world that women deserve- An unfinished agenda

“My generation is now handing over the torch, and with it an unfinished agenda. A long to-do list is still pending, to shape a world that women deserve.”

Sexual and reproductive health and rights

Reproductive evolution

“The Homo sapiens has escaped the grip of Nature in evolution to become a self-evolving animal. The recent dramatic evolution in human reproductive behavior is not followed or accompanied by a change in the anatomy and/or function of the reproductive system, as would have been expected in other major evolutionary jumps mediated by Mother Nature. As a consequence, the Homo sapiens has to accomplish its reproductive evolution while retaining a reproductive system geared to high fertility.”

A woman’s body should all be hers

“A woman can claim as her own, her head, her hair, her hands, her arms, her upper body, her legs and her feet. She cannot claim the same right to a remaining area of her body, which appears to belong more to certain males of the species, moralists, lawyers, men of religion, and others, all of whom claim the right to decide how this part of a woman’s body can best be utilized. Let her body, all her body, be her’s.”

The human rights movement has been gender blind

“Sexual and reproductive rights are not a new set of human rights. They are simply the application of the already recognized list of human rights to the area of sexuality and reproduction. The international community has been slow to make this recognition. For a long time, the human rights movement has been gender blind, focusing on the "public" arena largely populated by men and neglected the so-called "private" sphere in which women are traditionally enclosed.”

“The human rights movements often forget that women are also human and have rights that should be respected, protected and implemented. When the mobility of few people is restricted by government, there is an uproar. But when millions of women are “under domestic house arrest”, not allowed to go beyond home, the movement turns a blind eye. When the streets are not safe for political demonstrators, there is a loud cry. When home is no longer safe for many women, because of intimate partner violence, the human rights radar screen often goes blank. This must change.”

Reproductive rights and reproductive wrongs

“Understanding the implication of human rights to women’s reproductive and sexual health will be more apparent when we look at the other side of the coin, which we may call reproductive wrongs: when rights are not respected, are not protected, or are not fulfilled.”

Be brave and angry

“There is still a lot to be angry about. There is also a lot where we need to command courage, and to continue our just support for women’s sexual and reproductive rights.”

What does the future hold for sexual and reproductive health and rights

“I look at my oriental virtual crystal ball. On one side, I see major challenges. I turn the ball around. On the other side, I see major opportunities.”

The Daily Reproductive Health News

“Please do not try to look for the Daily Reproductive Health News of our Global Village at news stands. It is not in circulation. It makes us uncomfortable because it tells the painful truth, and as it has been rightly remarked, scarce as the truth is, the supply has always been in excess of the demand.”

Reproductive health: Ability, Success and safety

“Reproductive health is not about absence of disease or infirmity. Reproductive health implies that people have the ability to reproduce, to regulate their fertility and to practice and enjoy sexual relationships. It further implies that reproduction is carried to a successful outcome through infant and child survival, growth and healthy development. It finally implies that women can go safely through pregnancy and childbirth, that fertility regulation can be achieved without health hazards and that people are safe in having sex.”

Inequity in reproductive health

“Why should reproductive health, more than other areas in health, show such wide disparities and manifest that much inequity? It is simply because reproductive health is generally about women and children, and women and children are among the vulnerable groups in any society. If things go bad, they will be among the first groups to suffer.”

“The vulnerability of women is both biological and social. Women are biologically vulnerable because Nature has entrusted them with the noble biological burden of reproducing the species. Unfortunately, the noble task of motherhood has not brought societal rewards to women. On the contrary, it has often led to their subordination, ignoring their worth and worse to gender discrimination practices which, among other consequences, adversely impact on their health.”

Sex matters in women’s health

“The ability of a man and woman to engage in a mutually fulfilling sexual relationship is an important psycho-social component of health. Freedom from the risk of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection helps women to exercise their sexual rights and to better enjoy sexual relationships.”

Assault on the clitoris

“The clitoris has been a victim for assault, as a result of society’s view of female sexuality. It was unthinkable that any decent woman should derive pleasure from sex. The harmful practice of female genital cutting (various called mutilation or circumcision) in one form or another, continues to exist in around 40 countries, mostly in Africa. It is now also illegally practiced among immigrant communities in Europe and North America.”

Sex: A dangerous sport

“The sexual revolution has not been enjoyed by men and women only. Microbial agents shared in the fun, finding sex a convenient mode to spread and flourish. Sex has become a dangerous sport.”

