

On Women's Health and Rights
Lectures, Speeches and Statements
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Women have a right to life when they are giving us a new life

Remarks

**United Nations Human Rights Council, Geneva, June 14,
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Mr President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

There are occasions when an old man feels thankful about his age. In 1993, I published a scientific paper with the title “The neglected tragedy of maternal mortality in developing countries: a public health problem or a human rights issue?” How gratified the old man feels today, 17 years later, to see the issue established on the agenda of the UN Human Rights Council. I thank the co-sponsors of resolution 11/8, especially that the two countries, New Zealand and Colombia are not among those hit hard by this human tragedy.

In his kind invitation letter, the President asked me to address specifically the issue of empowering women through education. This happens to fit well with my background as a women’s health professional and educator. 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 one word: “empowerment”. 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.

As to education, a recent study published last month tracked the progress in the reduction of maternal mortality in the past 2-3 decades in 181 countries. The study gave hope in showing that significant progress has been achieved in a number of countries, including the country that I know best and countries of several of the distinguished members of the Council. In analysis of the results, the study ascribed the progress made to four powerful drivers, of which maternal educational attainment is one. The other three drivers are also inter-related with education. They are decline in unwanted fertility, rise in per capita income and access to skilled birth attendance.

I want to utilize my remaining precious minutes to highlight only one area of education for empowerment, where the Council can make a difference and add value. If the distinguished Council, expressing the collective noble voice of the world community, declares, in no ambiguous terms, that 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, the Council will then be sending a great empowering educational message for women.

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 maternal death as a matter of fate. It is hard to imagine the numbers of women, throughout human history, who gave up their lives, to fulfill the divine instruction to be fruitful and multiply and to replenish the earth. But women in the twenty-first century do not have to give up their lives. Mothers are not dying because of conditions we cannot treat. They are dying because societies have yet to make the decision that their lives are worth saving. Women need to be empowered with the education that they no longer have to accept maternal death as a matter of fate. They have a right to life when they are giving us new life.

As a health professional, I know that women die because of many diseases, many of which are also shared by men. Although maternal death ranks high among the mortality causes for women in reproductive age in developing countries, there are other major and important causes for the overall burden of disease on women. But there is a difference. 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 can, our human species will be extinct.

Mr President

English is not my mother tongue, but 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, collectively, could have been today expressing their justified grievances about obstetric labour at the Conference of the International Labour Organization going on in Geneva, and they will be entitled to a hearing.

Mr President

Let us face it. The way we are going, MDG5 will certainly be left behind, far behind. 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.

Finally, Mr President, I have a plea to the distinguished Council. Please do not underestimate what you can do in combating the human tragedy of maternal deaths. You can add value and you can make a difference in the already ongoing efforts. Yes, you can, and hundreds of millions of mothers, and mothers to be, hope you will.