Family planning: Experts proffer solutions to reduce maternal deaths

DRESSED in traditional attire, Fatima and Zabari Museveni, a young couple, made their historic appearance at the largest international conference on family planning (FP) with a testimony. With unimaginable confidence, they told the audience their heart-wrenching story. They had six children in 10 years the youngest is about 18 months old. Recently the couple made a joint decision to delay further childbearing until they were more financially secured. Their story told via an interpreter was heart-warming and received a thunderous applause from the audience.

Mrs. Museveni's, 24, an emotive and passionate voice and she had no idea of what family planning was all about until she came in contact with Prodam clinic, and was giving advice on contraception. "I used to produce year after year. I needed a break. I wish the access to contraception had been as easy as salt or pepper," she said in between smiles. That has been the fate of thousands of other women all over the world, who do not have access to family planning. In her case, she was lucky to have come in contact with Prodam clinic and was given all the necessary information and contraception she needed to change her life for the better.

Mr. Museveni, like most other men, who do not raise a fuss to assist their wives during pregnancy, told the audience that he thought FP was only for women. "I told my wife that family planning was a woman's issue." But after he was educated on the importance of family planning, Mr. Museveni had a change of heart, and now believes that couples should plan their families together. "I know now that family planning is for men and women," he added.

The benefits of Family planning cannot be underestimated. It is, among other things, key to development and, above all, in achieving the Millennium Development Goal 5.

The Mushen's testimony was part of the opening ceremony of the International Conference on Family Planning, which took place in Kampala, Uganda, between November 15 and 18, 2009. The Conference was organized by the Bill and Melinda Gates Institute for Population and Reproductive Health, the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, the Makerere University School of Public Health, and the Makerere University School of Public Health, and was attended by over 1,000 participants from 59 countries.

Family's experience represents those of estimated 200 million women all over the world, who have the experience of faced with the problem of fertility or delay pregnancy, but are not using effective contraception. It is either they have no access to it, they think they will not get pregnant, they fear side effects or their families object to any family planning methods. The outcomes of this are thousands of unintended pregnancies, ill health and maternal deaths.

The United Nations estimates that by 2050 contraceptive demand would grow by 40 per cent as record numbers of young people enter the prime reproductive ages. The tragedy of the situation is that the concept of family planning is surrounded by myths and misconceptions, which have been variously been debunked by health experts. According to United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), access to contraceptives empowers women and can save lives. "Contraception can prevent 2.7 million infant deaths a year. It can reduce poverty, slow population growth, edge the planet into the environment and make for a more stable, wealthier world," they say.

Another setback is that in spite of several conferences, researches find experiences with successfully planning programmes, global response to this health concern have dramatically declined in the past according to health experts.

The international conference on family planning was held recently in Kampala, Uganda. Victoria Ilbanga, Managing Editor, attended the event.

The conference was attended by about 1,000 people from 59 countries. In an emotion-laden voice, she said: "Welcome back to family planning to the delight of the audience.

The First Lady of Uganda, Mrs. Janet Museveni, in her keynote address attributed the high rate of maternal mortality in Africa to inadequate health systems and poverty and urged African leaders to invest in maternal, child and family health as such measures would yield high returns on investment for the continent in future.

Mrs. Museveni who said the situation of maternal health and child survival in Africa was a cause of concern called for zero-tolerance of maternal deaths. She said in sub-Saharan Africa, a woman's risk of dying from treatable or preventable complications of pregnancy and child birth over the course of her lifetime was high compared to her counterpart in developed countries. "The tragedy of maternal death does not just end at the loss of the mother. The children left behind experience unadulterated suffering. Every year, more than one million children are left motherless and vulnerable because of maternal death. The children who have lost their mothers are up to 10 times more likely to die before age five than those who have not." Mrs. Museveni said.

