

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND. JULY 6TH 2009

[Sarah Omega aged 32, a fistula advocate from Kenya].
I got involved with fistula activism after a successful repair surgery in May 2007, which ended my 12 years of suffering with the condition.

With special emphasis on maternal health, I stand in strong support of the theme, "Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to global public health".

I have a conviction that the story of a woman is the story of the society. Her success is our success, and what affects her, affects all of humanity. The billion-dollar question is "How safe is motherhood?"

Records indicate a disgusting reality. A woman dies every minute from complications arising from pregnancy and childbirth. More than ½ a million die in a year.

On average, in a year 15 million others suffer severe health problems, or are left with life threatening disabilities like fistula, which has a devastating mix of medical, social and psychological consequences.

It is disappointing to note that maternal health is the area of least progress, of all Millennium Development Goals. In the 21st century when the world has both skills and means to make motherhood safe, it is heartbreaking that a woman should die while she gives life. It is not an issue of incurable disease, but simply our indecision as a society to count the worth of a woman.

Since a vast majority of these hard realities happen in the developing countries, with sub-Saharan Africa, most affected, it is important to highlight the context. This will act as an eye opener at this conference, and a pointer to the right course of action in improving maternal health.

Maternity is generally compromised in two basic settings namely;

1. The socio-cultural context, and
2. The political and economic context.

In socio-cultural context, beliefs, values, harmful traditional practices, illiteracy and gender discrimination prevent women from making decisions about their own lives. Their only option in life is limited to childbearing irrespective of the risks involved. This must change, or we must force it to change. Women need the ability to make voluntary informed choices. We need the ability to have a wanted pregnancy and the ability to avoid a pregnancy that is not welcome. Our right to access health, nutrition, education and life opportunities should be promoted and protected.

Political and economic conditions such as poverty and civil war also have a direct impact on maternal health. Lack of basic resources, poor infrastructure, limited access to reproductive health care, insecurity and all related factors need our solidarity, commitment and action to end. Access to universal sexual and reproductive health care calls for increased funding.

I speak with conviction, passion and emotion, on maternal health, because every woman has a right to live, laugh and live again. I personally grew up in abject poverty. Orphaned at the age of 11, I dropped out of school for lack of fees, and got pregnant at 19 through the beastly act of rape. From that dehumanizing encounter, I developed a life threatening birth complication – obstetric fistula. Night and day for 12 years up to May 2007 my life was continually put on the verge. With uncontrolled leaking of urine, foul smell, stigma, isolation, pain and rejection, it was like dying every day.

While still in hospital after the repair surgery, is when I learned that I am just one among millions of women who die or suffer disabilities related to pregnancy and childbirth. This reality pushed me to action of not watching another women die or suffer as I suffered.

I am thankful to UNFPA for their support and funding that has broadened my vision for safe motherhood to the global level. I have advocated for safe motherhood at the "Women Deliver Conference" in London, October 2007 and several events on Capitol Hill in 2008. With support from UNFPA I put emphasis on community outreach because the community has great influence if involved in advocating for safe motherhood.

My fulfillment in life is when I can contribute in giving a woman a life and a genuine smile. My call to the universe is to make maternal health a priority.

We should not allow another woman to suffer that. We need to move in with strong policies, advocacy, systems and funding. Let the woman live, laugh and live again.

Thank you!