

Invest, Protect and Lead: Filling the Glass on Women's Health and Rights and Achieving the MDGs

Delivered by **Adrienne Germain**
President, International Women's Health Coalition

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Michaela Walsh, the Chair of this conference, probably asked me to speak today because, for 40 years, persistence and optimism have sustained my work for women's health and rights. Michaela and I share a gut-level conviction that we can make the world better for girls and women. But as I considered today's topic, my long-held optimism deserted me. Today, the glass of women's and girls' health and rights is only one-quarter full, at best.

One out of every three women worldwide will be beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime, usually by a man she knows.

More than half a million women will die this year alone from complications of pregnancy or childbirth—nearly all of them in developing countries—and at least 20 million more will suffer severe harm from these same causes.

Wherever there is war or conflict or civil disorder—in far, far too many places today—girls' and women's health and rights are not just neglected. They are violated as a means of waging war.

HIV/AIDS has also revealed just how badly the world continues to treat women and girls. Child marriage and other human rights violations, inequalities in education, employment and inheritance make girls and women dependent on the very men who may infect them. Let me cite just one devastating result: In sub-Saharan Africa, three-quarters of all new HIV infections among young people, ages 15-24, are now in girls and young women. But make no mistake, in every region, rates of infection are rising in girls and women, often more quickly than in men. If we do not change how we treat girls and women, we will not stop AIDS. We will not achieve the MDGs.

Why is the glass so close to empty? How have we let so many girls and young women become infected with HIV/AIDS? How can we care so little about our wives, sisters, and mothers that we let them die unnecessarily in childbirth or become incapacitated for life? One reason is our failure to invest. We know what to do. The World Bank has estimated that if all women had access to known—and I stress known—interventions, especially emergency obstetric care, three-quarters of maternal deaths could be averted, and an unknown amount of morbidity prevented. This is not rocket science. It is not expensive. But we are not doing it.

A second reason the glass is close to empty—in the face of twin pandemics, HIV/AIDS

and violence against women—is our utter failure to protect, or even recognize, the human rights of women. Too many people believe that men have the right to beat their wives or that men have a right to sex on demand, or that these are sacrosanct cultural practices. Violence against women and sexual coercion are not cultural practices protected by national sovereignty. They are not men's right. They are violations of human rights.

The third reason the women's health glass is close to empty, especially in the realm of sexual and reproductive health—including HIV/AIDS—is the focus on medical or technical interventions alone, without emphatic leadership for gender equality in all aspects of life, so that girls and women have the power to be—and to stay—healthy.

How can we redress these three failures—failure to invest, to protect, and to lead—so that the MDGs, especially on maternal health, HIV/AIDS, poverty and women's empowerment—are met?

First, we must invest far more in programs that promote and protect the health and rights of women and young people—including sexual and reproductive health services. In today's world, this requires mass mobilization to generate political will—and women especially are doing that in partnership with many others. The most recent example is “With Women Worldwide: A Compact to End HIV/AIDS,” an action agenda supported by 260 organizations from 50 countries. Our alliance includes HIV/AIDS organizations, positive people's groups, youth-serving organizations, sexual and reproductive rights and health groups, women's groups, religious groups, and leading human rights organizations. You can visit www.withwomenworldwide.org for more information.

We must also invest in changing how men and women relate to each other, in sexual partnerships and in the highest levels of society and government. This is not simply a matter of legislation for gender equality. Rather, we need to raise our children differently, by helping young people to establish equality in relationships; respect the right to consent in both sex and marriage; and end sexual coercion and violence. Current adolescent programs typically fall far short of this standard, but many, such as the Girls' Power Initiative—or GPI—in Nigeria show the way. Started 10 years ago, by two Nigerian women concerned about their own daughters, GPI reaches thousands of girls across four states. Both the organization and the girls organize marches, educate the public and negotiate with state and national governments, in addition to their core training programs. GPI girls get an education instead of getting married young; they have resisted genital mutilation for themselves and their sisters; and they are changing the way their parents, siblings, peers and communities value girls and young women. They are changing their world—and have also helped forge global agreements in the UN, in Cairo, and in Beijing so that millions more can benefit from what they have learned.

Returning to our second failure—the failure to protect—we must do far more to protect the human rights of girls and women. It is long past time for governments to come together in the UN to produce a binding convention that recognizes that sexual rights are human rights, and creates robust mechanisms for holding our governments accountable. Here at the UN, and in most countries, sexual rights have been a lightning rod for political controversy. But sexuality is a fundamental aspect of human life. And protection of the rights to choose one's partner, to marry only with one's full and free consent, to seek a pleasurable and safe sexual life, to live free of violence, coercion and

discrimination related to sexuality, and to determine the number and spacing of one's children is fundamental to achieving the MDGs on maternal health, HIV/AIDS and women's empowerment.

Third and last, we must urgently rectify our failure to lead—beginning here in this building. Using the foundation built by Secretary-General Kofi Annan, governments should select a new Secretary-General who holds women's rights and gender equality as a clear top priority. We are, after all, more than half the world's population, and a future of peace and hope requires equal partnership with women. Yet, throughout the UN system we are marginalized—relegated to “focal points” or advisory roles and without significant funds or political clout.

In addition to the commitment and accountability of the Secretary-General, effective UN leadership on gender equality and the human rights of women would entail major structural changes. Regardless of what the structures are, core principles must be met:

- Recruitment of experts in these issues to very senior specialized posts across the UN system;
- Performance evaluations of heads of agencies that hold them accountable for progress on their agencies' programmatic objectives for gender equality and the human rights of women;
- Ambitious programmatic objectives in each and every UN agency, backed by significant funding and staffed by full-time experts.

A pipe dream? Maybe. But we who have worked for women's rights for decades know that such serious and significant action is the only way to make serious progress.

All of us here—civil society and governments—could join together in partnership to make this happen, as we have increasingly done in the UN.

With such joint action, I could once again say, as Mahatma Gandhi did, “I remain an optimist, not that there is any evidence that I can give that right is going to prosper, but because of my unflinching faith that right must prosper in the end.”

Thank you.