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# **WOMEN DELIVER ... and so much more than babies**

De Carine Weiss, Carolyn Blake et Leah F. Bohle

*Gender equality, abortion, child marriage, quality of maternal care, violence against women and investment in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, new technology and innovative solutions were just some of the topics discussed at Women Deliver 2016, the world's largest conference on women's and girls' health, rights and wellbeing. A total of 5'700 participants from 194 countries joined the event - including government ministers, policy makers, business leaders and representatives of non-governmental organisations, members of civil society organisations, youth, activists, royal family members and celebrities - to discuss how to improve the lives of girls and women by the SDG target date of 2030. A report written by Carine Weiss, Carolyn Blake and Leah F. Bohle.*



World Deliver Conference 2016 (Photo: Carine Weiss)

Jill Sheffield, a global advocate for maternal, sexual and reproductive health and rights, launched in 2007 the first Women Deliver Conference - which evolved into an international advocacy organization aimed at generating the much needed political will and investment to meet MDG 5 by 2015.

With the slow progress made in maternal health by the end of 2015 and with the Sustainable Development Goals - in place -, the continuous prioritisation and investment in women's and girls' health is more than ever needed.

The conference however did not only focus on maternal health, but women's health and rights in general: Every minute a woman continues to die due to pregnancy or childbirth related complications leading to 300'000 deaths each year. One out of three women worldwide experience physical or sexual violence, 15 million girls are married before the age of 18 and globally 3 million girls are at risk of FGM/C each year. Behind each number is the life of a woman whose rights have not been upheld.

The conference took the participants on a four day journey through a great diversity of sessions and activities including plenaries, numerous partner side events, a speaker's corner, TED talks, short films and poetry, a photo exhibition, mHealth innovations and a large exhibition hall with booths of many organisations. Impressive was the composition of the panels: a mix of technical and emotional inputs; experts and people affected by HIV, FGM or stillbirth to mention a few.

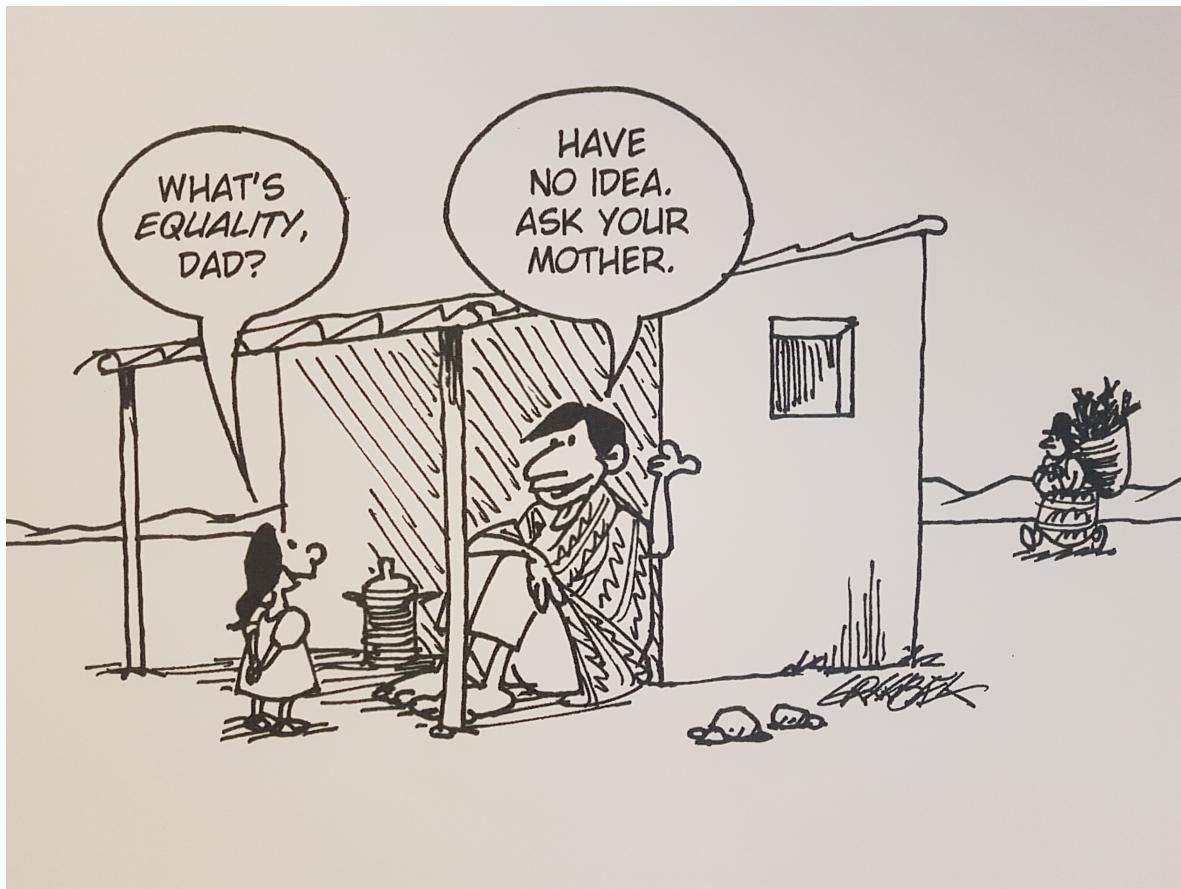
*"Girls and women carry more than babies. Or water. They carry families. They carry businesses. They carry potential. And when we invest in their health, rights and well-being, it creates a positive ripple effect that lifts up entire countries."*