“Most women are acquiring HIV not because of their own sexual behavior but because their partners engage in unsafe behaviors. “

*“**A**bstinence, **b**eing faithful and **c**ondom use are the classical **ABC** of protection against STIs, including HIV. Given the reality of gender power relationships, these methods are not women controlled.”*

A woman-controlled method for protection against sexually-transmitted infections

“I am old enough to remember the days when a woman had to be completely dependent on her male partner to protect herself from an unwanted pregnancy. With the advent of the contraceptive technology revolution, women for the first time had access to methods that are completely women- controlled. The vaginal microbicide dream is that no woman, rich or poor, living in the skyscrapers of Manhattan or in the slums of the less privileged world, will not have to be at the mercy of the cooperation of her male partner to protect her health and life, in this pandemic of sexually transmitted infections, including especially HIV.”

Abortion

“Asking the question “is abortion moral or immoral?” is asking the wrong question. The right question is: “Can women be trusted to make moral judgments on their own or are women morally incompetent to make these decisions and they need big brother to make these decisions for them”.”

“Women may not want abortion, but they need it”

“From the perspective of the health profession, unsafe abortion is a tragedy of denial. Some people seem to think that if you move yourself away from a problem, shut your ears to the sounds of pain, and close your eyes to the sights of sufferings, the problem will no

longer exist. The tragedy is that the problem will not go away. It will still weigh heavily on your conscience, and will be glaring in your eyes, even more, when you open them. “

“Science tells us that abortion will never be eliminated. Abortion will never be eliminated because there is no power or superpower that can control the most efficient pro-choice activist in the world, which is our Mother Nature. A majority of early human conceptions are efficiently aborted by Mother Nature every day. Mother Nature does not give us any reasons for most of them, but keeps on doing it and apparently with no moral misgivings about it.”

Donor fatigue is real

“In previous incarnations, in a long career, I have been on both sides of the fence. I was on the receiving side, and I worked with the giving side. I can tell you, first hand, that donors are not to be relied upon as faithful partners. Their love is not sustainable. They can be distracted by other beautiful causes coming in their way, and there is no shortage of beauties competing for attention in the global health field.”

In health product research and development: Think public sector, act private sector

“The private sector thinks of doing well; the public sector thinks of doing good. The private sector will go where it smells money. The public sector goal is to develop products that are affordable and can be delivered in low resource settings. But we must learn to act Private sector. The private sector act is a pro-choice act. It will have no sense of guilt in immediately aborting a product lead that does not appear to be promising. They know that money saved is money gained.”

Safe motherhood

The dangerous journey of pregnancy and childbirth

“In a piece of our African folklore, a mother tells her children: “I am going to the sea to fetch a new baby; the journey is dangerous and I may not return”. And she is right. Many did not return, and many still do not return even today.”

“It is mind boggling to think of the numbers of young noble women who gave up their life to fulfill the divine obligation to be fruitful, multiply and replenish the earth.”

“It may not be sufficiently realized that only for the birth of the 7 billion people who are now living, replenishing the earth and subduing it, more than 25 million women had to die, not to talk about those who suffered but survived.”

“The numbers of young noble women who gave up their lives in the battle of human survival throughout history is probably more than the numbers of men who gave up their lives in battles of mutual human destruction.”

“Mothers sacrificed their lives when we had no means to save their lives. But after the world had the knowledge and means to make motherhood safer for women, mothers in many parts of the world were, and still are, left to die. The world turned a deaf ear to their screams.”

An inconvenient truth

“The inconvenient truth, and let us face it, is that mothers are not dying because of conditions we cannot prevent, or treat. To put it bluntly, they are dying because societies have yet to make the decision that their lives are worth the cost of saving.”

How much are mothers worth?

“The tragedy of maternal deaths in the world today is an issue of priorities in the allocation of resources. It is a question of how much the lives of mothers and women are considered worth. The economic invisibility of women is because their work, much that it counts, is not counted.”

Mothers’ day

“We celebrate the glory of motherhood on a certain mother’s day during the year in most countries of the world. I wish on that occasion we also remember and pay tribute to the seven or eight hundred women who will give up their lives on that same day on their way to motherhood.”

Biology and motherhood

“Biology teaches us that motherhood was one of the greatest inventions in Nature. Biologists remark that species which mother their offspring have dominated every ecological niche in which they dwell. 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.”

Pray to God: not a maternal death

“If I have to go through another re-incarnation in a future life, I pray to God not to assign me as a woman in a poor developing country. But if such is God’s will, so be it, and then I will only pray that God spares me the bitter cup of a maternal death.”

The way, the will and wallet

“We know the way to make motherhood safer. It has been rightly said that when there is a will there is a way. The converse, however, does not always hold true. And the way and the will must be backed by the wallet”

Women’s ‘labour’

“I applaud the English language for using the term labour to describe what women do to deliver a new life. Unfortunately, it is a labour that has never been unionized. If it has been unionized, mothers of the world could have expressed their justified grievances at the Conferences of the International Labour Organization, and they would be entitled to a hearing.”

