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Investing in women
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Statement

I would like to talk about why investing in women and in women's health is a smart choice and an investment that is key to making progress towards the Millennium Development Goals.

If we look around the world today, we see that women are often on the frontline when it comes to demanding change and opportunity, but that they are at the end of the line when it comes to power and decision-making.

Today women constitute the majority of the world's poor and illiterate, and they still hold very few top positions in both the private and public sectors.

Across the European Union, women account for only 11 percent of the membership of governing bodies such as boards of directors. And worldwide, women comprise just 18 percent of parliamentarians.

At the same time we know that investing in women and opening up opportunities for women is not only the right thing to do, but it is smart economics.

There is no doubt that educating girls and women and providing microfinance and other job opportunities brings tremendous and well-documented benefits, including even slowing population growth. I would like to add a third area that is vital for broadening women's horizons, one on which I am sure all of us here agree: improving women's access to health.

We need to keep the promise that was made in Cairo 15 years ago at the International Conference on Population and Development. We need to join forces to ensure universal access to reproductive health by 2015. This target appears in the Millennium Development Goals, under MDG 5 to improve maternal health, and it is an area where we need to make far greater progress.

Of course, reproductive health is not only a right but it is also a critical factor that influences population dynamics, such as population growth and size and age structures.

Today poor reproductive health is a leading killer and disabler of women in their reproductive years in the developing world. And this is causing a tremendous amount of needless death and suffering, and it is also dragging down economic growth and hindering efforts to reduce poverty.

Every year, more than half a million women die during pregnancy and childbirth, largely from problems that could be prevented. And for every woman who dies, 20 more suffer injuries and disabilities that can last a lifetime and rob them of energy and productivity. Of all regions, Africa has the world's highest maternal mortality - at least 100 times higher than the richer countries.

The sad and shocking truth is that maternal mortality represents the largest health inequity in the world. And of all the Millennium Development Goals, MDG 5 to improve maternal health is lagging the furthest behind. This is the case even though proven interventions exist and we know what needs to be done. In countries where women do have access to comprehensive reproductive health services, maternal death is a rare phenomenon.

It is not a lack of knowledge that is hindering progress; it is a lack of political will to protect the health and rights of women, especially their decision to access voluntary family planning.

And the bottom line is that the world is paying a high price for not allowing women to live up to their full potential.

While the loss of a mother to a child, and family is beyond measure, there is a figure that sums up the global cost of maternal and newborn mortality and it is \$15 billion lost in productivity annually.

So clearly we need to do more to improve women's health. We need to join forces to strengthen health systems and scale-up quality health services to deliver a package of reproductive health services. This package should include family planning, skilled attendance at delivery and emergency obstetric and newborn care.

And here I would like to stress that maternal mortality is an indicator of how well a health system is functioning and we should use it as a marker in our efforts for health systems strengthening. We should view a functioning health system as a system that can deliver to women when women are ready to deliver.

Of course, we also know that we have to tackle the root causes of maternal mortality and morbidity, including gender inequality, low access to education- especially for girls – child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. The health benefits of these investments are well known, well documented and substantial.

It is estimated that ensuring access to voluntary family planning alone could reduce maternal deaths by 25 to 40 per cent, and newborn deaths by as much as 20 per cent.

New analyses show that the direct health benefits of meeting the need for both family planning and maternal and newborn health services would be dramatic: 70% per cent of maternal deaths could be averted.

These are significant benefits. But as striking as these numbers are, the personal, social economic and demographic benefits of reproductive health services may be even higher.

Access to reproductive health helps women and girls avoid unwanted or early pregnancy, unsafe abortions, as well as pregnancy-related disabilities. This means that women stay healthier, are more productive, and have more opportunities for education, training and employment, which in turn slows population growth and benefits entire families, communities and nations.

In every region, increased women's labor participation and earnings are associated with reduced poverty and faster economic growth.

It is also a fact that the right to sexual and reproductive health is essential for advancing women's empowerment and equality between women and men.

Yet despite these well known benefits, some 215 million women today want to plan and space the births of their children but lack access to safe and effective contraception.

And whether these services are provided and expanded to meet rising needs over the coming decades will also determine whether global population grows from today's 6.8 billion to the UN's median projection of 9 billion, or the high projection of 11 billion people by the year 2050.

I think we can all agree that our world today is too complex and interconnected to consider or confront problems in isolation of each other.

When a mother survives, when a young girl gets an education and grows into a life filled with opportunities, the consequences extend beyond the existence of these individuals. They enrich the society as a whole and increase prospects for peace, prosperity and stability.

Progress is possible when people join together united by a common cause and when we focus on real people and their daily challenges. No social investment costs so little and brings such far-reaching benefits as investing in the health and rights of girls and women.