A Newsletter for the 2nd Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights

Tuesday, June 20, 2006

Sexual Health & Rights are human rights-African Govts told

By Gregory Gondwe, Malawi and Abebe, Ethiopia Journalist to Journalist Fellows

African countries should recognize and support sexual health and rights as human rights, Kenya’s Vice President Hon. Moody Awori said while opening the 2nd African Conference on Sexual Health and Rights in Nairobi yesterday. He made a strong call to the delegates to include a component of reverting to African family values and for governments to increase budgetary allocations towards the cause.

“We must retrace to our family values, this is what will save our continent,” he said adding that there is a need to persuade African governments to support reproductive health issues. “It is crucial to encourage African Governments to recognize sexual and reproductive health issues as human rights.

The Conference, which is a follow-up to the inaugural one held in South Africa in 2004 is being attended by over 400 delegates including academics, sexual health experts, journalists, representatives of governments, and activists from all over the world deliberating on various issues around the theme, sexuality, economics and Development in Africa.

Dr Sarah Onyango, the Regional Director of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America International (PPFA-I), one of the co-convenors of the meeting said that the subject of sex and sexuality in Africa was shrouded in silence and ignorance and urged governments to take up the issue seriously.

“The goal of the conference is to bring the discourse of sexuality, sexual health and sexual rights to the forefront in Africa and press stakeholders, mainly governments, to formulate legal charters on this subject,” she said.

Sneak overview of Day 1 deliberations

Key note address: Sexual and reproductive health, “ The road to be and being” by Prof Roland Eddie Mhlanga, Head of the school of maternal, child and women health and chief specialist in the department of obstetrics and gynecology of the Nelson Mandela school of medicine, university of Kwa Zulu Natal in Durban south Africa.

Key Points
• Women have been crying for a long time, sometimes silently, sometimes loudly; no one listens
• Worldwide more than 600 000 women die from pregnancy related causes
• Unwanted or ill-advised pregnancies form a significant portion of the deaths
• Role of men and religious organisations needs to be strengthened
• Women’s Lifetime Risk of Maternal Death: Angola 1 in 9, Benin 1 in 15, Cameroon 1 in 21, Iraq 1 in 41, Kenya 1 in 13, Senegal 1 in 12, Rwanda 1 in 6, South Africa 1 in 70, United Kingdom 1 in 4 600

Plenary sessions: Sexuality, economics and development and the millennium development goals. Dr Rehana Ahmed, specialist UN millennium project, MDG centre East and Southern Africa made a presentation on the UN Millennium Project

Key Points
• To inform and support national growth and development strategies and to provide a model for sustainable investments leading to an economic transformation in rural areas. Linking with local, provincial and national governments.
• Objective: Each village is to empower the village to meet the MDGs no later than the target year of 2015, and in many cases as early as 2010.
• Underlying Principles: Community empowerment, Interventions based on proven, science-based research combined with the best local knowledge and Implementing within the budget estimates of the Millennium Project; at approximately $110 per person per year
• Project Partners: Government, Communities, Development partners and NGOs, UN organizations, The Earth Institute at Columbia University and MDG center (Nairobi)

Dr Richard Muga, Chief Executive Officer, National coordinating Agency for Population and Development, Kenya made a presentation on sexual reproductive health and economic development.

Key points
• Sexual and reproductive health in Kenya with a focus on the youth (aged 10 to 24) who comprise 36% of the Kenya Population.
• In Kenya only 42 percent of women have access to safe delivery in the presence of trained medical personnel, and the situation is worse for the youth because only 12 percent of facilities provide youth friendly services.
• There is further evidence that 68 percent of mothers with no education do not visit health facilities for antenatal care.
• The lack of education among the females limits them to access to knowledge and information on sexual and reproductive health and eventually poor birth outcomes.

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Prof. Charles Ngwena, is a Professor in the Department of Constitutional Law of the Faculty of Law of the University of the Free State. Professor Ngwena has taught, researched and published widely on issues at the intersection between human rights, ethics and health care, including HIV/AIDS and reproductive and sexual health.

Amb Dr Eunice Brookman-Amissah (Ghana, Kenya) Ipas Africa Alliance Dr. Brookman-Amissah is the Ipas Vice President for Africa. Ipas is an International Non-Governmental Organization working globally to improve women’s health through a focus on Reproductive Health.

Dr Fred Nunes board member of IPAS is an experienced advisor on health administration institution and management. He joined the World Bank as a management consultant.

Delegates are requested to be punctual.
Dr Thenya’s prognosis of sodomy cases

By Brenda Otindo, Journalist to Journalist fellow

Out of the crimes that involve sexual conduct, sodomy remains a terror to many victims. Cases of sodomy are said to be on the increase in sexual violence against boys aged between 3-17 years frequently highlighted in the media.

Sadly, the laws of Sub Saharan Africa are yet to fully address the issue of male sexual abuse adequately. This is linked to the myth that “A man has to be a man”. The damaging effects are not only biological but also psychological. Social stigma is the most outstanding.