Pregnancy is special

“Pregnancy is not a disease. Pregnancy is a privileged bio-social function entrusted to women, to ensure survival of our human species. If women, all women, stop getting pregnant, and they now can, thanks to contraceptive technology, our human species will be extinct.”

“Maternal mortality should not be lumped with and ranked, for priority, against other disease problems. Society has more of an obligation for preventing maternal deaths than for preventing deaths from other disease conditions, often resulting from our own unhealthy lifestyle behaviour.”

Women have a human right to safe motherhood

“Women have a human right to go safely through the risky journey of pregnancy and childbirth, a right that should be respected, protected, and implemented, a right that implies both core obligations and progressive realization.”

A definition of insanity

“The way we are going, the Millennium Development Goal of reducing maternal mortality will certainly be left behind, far behind the other seven goals. Albert Einstein once gave a definition for insanity: to keep on doing the same thing and expect a different result. The international community has two options: either to do it differently by raising maternal mortality to a platform of human rights, or to keep on doing the same thing. If we continue to do the same thing, we should at least be sane enough not to expect a different result, and we should have the honesty to look our mothers in the face, and say: sorry, we will fail you”.

Women and the culture of sharing

“Typical of mothers, what they need for themselves will always benefit others. Facilities and skills for essential and emergency obstetric care, where made available to women, will not be kept by women for their exclusive use. Sharing the benefit of what they have is something basic in the culture of women. It has been there since the time of Eve. When Eve took of the tree thereof in the garden and did eat, what did she do? Keep it to herself? No, she gave unto her husband, and he did eat.”

Mothers of the world: Unite

“When I look back at more than 25 years of campaigning for safe motherhood, I feel that one of our shortcomings was that we did not mobilize women enough for their right to life. Women in the North have long forgotten what maternal mortality is. Their sisters in the South have come to accept the dangerous journey of pregnancy and childbirth as a matter of fate. Mothers right to life should be an issue around which all women should mobilize and act.”

A time to stand up and be counted

“If we see the tragedy of maternal deaths for what it is, the final blow in an incessant drama of inequity and social injustice, then let us say it will not stand, and let us work at all cost to put this tragedy where it belongs, in the disgraceful trash of the history of humanity together with slavery, holocaust, apartheid and the like. There will always be among us those who do not want to see, who do not want to hear and who do not care. But for all of us who see, who hear and who care, this is an issue and a time to stand up and be counted.”

Healthy and being a mother

“For women in the twenty-first century, healthy motherhood is broader than safe motherhood. It implies the ability to be and when to be a mother, success in being a mother and safety in being a mother.”

Women, population and family planning

Beyond demography

“The adoption of a smaller family norm, with consequent decline in total fertility, should not be viewed only in demographic terms. It means that people, and particularly women, are empowered to take control of their fertility and to plan their lives; it means that more children are born by choice, not by chance, and that births can be planned to take place at optimal times for childbearing to ensure better health for women and children; and it means that families are able to invest relatively more in a smaller number of beloved children, trying to prepare them for a better future.”

An evolutionary jump

“Family planning should not be looked upon in a narrow perspective as a measure to ease the world population problem. Family planning will be a permanent feature of the way of life of all succeeding generations on this planet. Our reproductive function is being voluntarily adapted to dramatic new realities. What we are witnessing is a major evolutionary jump that is science-mediated, rather than brutally imposed by Nature”

“With the adoption of a small family norm, the demand for quality in births will substitute the demand for quantity.”

And the winners are: Women

“In the upheaval in population and reproductive behavior, there is one clear winner to emerge: women. They deserve to be the winners. They were the ones who made the sacrifices in the battle for survival of our species.”

Emergence of the woman from behind the mother

“With the adoption of the small family norm, and with the ability of women to regulate and control their fertility, the woman is finally emerging from behind the mother.”

Population and the planet

“Spaceship Earth is sending signals of distress loud and clear. The globe is warming, the ozone-layer is being depleted. Degradation of natural resources, soil erosion, water stress, deforestation and loss of biological diversity are threatening the quality of life. As the 20th century draws to a close, the world is confronted by a daunting challenge: to bring growing human numbers and their increasing needs into balance with the natural resource base that underpins any development. Panic on spaceship earth at this time can only lead to disaster. Apportioning of blame is no good either. This is a time for scientific objectivity and for international cooperation.”

