

January 26, 2010, Vol. 16, Issue 1

ACCESS TO REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CARE ESSENTIAL FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH AND PROGRESS, SECRETARY CLINTON SAYS

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton gave a powerful speech recommitting the United States to prioritizing women's access to reproductive health services and programs as a path to better health and equality. The January 8 speech at the State Department commemorated the 15th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) – the first ever global forum to recognize the connection between women's health, the quality of women's lives and human progress.

Inequities Remain

The Secretary noted that 15 years after the landmark Cairo conference, vast inequities remain. "Too often, still today in 2010, women and girls bear the burdens of regional and global crises, whether it's an economic downturn or climate change or political instability. They still are the majority of the world's poor, unschooled, unhealthy, and underfed. They are rarely the cause of violent conflicts, but increasingly they bear the consequences of such conflicts. We've seen that from the Congo to Bosnia to Burma. And 15 years after the Cairo conference, far too many women still have little or no access to reproductive health services, including family planning and maternal health care," she told the audience of State Department employees, advocates and experts.

"In societies where women's rights and roles are denied," she added, "girls are forbidden from attending school or they pay a very heavy price to try to do so. Few have the right to decide whether or when to get married or become mothers. Poverty, political oppression, and even violent extremism often follow."

Moving Forward

The world has made measurable progress in improving the lives of women and girls – including a global increase in contraception use, greater access to neo-natal care and to medicines that prevent the spread of HIV from mother to child, increased child survival rates and a growing number of girls attending schools, she said. Yet today, some 215 million women worldwide lack access to modern forms of contraception, which leads to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, unintended pregnancy, abortion, infant mortality, and a range of maternal and child health problems.

"If we believe that human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights, then we cannot accept the ongoing marginalization of half the world's population," the Secretary warned. "In the Obama Administration, we are convinced of the value of investing in women and girls, and we understand there is a direct line between a woman's reproductive health and her ability to lead a productive, fulfilling life. Therefore, we believe investing in the potential of women and girls is the smartest investment we can make. It is connected to every problem on anyone's mind around the world today. So we are rededicating ourselves to the global efforts to improve reproductive health for women and girls."

2015 is the target year for completing the goals set forth back in 1994 at ICPD. At that conference, 179 nations agreed on actions needed to achieve universal access to: education, especially for girls; reductions in infant, child and maternal mortality; and universal access to reproductive health over the next 20 years. Many United Nations conferences and international meetings have reaffirmed the Cairo Consensus, including the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/fwcwn.html>), which established the Beijing Platform for Action, and the 2000 Millennium Summit, which established the Millennium Development Goals (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>).

Secretary Clinton closed her speech by saying that achieving these goals to improve the health of women and children worldwide is in America's best national security interest. She asked advocates to help "create institutional and structural change that does not get wiped away when the winds change."

Secretary Clinton's remarks are available (<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135001.htm>). For information on the International Conference on Population and Development and a video of the speech, please visit www.icpd2015.org/. Visit the FVPPF's 'KnowMoreSayMore' initiative, which examines the reproductive health consequences of sexual coercion and violence, (<http://www.knowmoresaymore.org/>).