



International Women's Day Luncheon

From crisis to opportunity

**Statement
by**

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Good afternoon. I start by saying how wonderful to find myself invited here in DC! It has been a long time!

And it is my pleasure to be here with all of you today to celebrate International Women's Day.

It is a wonderful to know that I am among such a large gathering of people representing organizations who truly care about women and men, young and old all over the world. It is this global goal that unites us, as we act locally to generate support and change.

I would like to thank Will Davis, the Director of the United Nations Information Center here in Washington, D.C. and Patricia Ellis, President of the Women's Foreign Policy Group, for organizing this event and bringing all of us together.

I would also like to thank Tim Wirth, a good friend and supporter, as President of the United Nations Foundation, and my friend, Kathy Calvin, for all they have done and continue to do for the world's women. Their unwavering support for UNFPA has warmed us in cold days and certainly touched the lives of many women all over the globe.

And I would like to thank Sarah Craven, our UNFPA Liaison Officer, who is our ambassador here in the United States capitol, a champion for women's health, rights and dignity. I want to publically acknowledge that she is one of the bright stars of UNFPA, a real professional, with political wisdom and a big heart for all the women and young people of this world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is always a pleasure for me to talk about women's rights because I myself am an example of what is possible for women when we are given opportunity.

Many of you already know that I was the first woman from my home country of Saudi Arabia to receive a government scholarship to attend university in the United States. I attended Mills College in Oakland, California and Wayne State University in Detroit.

Education is a powerful tool for women's empowerment, equality and leadership. It has contributed in a major way to where I am today.

In every region of the world, more girls are attending school and enrolment rates are rising. This is an area where we are making solid progress. But it is also an area where we still need to focus on adolescent girls who continue to be more disadvantaged than boys.

I arrived this morning from the Clinton Global Initiative Retreat during which we were trying to focus on some areas that are of a priority for the Initiative at this particular time of multiple crises.

In the Human Capital working group, we recommended that we focus on girls, especially adolescent girls, due to the vulnerability many face in their local contexts in all countries – developed and developing. We also said that, if given real life opportunities, these young girls can become real change agents and innovators for a better life. Attention has to be given to boys as well, since behavioural change is part of growing up and maturing. Therefore addressing boys and men must be given even higher priority than we, collectively, have done so far.

Progress is possible when people join together, united for a common cause.

Today I want to focus on the urgent need for all of us to join together for the common cause of women's health and women's rights. This is an area that needs urgent action and increased investment.

Fifteen years ago, the world agreed that every woman has the right to sexual and reproductive health. They took this historic decision at the International Conference on Population and Development. 179 governments, including the United States, agreed to guarantee universal access to reproductive health by the year 2015.

UNFPA is working in more than 150 countries, supporting them to keep this promise. We enjoy a wide circle of supporters and I thank all of you in the room for your unwavering support during my eight years as UNFPA Executive Director. And now with the leadership of President Barack Obama, the United States intends to rejoin the 180 governments that support us.

President Obama's announcement of his intention to work with the US Congress to release funding for UNFPA shows the world that the United States wants women around the globe to be able to enjoy what women in the United States have already achieved.

This is welcome news and a great day for women, girls and their families around the world. We warmly applaud this action by President Obama, which underlines his support to protecting the lives and human dignity of women and girls who are vulnerable in their own communities.

On behalf of all of us, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Senator Leahy for his passionate advocacy on our behalf in the United States Senate in yesterday's debate over UNFPA funding in the spending bill. What a great victory and thank you to the many NGO advocates in the room today who tirelessly advocate on our behalf.

We look forward to working closely with the United States in partnership with our ongoing initiatives, such as training midwives to ensure safe deliveries, expanding access to family planning, delivering reproductive health supplies to clinics in remote areas, supporting the treatment of obstetric fistula, meeting the special needs of women in crises, preventing HIV among young people, and ending violence against women. Our goal is to support countries and communities to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health as a basic human right.

We are making progress but it is still slow and uneven. Together we must do more and faster.

Just a few years ago, few people had heard of fistula, but now it is reported in major newspapers, featured on television shows and being addressed by leaders and communities in more than 40 nations.

Together with partners, UNFPA is working to end fistula and we are making progress. Today, thousands of women have received corrective surgery in new health centers, doctors are being trained and the condition is being prevented as girls and women gain information and healthcare.

Last week, I visited Tanzania, met with government officials and visited many facilities. The government is dedicated to improving women's health in their country but they have a challenging road ahead.

The government and the people of Tanzania know that they cannot do it alone, but they also know that they must lead us, as we support them in facing the challenges of development.

We have learned from decades of development work that ownership of change is key to bringing about actual change and ensuring its sustainability. The countries are now claiming their right to be owners of their own change. Together we must respect it and support them to achieve it.

In Tanzania, a woman faces a 1 in 24 chance of dying during pregnancy and childbirth, compared to a 1 in 4800 risk for a woman here in the United States. The government is working to improve their health system to reverse this reality.

And we also need to make sure that this great gap is narrowed.