Population is about people, not about numbers

“The great revelation in Cairo (land of pyramids), at the 1994 International Conference on Population and development ICPD, was that the colossal population pyramid is not made of numbers. There are people inside, and in Cairo, lo and behold!, they emerged out of the pyramid, made their voices heard and the world had to listen. People and not numbers took the center stage and framed the Cairo debate”.

“The paradigm shift in the Cairo ICPD moved the focus from “counting the people” to “the people count”, with women at the centre as ends and not as means, and with family planning in the right place within the broader spectrum and totality of sexual and reproductive health and rights.”

“Some policymakers tend to forget that the solution for the population problem will not be made in governments' boardrooms but by people in their bedrooms. People would more likely adopt a family planning behavior when they find that their other reproductive health needs are also addressed.”

Infertility and the population problem

“With the population problem on our hands, is it appropriate that we continue to worry about infertility? The answer is that we should worry even more. The adoption of a small family norm, through voluntary infertility, which is a desired target at family, community, country and global level, makes the issue of involuntary infertility more pressing. If couples adopt the responsible reproductive behaviour to postpone and widely space pregnancies, it is imperative that they should be helped to achieve a pregnancy when they so decide, in the more limited time they will have available. The suffering of infertile couples is real”

The rationale for family planning

“From a global perspective, there are three major rationales for the organized family planning movement: a demographic rationale, a health rationale and a human rights rationale. The three rationales have evolved separately, at different times and for different objectives.”

Family planning saves lives

“Pregnancies that are too early, too close, too late or too many carry extra hazards not only for the health of the woman but also for the child.”

Family planning in the definition of health

“In the constitution of the World Health Organization, health is defined as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. While this ideal may not be readily attainable, it serves to remind us that health is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Family planning should be viewed in this broad context of the definition of health. The ability to regulate and control fertility is a basic ingredient in the positive definition of health, particularly for women. A woman who is unable to regulate and

control her fertility cannot be considered in a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. She cannot have the mental joy of a pregnancy that is wanted, avoid the mental distress of a pregnancy that is unwanted, plan her life, pursue her education, and enjoy both a productive and reproductive career.”

Family planning: A women’s movement

“The family planning movement started as a movement by women for women. Women's perspectives and women's concerns should continue to guide the field of family planning.”

Fertility by choice

“When I hear the nice expression: “fertility by choice”, I say: “yes, but whose choice”. Pregnancy should be a dignified informed responsible choice by the woman who is empowered to make the decision and has the means to implement it.”

“It is a reproductive wrong when fertility control by women is changed into fertility control of women.”

“When societies allow women only one choice in life, childbearing and childrearing, and make children the only goods they can produce and they are expected to deliver, fertility by choice, as a reproductive right, does not mean much.”

“A crucial element in the quality of a family planning service is the freedom to know, the freedom to choose and the freedom to decide. Family planning is a dignified behaviour, and services should be provided with full respect to human dignity.’

Coerced contraception and coerced motherhood

“As far as women’s health and human rights are concerned, there is little to choose between coerced contraception, sterilization or abortion, because society does not want the child, and coerced motherhood, because society wants the child. Coerced contraception and coerced motherhood are two sides of the same bad coin. They deny women the dignity of making an informed choice in their lives. Coerced motherhood in one form or another is much more pervasive. Women are coerced into motherhood when women, including adolescents, are denied access to family planning, when women are forced to keep unwanted pregnancies, when women are denied any other choice in life except childbearing and child rearing, and when children are considered the only goods that a woman is expected to deliver.”

Society and reproductive life

“No society, primitive or advanced, no culture, no religion, and no legal code has been neutral about reproductive life. The past few decades, however, have witnessed a major development. Governments saw fit to step into people's bedrooms.”

“When women are empowered to make choices, even the poor and illiterate women, whom I know best, will make the right choices for themselves, for their families, for their communities, for their countries and for the world at large.”

“It is only recently that the world is realizing the heavy penalty it is paying for not empowering women to make decisions in their lives, including reproductive decisions.”

“It should be a responsibility of the whole international community to ensure that women, wherever they are, are given a choice in their lives and are given the means to implement their choice.”

Contraceptive technology

“The first contraceptive technology revolution was needs-driven, with emphasis on methods that can have a demographic impact. When the revolution stalled, the poorly funded field became opportunity-driven. For a second contraceptive technology revolution, the field must again be needs driven, with the emphasis this time on the needs and perspectives of women.”

Futile search for the ideal contraceptive

“There is no, and there probably will never be, an ideal method of contraception for all users, but there can be a variety of “ideal methods” for the needs of different users.”

Women and the population problem

“Take care of women and the population problem will take care of itself”

Where to invest your one dollar in family planning?

“Girl education will be your best investment”