

FIGO Congress News: Key Links Between Women's Rights And Their Health

Thursday, 8th October 2009

"It's about the right to access the highest attainable standard of health, taking into consideration the circumstances and context of women's lives ..."

The XIX Congress of the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) is a time to reflect on the progress and challenges in the fight to extend health equally to all women everywhere.

President of FIGO, Dr Dorothy Shaw, said, "The challenge to us is to evaluate policies that promote the health of women and then to understand how they are translated on the ground. This has to be done taking into consideration the context of women's lives, whether rural or urban, and their ability to access reproductive health services, including maternal and newborn health."

"Every pregnant woman has the right to life and, in fact, maternal mortality has recently been recognised by the United Nations as a human rights issue," said Shaw, speaking at a press briefing today (5 Oct 09), at the start of the FIGO Congress in Cape Town, South Africa.

This Congress comes as the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) celebrates its 30th anniversary concurrent with the 15th anniversary of the International Child Development Programme (ICDP). Another important recent development in promoting the rights of women was the creation of a new, more powerful agency for women, which has been hailed as a breakthrough for women's equality and rights.

"The creation of the UN agency for women is an important step in advancing and consolidating women's rights. It will, hopefully, create the necessary dialogue to enable better policy in the battle to eliminate discrimination against women and other forms of gender-based violence. We need to understand the data that shows where we are achieving success and to find ways of empowering women and enabling them to participate meaningfully in civil society. The context of their lives is a critical determinant of their health," said Shaw.

Another important factor in promoting health care access is understanding the role that religion and culture play in societies. "We need to be sensitive in how we work with community and religious leaders on these issues, so that women can fully realize their rights as agreed upon by their nations."

During the Congress, the film "The Cutting Tradition" - which sensitively addresses female genital mutilation - will be launched. "This is part of understanding greater concerns about how women are negatively impacted by traditional practices, and how communities can act to bring about changes that respect the rights of children and women," said Shaw.

Women are critical to the development of nations, as recognized by the World Economic Forum in its Global Gender Gap report. "This covers a range of quantifiable indicators in four categories, one of which is health and survival. Interestingly, this report tracks the same indicators that are critical to the success of the Millennium Development Goals, especially in maternal newborn health," said Shaw.

Another area where progress is being made is through clarification of laws through courts and tribunals, where women's health is compromised because the interpretation of some laws is unclear to the community and health professionals. Limiting the right of conscientious objection to individuals rather than institutions was one such recent decision where restitution was ordered.

When it comes to HIV/AIDS, Shaw said that it is important that women have confidence that being tested and gaining access to drugs is of benefit to them. "Perhaps the focus has been too much on saving the baby and not explaining to women the benefit to them of being tested and treated with anti-retrovirals," she said. Shaw also said that it was vital that the stigma of HIV was challenged so that women would feel free to be tested without risking their safety and security.

While there has been progress in decreasing maternal mortality, there is still a long way to go. There is a need to use interventions such as the Berlin Call to Action by Global Partners in Action "to accelerate implementation of the international conferences on Population and Development Programme of Action as fundamental in achieving equality, human rights and social and economic development. With a need to invest in health and rights for women and young people; provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information, services and supplies for all people; eradicate discrimination against girls and ensure access to all levels of education, and to advance gender equality and equity and empower girls and women" (the Berlin Call to Action, 4 September 2009).

"The most basic and critical challenge is to respect the rights of all men and women as equal and thereby to assure that all women are valued, and have access to the rights that protect and promote their health and well-being," said Shaw.