

Sexual rights on the agenda

By Colleen Lowe Morna

As the US delegation circulated a resolution on maternal mortality at the Beijing+15 review Friday, activists from around the globe called on governments to accompany this with strong language on sexual and reproductive rights.

According to Maria Antoinieta Alcalde of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) Latin America desk, the narrow focus on maternal health ignores the root causes of why so many women die at child birth, including early marriages, botched illegal abortions, and poor sexual and reproductive health advisory services.

"When you only target maternal mortality it's as though the only thing women want is not to die," she told a lunch forum. "Women also want access to sexual and reproductive health services and information that empowers them to make choices."

Stressing that this had been a tough battle in the formulation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), she said a resolution that only dealt with maternal health ignored key contextual and rights based arguments. Clause 5b of the MDGs enhances the commitment to reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio by committing states to achieve, universal access to reproductive health services.

"The resolution should include comprehensive access to sexual and reproductive health services, not just preventing maternal mortality," she said. While it is understandable that governments are now anxious about not achieving the MDG goal on reducing maternal mortality with the ten-year review coming up in September, the Beijing +15 review must be used to press home the



Callie Chau with IPPF's petition

Photo: Colleen Lowe Morna

twin demand for sexual and reproductive rights she declared amid applause.

Funmi Balagun from Nigeria asserted that "the spaces that were broadening earlier on this front are getting more closed" as a result of the rise in religious fundamentalism since the historic Fourth World Conference on Women. Being a "good woman" meant "having no sex if you are not in marriage or do not intend having children."

IPPF has launched a campaign called "Girls decide: Stand up for choice on sex and pregnancy." The campaign, that has garnered hundreds of thousands of signatures worldwide notes that young women account for 23% of the global burden of disease due to pregnancy and child birth. An estimated 2.5 million young women have unsafe abortions every year, and these account for 46% of deaths related to abortions.

The forum heard that there are 60 million child brides worldwide among whom maternal mortality is especially high. A

study in India found that only 15% of young women can go for sexual and reproductive health advice unescorted. IPPF president Jacqueline Sharpe from Trinidad said in the Caribbean "sexual activity precedes sexual knowledge...we are so afraid to talk to young people about sex."

There is a disjuncture globally, she said, between the rise of fundamentalism and the fact that most young people have their first sexual experience in their early teens without using contraception. In the case of young women, this experience is often violent or coerced. While there are isolated cases of successful programmes to reduce teenage pregnancy, there is urgent need to "scale up comprehensive adolescent sexual and reproductive health services," Sharpe said.

Alcalde stressed that a maternal mortality resolution that lacked a rights perspective; said nothing about prevention and avoided the issue of abortion - one of the most controversial

Economic resolution on the table

By Arthur Okwemba

Women at CSW54 are busy rallying delegates and lobbying their governments to support the adoption of a resolution they say will play a critical role in the realisation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals before 2015.

Presented by the government of Columbia and reinforced by NGOs, the resolution titled *Women's Economic Empowerment*, calls on member states to take radical steps and commit themselves to far reaching actions that would have substantial benefits to the women. "This is the resolution we have to follow keenly and lobby our governments to support it if we need to see increased empowerment of women," said a delegate from Latin America during one of NGO briefing sessions at the Salvation Army.

The resolution, which is being discussed before adoption on Tuesday, calls on the member states to incorporate gender perspectives into social and economic policies, including development of poverty reduction strategies ensuring access and transferring appropriate technology to women. If adopted, member states are to give priority to identifying and redressing women's unequal access to economic and financial resources, including employment, social security and productive resources such as land, property and natural resources. They have to consider the adoption of legislation and implementation of more effective national policies.

issues in the Beijing Platform for Action negotiations in 1995 - does little to advance women's rights or health.

Declaring that there is need to come up with "new, comprehensive approaches" she said the global IPPF

Says the resolution:

While women represent an important and growing proportion of business owners, their contribution to economic and social development is constrained by, inter alia, the denial and lack of equal rights and lack of access to legal aid, education, training, information, support services and credit facilities including salaries, and control over land, capital, technology and other areas of production.

To remedy this situation, the resolution proposes the implementation of positive steps that promote equal pay for equal work or work of equal value, which remains one of the causes of women's marginalisation in the economic sector. It also suggests action to remove structural and legal barriers as well as stereotypical attitudes to gender equality at work, by redressing gender bias in recruitment, working conditions, remuneration, occupational segregation and harassment. The issue of discrimination of women in social protection benefits; unequal career opportunities; and the inadequate sharing of family responsibilities, are to be redressed as a matter of urgency.

If adopted, member states will be expected to develop and implement specific policies and programmes that promote women's economic empowerment, including those that enhance their access to full and productive employment as well as support their entrepreneurial capacities through the provision of advisory services and access to markets.

network seeks to increase access to safe, legal abortions while at the same time reducing the need for this. The IPPF announced during the forum that it had formed a partnership with the Pan African Parliament to advance the sexual and reproductive rights of women in Africa.