

Presentation for IWDA conference Melbourne September 1st 2005

Good Afternoon Everyone

I am very pleased to have been asked to give this presentation today although I can't be there to give it person.

My name is Chris Richards I am the CEO of the Reproductive Health Alliance, an NGO which works for women's rights in developing countries and in Australia, particularly women's reproductive rights which underpins many of their human rights.

Why do we focus on women's reproductive health? Just take a second to think about how women's ability to control their own fertility is so central to their lives – their emotional, physical and economic wellbeing. How once girls reach adolescence their reproductive health can bring them undone in so many ways. How through complications of childbirth and pregnancy women may die and how that would affect their remaining family members, especially existing children. How if a woman felt she had no alternative but to seek abortion unsafely or illegally she could also die or be rendered infertile. And if we must focus on economics, how much less productive women are when they cannot control their fertility or earn income or are too sick to care for others.

And what about the radical thought that we should focus on women's sexual and reproductive health because the right to life and to be free to participate in society is a basic human right and not just an economic benefit to the community.

What I want to talk about today is not so much about the MDGs because I think many speakers will have been able to well express why gender is important and the specifics about what needs to be done to achieve the goals.

Political will

I want to talk about the lack of political will which is holding us back from achieving the MDG's. We have all heard the scary statistics that inform why we need to support the MDGs. I will give you just a couple.

One woman dies every minute from of complications due to pregnancy or childbirth- Over 99 percent of these occur in developing countries. 68,000 women each year die from accessing unsafe abortion.

We also know the economics behind the stats-that it costs a lot more to save somebody from the complications of pregnancy and childbirth than it would to provide the very basics of health care to save women's lives in the first place.

The problem has been articulated over and over again. We even have the solutions. But we also know that political will is what it will take to actually achieve the MDG's.

Problems and solutions

We know that every task force on the MDG's to do with gender, health and issues around S&RH which underpin the achievements of all of the MDGs has clearly articulated the problems and the solutions.

Let me just give you a few quotations from Stan Bernstein who worked with Geoffrey Sachs on the Millennium Project Report.

He says "That ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health information and services including voluntary family planning is essential for the MDGs"

Stan Bernstein also says "Gender equality is essential for achieving the MDGs and gender equality cannot be achieved without guaranteeing women's and girl's sexual and reproductive health and rights."

The Secretary General of the UN Koffi Annan has also stated "The MDGs particularly the eradication of poverty and hunger cannot be achieved if questions of population and reproductive health and not squarely addressed. And that means stronger efforts to promote women's rights and greater investment in education and health, including reproductive health and family planning".

When you have such a distinguished panel of people all talking about the need to have S&RH highlighted in the MDG's along with women's rights and gender equality you may ask 'if these people are calling for this - why is it not happening?'

And that is a very good question. I believe that the answer to this is that there is not enough political will.

A few months ago I attended an ECOSOC meeting in New York which Mr Billson also attended. It was a lead up to the September MDG's summit.

At that meeting many civil society groups and countries committed once again to gender initiatives to progress the achievement of the MDGs and expressed support for SRH in their country statements. This needed to be explicit because there is opposition to gender equality from all sorts of avenues—I am sure you all know of them—from governments, from men in high positions, from religious groups and from many interest groups which have an investment in disempowering women. And yet all of the research and all of the scientific evidence says the MDGs cannot be achieved without gender equality.

So where does the Australian government stand on these issues?

Mr Billson made some statements recently in Indonesia at the High Level Regional Meeting on the MDGs about Australia's understanding of the way forward. Let me just quote you one strategy he mentioned and perhaps he has quoted this himself earlier this afternoon—

‘Policies and programs need to ensure that poor people are able to participate in growth. Investment in health, education, rural development and market access is essential’

Who are these people? These poor people? Well more than 50% of them are women. It is women who suffer most when governments don't have the policies and programs needed to ensure that they can participate in growth. They are the ones who don't get the investments in health, rural development or education. Globally women hold title to only 2% of all land owned. You heard right, 2 per cent.

And yet - women are not a commodity, an issue that has to be considered as part of the problem like trade and infrastructure. We are the half of humanity that creates the rest of humanity and in developing countries this is often at the cost of our own lives and health. We are not a problem to be considered in policy and programming; women's empowerment IS the solution and that means **access** to services and human rights that most women in developing countries are denied.

IF women owned 50% of land titles, if they controlled our own fertility, if they were free from the scourge of violence and could protect themselves against HIV/AIDS and if they had access to political processes and freedom to participate more fully in community and local government, then the MDGs would much more easily be achieved. And all this takes is political will.

