

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

FIGO will act
President speech
FIGO Congress opening ceremony
Copenhagen, 1997

Your Royal Highness, Princess Benedikte

Your Excellency, Lord Mayor of Copenhagen

Professor Larsen, Professor Janson

Dear friends and colleagues

Obstetricians and gynaecologists of the world look forward to this great occasion every three years, when they gather under the umbrella of their FIGO, and are hosted and welcomed by a national member society of the Federation. This year we are privileged to be hosted and welcomed not only by one society, but by all five Scandinavian societies. I can tell you first-hand that they have been working hard for six years under the strong driving leadership of Professor Larsen to make our Congress a success and to offer us the best in science and the warmest in kind hospitality. For this, we are most grateful, most grateful to those we met and also to the many we did not meet, but we know how hard they have been working behind the scenes.

A rich scientific programme, one of the best ever developed, has been prepared for us by the international and the Scandinavian scientific programme committee. We thank the two committees and their able chairpersons, Professor Sciarra and Professor Hamberger for their good work.

We will be excited by the new scientific developments in our field. But this excitement will not make us forget that access to our knowledge is still denied to a majority of women in the world today. And it is not simply a question of lack of resources.

As far as women's health is concerned, it is more a question of how available resources for health care are allocated when societies under-estimate a woman's worth.

The neglected tragedy of maternal mortality is the most glaring case in point for this inequity. From the time we started this opening ceremony to the time we end it and go for a drink, at least 135 young mothers will have died. During the week of our Congress, more than 10,000 women will have died.

The estimated 585,000 mothers who die every year in the world do not die because of conditions which we cannot detect or which we cannot treat. They die because of conditions which we can detect and we can treat. They die because the societies in which they live did not see fit to invest what is needed to save their lives. As to the rest of the world, it cannot plead ignorance by choosing not to see or hear.

Ladies and gentlemen

I come from a very ancient culture that believes in a life hereafter. I can almost feel the presence, with us here today, of thousands and thousands of the noble souls of these young women in the prime of their lives. They are probably roaming in the space of this wide hall, begging an answer from us, obstetricians of the world, an answer to the question, why did we let them die, and begging an answer to the question, why did the world turn a deaf ear to their screams. I want you to join me in sending a signal to these young women, victims of social injustice, just a simple signal to say: We do hear you.

For this, and with the permission of your Royal Highness, I ask this distinguished gathering to stand up and observe a minute of silence.

Thank you.

Maternal mortality should not be looked at as another health problem. Maternity is not a disease. Maternity is a privilege of women who have been entrusted by nature with the responsibility for the survival of the species. Women have a right, a human right, to be protected when they fulfill this function.

From this forum, from a country that puts the highest value on human rights, we obstetricians of the world hereby serve notice to the world government community that they may be in breach of their human rights obligations to protect women's basic right to life while they are in the risky process of giving us life.

We are witnesses to a great health scandal of our time. We will not be passive. FIGO will act and will show the way to those who want to see the way.

I am pleased to formally announce today the launching of FIGO Save the Mothers Fund and Programme. We will demonstrate through action, and document through research, in as many countries as our resources will permit, that the lives of mothers can be saved and that many lives can be saved at a cost that is affordable to any society that upholds women's right to life. I am pleased to acknowledge our first two partners in this major initiative, the Pharmacia-Upjohn pharmaceutical company and the United Nations Population Fund. With their generous contributions, this initiative is launched.

Dear colleagues

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. This world Congress will confirm our commitment and will increase our resolve.