These comments were made by Dr Sam Thenya, CEO Nairobi Women’s Hospital and Gender Based Violence Center during a pre-conference seminar for journalist. He highlighted the following points:

- Major targets: Boys aged 3-18 years
- Attackers: Varied age groups of men
- Major damage: Anal damage
- Possible infections: STIs, HIV/Aids, Bacterial infections
- Rapid action to take:
  - Report to hospital/health facility
  - Report to the police and obtain a P3 form
  - Seek counseling and support from immediate family and friends
- What you get at hospital
  - Blood test
  - HIV Test
  - STI tests
  - Antibiotics
  - Anti Retroviral Treatment (ARVs)
- To prevent attacks on male children
  - Pick your child from school or assign a trustworthy person. Do not let them come home alone
  - Listen to your children – They could be going through bullying whenever they complain
  - Watch your children’s behaviour and note extreme changes
  - Warn children not to talk to strangers, accept any edibles or gifts even from friends if you are not present.

Dr Thenya called on the media to help in exposing cases of sexual violence in order to create a society that is safe, secure and free of sexual violence.

- Gregory Gondwe, Malawi

Prevent needless deaths in Africa

“Nobody should have to die because they got pregnant,” a visibly worried Regional Director, Sub Saharan Africa for the Population Council, Dr Ayorinde Ajayi has pleaded.

Dr Ajayi spoke to journalists during a pre-conference training session aimed at developing a crop of journalists across the East African sub-region on sexual health and rights. “People should be given a chance to stay alive,” Ajayi added.

He added that an African woman’s lifetime risk of dying of child bearing related causes was 5% as compared to 1% in Asia and Latin America. “Nearly three quarters of maternal deaths are due to direct complications of pregnancy and child birth.”

Ajayi, who widely quoted data from the Population Reference Bureau, added that pregnancy-related deaths are 100 times higher in Africa than in developed countries. He lamented that Africa was lagging behind in maternal health care owing to poverty.

- Kenneth Oluka, Uganda

Journalists cautioned

Journalists have been urged to write balanced stories and avoid being emotional and judgmental while covering the Second Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights.

Esther Kamweru, head of the Media Council in Kenya, told journalists that they needed to stick to the facts to avoid bias. Over 20 journalists from Malawi, Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Uganda attended the pre-conference workshop organized by the Journalist to Journalist project, Population Council (PC) and Population Preferences Bureau (PRB).
Using art to inform on Taboo subject

By Tom Arocho, Kenya 
Journalist to journalist Fellow

“...At nine years she was raped by a relative…”

Eyes widen, mouths a gape as the message hits participants. “When she was 15, she was once again gang-raped by schoolmates…,” the poem goes on. “She was 18 when her boyfriend raped her…he was her first love.” What! The exclamation from the participants echoes through the conference room.

“She was 26 years, married, her husband raped her in the bedroom, in their home where nobody will question, as she breastfed their month old baby”, at this point hands cover mouths in horror, the thumb and the index finger nervously pinch the chin while for some, the open palm rests on the cheek in a sad reflective pose.

The poem titled “Silence of a Lifetime” was among the presentations at the opening of the 2nd Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights that had a lasting impression on the participants. The poem originally by Makhozana Xaba brings out the brutality of sexual violence and the vulnerability of women to this human right abuse. It is about a woman sexually violated from childhood and all the way past adulthood. The use of artistic creativity to pass across taboo subjects such as rape has been effectively achieved by this poem. Participants were able to appreciate and understand that rape is violation of the victim’s rights first and foremost as a human being, as a woman and as a mother.

In a subtle but powerful way, the poem defines the often misconstrued fact that rape can never occur in marriage. The poem also reinforces the fact that rape in most cases is perpetuated by people known to the victim. Schoolmates, colleagues at work, neighbours, a relative, you name them. The poem adopted a dramatic dialogue between the rapists and the victim, not only arrest the attention of its audience, but also to pass across what otherwise is normally discussed in muted whispers. The audience is able to appreciate what goes in the mind of the victim and perpetrator.

“You will know who is the boss now”, one of her workmates tells her as they gang-rape her in the boardroom. This portrays the psycho-sexual desire by the perpetrator to dominate over the victim. “Nine years old, she muffles her cries” as her uncle threaten her with death while raping. This shows the helplessness of the victim who more often than not have no where to turn to for help.

When I asked some of the participants what impact the poem had achieved on their perception of sexual violation, they all agreed that their understanding about the subject had been greatly enhanced through a powerful medium of art: poetry.

Uncle who?

Kenyans endearingly refer to the Vice President Hon. Moody Awori as “Uncle Moody” for his level headed and mature way of approaching issues. The veteran politician (he joined parliament in 1983), who is also known as a fashion trendsetter, never shies away from addressing social issues. As Dr.Onyango pointed out in her speech, Uncle Moody was just the right person to open the conference. By the way, did you know that his brother is an MP and a past presidential aspirant in Uganda? I wonder if they also call him uncle down there.

Urgently wanted: Geography teachers

Is it a slip of the tongue when a conference delegate repeats more than once that she is glad to be in Kenya, the capital city of Nairobi? I hardly think so. We propose the inclusion of geography lessons in the conference programme. Any noble Geography teachers around, please step forward!

Leave my foofoo behind? No way

Our conversation with a Nigerian delegate confirmed what we had been thinking all along: you can remove a Nigerian from foofoo but you cannot remove foofoo from a Nigerian Apparently the delegate carried enough packed foofoo to last a week. Yes you guessed right: she will be eating supper at a friend’s, not at the Hilton. Reminds me of the Kenyans who carry packets of maize flour on trips abroad for their favourite ugali.

We are not bragging, but wasn’t the ‘Destination Kenya’ film a confirmation of Kenya as a prime venue to visit? And weren’t the performances just too energetic? That’s before you even consider the many exhibitions and presentations outside the conference rooms. My word, this must be the most exciting conference in a long time, isn’t it?