Political Will and Aid

The Australian Aid program which comes under Mr Billson's balliwick has recently formed a gender health and population section which many of us who work in this area are cautiously thrilled about. Indeed in New York Mr Billson said that political leadership is needed if we are to tackle HIV/AIDS and he said that Australia is particularly concerned at the rate of spread of HIV among women and girls in our region. I wonder if the creation of this section is part of that political leadership.

The question I am asking is, 'is there enough political will to give that Section some real teeth or will it be history revisited in appearing to have a real function but with no real clout?

Will that Section be asked for **significant** input into the White Paper on Aid, into the international health policy, into the HIV/AIDS strategy, into policy documents like the AusAID PNG Economic Report which in a recent report did not even mention gender or women and the implications for the PNG economy. And that in a country which has one of the highest maternal mortality rates and HIV infection rates amongst women in the world.

Will this Section be able to implement gender budgeting which brings gender equality into the allocation of public funds? Will this Section be able to implement gender auditing which looks at fair and efficient distribution of resources across the aid program? Are they going to be able to influence the processes needed to ensure the collection and analysis of gender disaggregated data to base sound decisions on?

Many years ago we had a very strong commitment to gender and to women's equality. We were applauded around the world for our leadership in this area. We worked with UNIFEM in trialling gender budgeting through the Office of the Status of Women; an office that has now been removed from Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Australian Leadership

For me working in the international development field it would be fantastic if Australia was once again to resume its place as one of the leaders not the followers in truly integrating gender into Australian programs and policies which impact in our region. And I am not just talking about the aid program. We need to be working with the Departments of Finance, Treasury and Foreign Affairs and Trade on gender financing and auditing, on trade and access, and on foreign policy. We need to be saying that women collectively, are no longer an issue to be considered and dealt with in a separate paper or policy. We are the half of the world that ensures the survival of the rest of the world and gender inequality is THE issue.

To be a leader on gender thinking again we need to be able to find out **before** Australian government officials go to these international conferences what Australia's position is going to be.

We need to have input and to ask our government to consult much more with civil society **before** they make their statements. I am too often asked by international counterparts what has happened to the leadership on our issues that Australia used to take.

Instead it is very difficult to find out what Australia is going to say and it can be contradictory on our issues from one conference to another. Perhaps this is the price we pay for having different Ministers take different views on similar issues.

It would be wonderful if our government consulted with us beforehand as many other countries do and in fact even invite civil society to join the delegations— UK, Canada & New Zealand being the one's most obviously come to mind. Given the limited resources governments have these days, civil society is often better informed about work that is our core business and can work with government to better inform them and ensure some consistency of message as well as informed debate on key issues.

It would be fantastic if Australia could once again be one of the leaders not the followers on gender issues especially in our region when we know that the HIV/AIDS pandemic is about to impact most severely on women and where we have some of the highest maternal death rates in the world in East Timor and PNG.

World Bank Support

I'd like to finish by saying that if Australia decides its statement at the UN Summit on the MDG's is mainly about governance and trade and does not include strong statements about its commitment to achieving all of the gender related MDGs including references

to sexual and reproductive health then I think there will be a very long slow road to really achieving gender equality in our region.

We cannot achieve the growth that the Government argued for at ECOSOC without the full participation and empowerment of half the population... WOMEN.

Mr Billson said at ECOSOC that The World Bank states that broad-based economic growth must be at the centre of any strategy to achieve the MDGs and that Australia absolutely concurs with this. Hopefully Australia also concurs with the World Bank statement that:

‘the third MDG to promote gender equality and empower women is central to the Bank’s overall mission to reduce poverty and stimulate economic growth.’

Gender equality and empowerment **are** the necessary steps in forming the basis for sustainable economic growth.

Growth and health

Indeed the countries that Mr Bilson identified in his statement in Jakarta recently as having the best growth in decades, Vietnam, China and India have relatively strong state welfare systems, and have only deregulated and opened up their economies very cautiously and slowly. In other words there is an equally strong argument that those countries had the health and welfare systems in place first and that access to those health systems have enabled stronger economic growth.

We can make a difference now by asking our government to support strong statements on gender and sexual and reproductive health and emphasizing the importance of their prominence in our country statement at the Millennium Summit next week. And our Government can make a difference by showing that is serious about its statements that gender equality is central to poverty alleviation.

And we can start to recognize that Australia’s position on these issues is looked at by developing countries in our region so it is very important that at a policy level Australia leads the way in best practice. We will not achieve this if women’s empowerment is seen as a side issue instead of ‘the issue’ in achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Christina Richards
CEO ARHA