In the past eight years as head of UNFPA, I have visited many countries where I have witnessed the sad and outrageous truth – that maternal mortality is the largest health inequity in the world. I have seen clinics with little or no drugs, beds that are occupied by two women, a severe lack of equipment, and a shortage of doctors, nurses and midwives.

As a result, during the next minute, another woman will die from complications of pregnancy and childbirth – more than half a million women every year. This does not have to be the case because we know what needs to be done. To ensure safe motherhood, every woman needs at least three things: family planning, skilled attendance at birth and emergency obstetric care if complications arise.

This is why UNFPA is joining together with other partners, especially the World Health Organization, UNICEF and the World Bank, to fully support governments as they work to decrease maternal, neonatal and child mortality, including through improving health

systems. As we do that, we focus on ensuring primary healthcare is reaching communities, where the real stories of life and death take place. We know that when we have a functioning system to avert maternal death and disability we have a well functioning health system. It will deliver to women when women are ready to deliver.

We are working to ensure that health systems can deliver an essential package of sexual and reproductive health supplies and services and that it responds to the 200 million women who have unmet need to family planning. We must support them to determine the number and spacing of their children and to achieve the best quality of reproductive health.

In Tanzania, I visited a health facility that offers these integrated services, in spite of its poor setting and quality of equipment. But a woman can go to one place and get counseling and services for family planning, HIV prevention and safe delivery. This approach has many benefits: it is a boost for public health and it is also cost-effective; it is equally important that it decreases the stigma associated with HIV. Most of all, it is a one-stop for women to meet their health needs.

At UNFPA, partnership and working with national institutions have been a long standing way of work. But calls for partnerships are increasing, not only as United Nations system but as development partners.

In Tanzania and other seven countries, the United Nations Country Teams, composed of all of the agencies working in the country, are piloting a triangular partnership among the government, the development partners (United Nations and donors) and civil society organizations to support governments achieve their development plans.

We call these *Delivering as One* Pilots. They have worked and I saw real success in Tanzania, with results such as pooling resources, decreasing transaction costs, and even saving administrative costs to the benefits of programmes. We know that, out of 90 countries that will be rolling out new programmes in the next three years, at least 40 of them want to *Deliver as One*.

For the ICPD agenda, this is a dream come true. Only when a coalition of partners agree that the right to reproductive health is a common agenda and when they work together to integrate it into development plans at the national and community level, can we say that we are beginning to see some sustainability of the programmes.

I deeply believe that the only way for this very vital agenda to endure and serve women all over the world is when we, the community of committed actors, are willing to share it with others from outside of our own small circle.

We at UNFPA know from 40 years of experience that the poor health of women and girls goes beyond the health sector. To be successful, we must also tackle gender inequality and the violence and discrimination that girls and women continue to face. We must work across sectors and ensure that others are adopting this agenda as their own.

Our vision is to promote the health of women throughout the entire life cycle. Women do not just suddenly die when giving birth only from obstructed birth; they die because they have been deprived since their birth of nutrition, health care, education, and have been exposed to harmful cultural traditional practices and other conditions.

Experience has shown that change cannot be imposed from the outside, to be lasting it must come from within. This is why we are working with other partners to support countries in strengthening their communities, institutions and health systems. This is why we are supporting women and other community leaders as agents of change.

Today as we celebrate International Women's Day, let us recognize and celebrate the progress we are making. In every country, women are standing up for their rights and more and more men are joining them.

During this financial crisis, we have an opportunity to refocus on our priorities. It is time for us to focus on building the capacities of civil society organizations that are community-based, so they can lead the change that must come from within.

It is time for us to focus on building institutions in countries that support women and girls, and mobilize boys and men for equality.

Women are a powerful force for change and innovation. They are agents of peace, prosperity and stability. And we must put our resources together to ensure that the women's institutions at the community and national levels are built in innovative and creative ways that allow their sustainability.

We know that recovery from the present crisis will take a long time and we know that we have not seen yet the bottom of it. But we also know that out of crisis comes opportunity.

We must turn these challenges into opportunities. And there are many examples from which we can learn.

Today after a terrible genocide, Rwanda has more women members of Parliament than any other nation.

In Liberia, after years of conflict, the people elected the first African woman President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a great leader. And the country is turning itself around with standards of education and health improving and clear actions for zero tolerance for violence against women.

From Tanzania to Turkey, from Egypt to Ethiopia, from Laos to Liberia, from Bolivia to Brazil, we are making progress for women's health and women's rights.

And I am confident that this progress will accelerate with the renewed and important support of the United States and wonderful people like you.

I call on all of us to work together, to lower barriers that keep us apart and make us work in silos.

I call on all of us to pool resources in an innovative way and to share in the implementation of this visionary agenda for the empowerment of women.

I call on all of us to identify our strengths and build on them and identify our gaps and work together to address them.

Only through an honest and open partnership can we reach our common goals. We have to be effective and efficient and we will be collectively and individually scrutinized for how we respond to the needs of populations around the world in the context of the financial crisis that will impact us all. Women of the world deserve that and we are ready to respond to them.

Thank you.