

Statement by:

Harold Robinson

UNFPA Representative for the English and Dutch Speaking Caribbean, at
the Opening of the Safe Motherhood Conference November 16, 2005

Greetings

Master of Ceremony and Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Barry Wint

Hon. John Junor, Minister of Health

Distinguished Guests

Members of the Media

UN friends and colleagues

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning!

The birth of a child is a special and miraculous event and every man who witnesses it for the first time confesses that it is a life changing experience.

Happily, in most parts of the world, men now have the right and the opportunity to participate in the birth of their children. Those men who've provided this kind of maternal support often recount their experiences for days to come as they bask in the beauty and wonder of their new born.

This is how it should be for all women and their newborns... but unfortunately it is not!

Every 60 seconds one woman somewhere in the world dies of pregnancy related causes. It seems hard to believe that in this the era of advancements when mankind has made so many conquests and wonderful achievements more than half a million mothers are lost each year and another eight million or more, suffer life-long health consequences from the complications of pregnancy.

There is a striking disparity in the maternal mortality rate between women who live in resource rich countries and those who live in poor countries. It is generally recognized that for every pregnancy, whether the woman is rich or poor there is a minor risk of complications around delivery. However, when we compare the figures relating to maternal mortality in developing countries with those in developed countries the link between poverty and maternal mortality becomes evident.

In Sub-Saharan Africa for example, 1 in 16 women is likely to die as a consequence of pregnancy and in some of the poorest parts as many as 1 in 6 face this risk. By comparison, in industrialized countries the lifetime risk is only 1 in 2,800. The fact is that most women... 99% of those who die during

pregnancy or childbirth are women who live in developing countries.

Almost all - 95% in Africa and Asia.

[As my colleague Bertrand Bainvel has pointed out,] this has implications for the millions of children who lose their mothers due to lack of services that are readily available in richer nations.

The shocking truth is that death from complications of pregnancy and childbirth are almost always preventable, with well-known and relatively inexpensive interventions.

The disparity in the figures between the women from developed as against developing countries indicates clearly that access to good reproductive health services and care makes the difference. It saves lives.

The inclusion of the goal to reduce maternal mortality by 75% by 2015 in the United Nations Declaration of September 2000 represents a clear statement of commitment to reproductive health by world leaders.

As the statistics indicate it is the poorest women and their families who suffer the consequences of poor reproductive health, which results in high maternal mortality and morbidity. UNFPA is committed to turning the tide against maternal mortality and giving mothers of the world a fighting chance. We believe that by ensuring that women all over the world have access to reproductive health services and are able to exercise their reproductive rights...we are taking steps toward drastically reducing maternal mortality and morbidity and ultimately improving the quality of life for women and their families. Access to reproductive health services and care can help to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, loved and has a chance to survive.

The converse is also true... a mother's poor reproductive health can undermine the well being of her children. The statistics indicate a close link between maternal and infant mortality. When a mother dies giving birth her infant often dies as well. Motherless newborns are three to ten times more likely to die than those whose mothers survive. Even when the children survive they suffer too, as mothers usually take on the primary responsibility for the health, education and nutrition of their children, and in many cases, also a contributing breadwinner.

The lives of many women in developing countries as well as the lives of their children could be saved with reproductive health interventions that women in developed countries take for granted.

UNFPA supports programmes all over the world that work to ensure that:

1. All pregnancies are wanted... this involves ensuring access to reproductive health services and advocating for the reproductive rights of women. Poor reproductive health has serious negative consequences for a woman's general health and well-being and also the health and well-being of her family. When a woman is unable to make free and informed choices regarding the number, timing and spacing of her children her prospects for good health are limited. Her ability to pursue economic activities and to secure stable employment and higher wages is seriously compromised. This in turn has implications for the standard of living for her family; the economic development of her country and the overall goal of poverty reduction.

2. Pregnant women have access to skilled care at childbirth. In this regard UNFPA supports programmes to expand access to skilled attendance at birth including providing training for health providers.
3. Pregnant women have access to emergency obstetric care when complications arise. This includes partnering with governments to restructure health systems and build capacity.

UNFPA is actively involved in interventions in all three areas identified however greater focus is now being placed on emergency obstetric care, which has not received as much attention in the past as the other two.

Most hazardous complications arise during Labour and immediately after delivery; adequate interventions at this time can prevent death. Often, small investments in equipment and training are sufficient to ensure that emergency obstetric care is widely accessible.

This conference is part of UNFPA's ongoing collaboration with the Ministry of Health and other partners to strengthen Jamaica's Reproductive Health programme. All of us have a commitment to achieving the goal of a

reduction in the Maternal Mortality Ratio in Jamaica in keeping with the Millennium Development Goal.

We believe in the strength of partnership that is why we've invited our neighbours from the Caribbean and Latin America to share their experiences with us; to share findings of recent research and other relevant interventions. This we believe is critical in formulating a national strategic framework for Safe Motherhood for Jamaica.

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