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Lack of care a form of violence against women

More than half a million women worldwide will die this year from the complications of pregnancy and childbirth, mostly because girls and women in the developing world have no access to the basic services they need. According to the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance (ARHA), this lack of care and low priority of saving women's lives is a form of violence against women.

CEO of ARHA, Ms Christina Richards, says that on International Women's Day, the world needs to take seriously the new target under the fifth Millennium Development Goal, namely, *universal reproductive health by 2015*.

"Good reproductive health care, particularly in the developing world, includes access for women and girls to proper nutrition, protection from sexual violence, access to contraception, emergency contraception and safe pregnancy care. It also includes the right not to die from unsafe abortion practices," says Ms Richards.

"The half a million deaths from complications of pregnancy and childbirth include 68,000 from illegal and unsafe abortions. An estimated 90 per cent of deaths from unsafe abortions and 20 per cent of obstetric mortality could be avoided with improved access to contraception. Yet globally, donor funding for family planning has decreased by 36 per cent."

Ms Richards says that reproductive health care has to cover girls as well. The 51st UN Meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, currently being held in New York, is addressing the elimination of violence against the girl child. Delegates have heard harrowing stories about child marriage, female genital mutilation and other forms of sexual violence against girls.

"Girls are being trafficked for sex, they are being raped when they collect firewood, they are being raped when they collect water," she says. "Many are exploited by the very people who are meant to protect them. Too many are having babies before their bodies are mature enough to bear children, and many have absolutely no access at all to the kind of reproductive services women in the industrialised world take for granted. This condemns them to a miserable life if they survive these horrors"

Ms Richards says that without emergency contraception, without safe abortion, without allowing access to safe delivery, child brides and girls who have been raped are at risk of permanent injury such as fistula or even death.

"It can be regarded as an act of violence by the international community to deny protection and health services to such girls," she says, "as well as an outrage that governments continue to ignore the issue".

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