*Katja Iversen | CEO Women Deliver*

## **#Gender Equality**

Gender equality is a human right. During the opening ceremony, Princess Mary of Denmark made an impassioned plea for governments and society to do much more to achieve gender equality. "The evidence is sound; when we invest in girls and women, society as a whole benefits," she said. "This agenda is not a woman's agenda but a united agenda for humanity that involves men, women, girls and boys. Together let's deliver for girls to have choice, not chance. And let's agree less bad is never good enough..."

Participants emphasized that gender inequality needs to be addressed at all levels if we want to achieve the SDGs – and particularly SDG 3 and SDG 5 - by 2030. During a side event organised by the Global Fund and the Global Partnership for Education on *Empowering Women & Girls Through Health and Education*, the panellist agreed that it takes three to five generations to change gender dynamics. It is crucial to work on the community level and to engage fathers and mothers if change is to be made in the education sector. Changing mind-sets and attitudes are key to achieving gender equality and thus better life outcomes for women and communities at large.



Cartoon shown at the conference (Photo: Carine Weiss)

## #Youth

*"The key to a brighter future is a healthier, safer and more empowered youth who are the new faces of the SDGs."*

*Babatunde Osotimehin | Director UNFPA*

The importance of young people driving change was felt during the entire conference. In the lead-up to Women Deliver 2016 600 young people were consulted to share their ideas and perspectives on what needs to be done to improve the engagement of young people in advocacy for sexual and reproductive health and rights. They responded that cultural and religious norms, insufficient information and education and absence of trust in or respect for youth perspectives are major barriers to meaningful engage in the promotion of SRHR.

In Babatunde Osotimehin's word, Executive Director of UNFPA, "the key to a brighter future is a healthier, safer and more empowered youth who are the new faces of the SDGs."

Women Deliver has developed a *Young Leaders Program*, which provides opportunities for youth advocates to build and strengthen their capacity and skills and find platforms for them to share their voices and experiences.



World Deliver Conference 2016 (Photo: Leah F. Bohle)

## **# Abortion**

“What if men got pregnant?” This poignant and yet ironic question was raised during a TED talk by Leslie Cannold – an ethicist, activist, public intellectual and Australian Humanist of the Year. Cannold argued that if we were living in a world where men got pregnant, legal abortion restrictions and abortion related deaths would no longer be an issue. Implying that abortion rights is a much wider debate related to the distribution of decision-making power in society – and the reality that if men were the ones getting pregnant, they would want and defend their right over their own body. This provocative yet compelling talk left an impression on many participants.

22 million women risk their lives through unsafe abortion every year. Yet in many spaces, mention “abortion” and a heated debate will ensue. Legislatures prefer not to address it, hospitals and health centres don’t want to provide it and women often face stigma if they had an abortion.

