High-Level Task Force for the ICPD

Are We Really Leaving Nobody Behind?

Equality & Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights for All

Side event on the occasion of the Beijing +20 Commemoration

Commission on the Status of Women

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Check against delivery

I am here to talk about a sizable group of women and girls in countries around the globe who face an issue so common yet so shrouded in taboos, stigma and fear: the 20 million women, including 3 million adolescent girls, who undergo unsafe abortions every year; the thousands of women and girls who risk their lives every day because of restrictive laws and policies that leave them without recourse when facing a mistimed or unwanted pregnancy.

Women facing very difficult situations and decisions, so desperate given their circumstances, that they undergo excruciating pain, insert harmful substances, chemicals and sharp objects in the absence of any other option -- coat hangers, sticks, bicycle spokes, and knitting needles; ingesting toxic substances – like laundry detergent and turpentine; to taking herbal concoctions, or strong prescription drugs intended to treat illnesses like malaria; to throwing themselves down the stairs or a roof in an attempt to induce trauma that leads to abortion.

Every year, 47 thousand women and girls die from complications related to these unsafe procedures. And for each one that survives, many more suffer serious injuries and disabilities. This is why unsafe abortion remains one of the leading causes of maternal deaths and injury in the globe.

But it does not need to be that way. Unsafe abortion and its lethal consequences are entirely preventable: as the World Health Organization, and I myself as a physician, know - abortion is one of the safest procedures when performed in line with medical standards.
Every year, there are 74 million unintended pregnancies globally, many of them mistimed or unwanted. The need for abortion will not go away. Indeed, its practice is known throughout history. Even where it is legally banned and criminalized, even where women are thrown in jail when seeking health care for pregnancy complications, the practice will continue. And even where abortion is legal, it is not always available, affordable or carried out in safe conditions. We also know the experiences of women and girls, even in cases of rape and incest, who are subjected to arbitrary administrative hurdles and delays, until it’s too late for them to avail themselves of the law. As well as the verbal abuse and humiliation women and girls presenting with unsafe abortion complications, or seeking an abortion, are too often subjected to.

Is this ‘dignity for all’? Is this social justice?

I don’t think so. There’s a choice to be made, requiring bold leadership and resolve: these deaths of women and girls in the prime of their lives will not end until abortion is made safe and legal. As research shows, making abortion illegal does not reduce abortion; it only makes it deadly.

And it’s deadly for those at greatest disadvantage, in the lower rungs of our societies and economies. This is what makes the lack of access to safe abortion a grave matter of social injustice and inequity. We know that too many women and adolescent girls are denied their sexual and reproductive health and rights, and lack access to modern contraceptives to prevent and reduce chances of needing an abortion in the first place—especially if they are poor. We know that women and adolescent girls in all regions of the globe and from all walks of life face mistimed or unwanted pregnancies and resort to abortion. And in the end, it’s the poor and young women who pay the highest price. Those with the financial means find their way to a safe procedure. Those without risk their lives and health. They also risk further impoverishment due to the hefty expenses for services to treat the complications of unsafe abortions. Women and girls in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, spend some $200 million dollars a year out of their own pockets to pay for treatment of unsafe abortion complications.

If we care about ending maternal mortality, this has to change. We are never going to end preventable maternal deaths and morbidity until we eradicate unsafe abortion as a public health problem.

Working around the globe I know first-hand what it means when women are not afforded basic choices – when women and girls are made to bear another child they cannot afford to feed; when they are ill-prepared physically, emotionally and psychologically; when they are forced to
carry the child of their rapist or the product of incest. These are common occurrences all over the globe including the U.S. Right here in New York City at the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center 25% of our adolescent girls have a history of childhood sexual abuse, the majority incest; I have encounter similar circumstances in my work in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Growing up in extreme poverty myself and working with adolescents and young adults from marginalized communities, I know what having options means for them. It can mean the difference between continuing school and developing their full potential; or being held back, in poverty and unfulfilled aspirations.

It’s time we move on – past the political quagmires and ideological impasses that get in the way of saving lives and reaching our shared global goals. If we want a truly transformative agenda that is inclusive of all, rooted in gender equality and human rights, let’s aspire for a horizon of 2030 where we have eradicated unsafe abortion as a public health tragedy and an affront to the survival, health and dignity of our women and girls.