## **# Midwifery Care**

Several side panels drew attention to the strong need for improving midwifery and the quality of maternal and newborn health services. A buzz word was “respectful maternal care”.

It has been recognised that institutional delivery alone does not result in a major reduction of maternal mortality unless a holistic health systems approach to improve quality of care is put into place. A recently published article by Alex Filby, Fran McConville and Anayda Portela systematically maps social, economic and professional barriers for midwives in low- and middle-income countries – the frontline workers playing a major role in ensuring the provision of quality of care to mothers and their babies. Midwives are a key element in reducing maternal and newborn mortality and morbidity and more needs to be done to integrate “... educated, trained, regulated and licensed midwives into the health system...”. (Filby et al. 2016)

This requires political will and a system in place for the regulation and licensing of professional midwives, a sufficient number of accredited teaching institutions to deliver high quality midwifery education, training and supportive supervision, and internationally binding accreditation guidelines – as currently developed by the International Confederation of Midwives – are all urgently needed. The lack of qualified midwifery teachers, mentors and role models as well as the willingness of donors to invest in teaching and other initiatives such as midwife-led service units poses a grave challenge for the success of SDG3.



World Deliver Conference 2016 (Photo: Carine Weiss)

## # Accountability

During the opening of the Women Deliver Conference Melinda Gates – co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation – announced the provision of \$80 million to close the gender data gaps in the near future. To achieve gender equality by 2030 as outlined in SDG 5, disaggregated data by gender is required to hold governments and decision-makers accountable for their actions. Sound data and evidence is a necessary building block to ensure accountability in upholding the rights of girls and women.

Strengthening accountability was indeed a term frequently discussed in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights at Women Deliver 2016. This is a broad concept which includes political, legal, social and professional accountability – which linked duty bearers to the right holders. Kate Gilmore - the United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights – emphasized this point by saying that accountability has to become an element of the Theories of Change we are working with. Accountability is not a standalone initiative, but needs to be supported by sound evidence and strategic advocacy. It was mentioned that the term accountability is not a static word but embodies voices and refers to a mechanism that is actionable and should be answerable to right holders.



World Deliver Conference 2016 (Photo: Carine Weiss)

## **Take home messages**

We are inspired, motivated and energized – that was the feeling we had when we left the conference. The energy created during these four days was impressive. And it is this energy which we need to use in our work to make our contribution to improve sexual and reproductive health and rights worldwide!

**The Women deliver team handed out a leaflet with 10 things to do when we get home:**

**1. Be a catalyst for change:** join with colleagues and other organisations in your country

**6. Use the solutions panorama** in your program planning: available at [womendeliver.org](http://womendeliver.org) by September, first anniversary of the SDGs!

**2. Sign on to the Deliver for Good Campaign:**  
<http://womendeliver.org/deliver-for-good/>

**7. Spread the word!**

**3. Seize the day:** follow up with new connections and potential partners after the conference

**8. Work with the media**

**4. Reach across the aisle:** work with new people from different sectors to achieve even more change

**9. Sign-up for the monthly delivery:** MMS did so!

**5. Share what you learned** – and learn some more: read this article!

10. Tell women deliver what you think!

The message of the conference is clear: if we invest in girls and women, everybody wins! But we cannot leave men behind.... Medicus Mundi Switzerland together with you will continue to work on these issues. Join us at the next Women Deliver conference in 2019!

You find this report as well as a pdf-document: [here](#)

## Resources

- Alex Filby, Fran McConville, Anayda Portela (2016) What Prevents Quality Midwifery Care? A Systematic Mapping of Barriers in Low and Middle Income Countries from the Provider Perspective. *PlosOne*, May 2nd, 2016.  
<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0153391>
- Women Deliver - An Unwavering Advocate for Girls and Women: <http://womendeliver.org/>
- Get the facts: When we invest in girls and women, everybody wins!  
<http://womendeliver.org/resources/>

- What Does it Mean to Meaningfully Engage Youth? <http://womendeliver.org/2016/mean-engage-youth-meaningfully/>
- Virtual Conference: WDLive <http://wd2016.org/media-resources/virtual-conference/>



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