Continuing, the First Lady said: "For every woman who dies in pregnancy and child birth, six others survive, but with chronic debilitation injuries and chronic ill-health. Among such injuries is obstetric fistula, which is a very dehumanizing condition. I am referring to the particular condition because I know how we affects our women, especially the very young ones."

She highlighted the fact that the causes of death among women and children are well known and are largely preventable, adding that such low-cost or relatively cheap cost-effective technologies such lives could have been saved. Recalling the various commitments by various governments she said, "Therefore, charged them to recommit themselves to the cause of saving womanhood and, indeed humanity. "We, therefore, have a solemn responsibility to ensure that women do not continue to die from preventable conditions whose remedies are available to us. We cannot just sit back and watch as our women continue to die so needlessly in pregnancy and child birth. That is the challenge we have today. No woman should die while giving life, she said."

She highlighted the four actions that are effective in reducing maternal deaths.

- Continues on page 29
Family planning: Experts proffer solutions to reduce maternal deaths

Million needless infant deaths and the loss of 50 million years of healthy life, each year.

He said access to family planning could also help in preventing morbidities such as obstetric fistula and lowering transmission of HIV, adding that over 90 per cent of infants and young children with HIV contracted the virus through mother-to-child transmission.

He said meeting the needs for family planning among women with HIV infection, and in communities where there is a generalized HIV epidemic, would prevent a large share of new infections, saying that voluntary family planning is not only about services, but also about empowerment. But voluntary FP is not only about services, it is also about empowerment, allowing women to have choices in their lives. When women enjoy equal rights and opportunities, they have, the means to participate in society and contribute to peace and security. When women are healthy and empowered, they are able to deliver for their families, communities and nations. Their newborns are more likely to survive and their children to thrive, creating a better life for all, Mr. Haug said.

He said FP is one of the most cost-effective interventions in development and the returns on it for communities and nations are much greater than what it would cost to provide, saying "investment in contraceptive services significantly reduce public spending on health; it is cost-effective. It may take a long run to slow down population growth," he added.

He said despite all the efforts, FP is still an incomplete agenda, saying "today, more than 200 million women want to use safe and effective family planning methods, but are unable to do so because they lack access to information and services or support of their husbands and communities. An estimated 25 million women in developing countries have unmet need for FP."

He also said FP is needed not just for women and girls in situations of conflict and crisis, adding that "families have become a weapon of war and of mass mayhem, and women in the developing countries against whom they will if emergency contraception is not readily available, violence against women, coercion, sexual activity and child marriage are all situations of abuse where family planning has a role to play."

Also, the representative of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), Mr. Michael Rodeff, said several countries are not anywhere close to meeting the goals of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the commitment to improve maternal health.

"We are not half way there to meeting the goals. In many countries, we have not reached anywhere, where we can see them in the next 5 years. We need to work towards realizing their commitments;" he said the other Health Administration was committed to making family planning a priority.

Quoting President Barack Obama statement in the first week of his administration, he said: "We are united in our determination to prevent unintended pregnancies, reduce the need for abortion, and support women and families in the choices they make. To accomplish these goals, we must work to break down barriers of incompetence, access to affordable contraception, accurate health information, and quality health care where there are important synergies to build on."

He described these initiatives as new goals for women and family planning and that the United States, we know that when women are given the freedom to make reproductive choices, they may happen for women, for women's health, for women's opportunities, for women's well-being; good things happen for the family - for child health, for the child's education, for the family prosperity, good things happen for the country - for its economy, for its security, and for its stability."

Meanwhile, also, Population Specialist, the World Bank, John F. May, said population and reproductive health matters were issues of great concern to the World Bank because the outcomes have impact on poverty reduction, especially among the poorest quintile of wealth distribution.

He said "without programmes on population and reproductive health, we cannot improve the health of the mothers and their children MDGs and SDGs, we need to assert the rights of women: currently, there is a large gap in information and awareness of family planning rapid population growth has also adverse impact on the environment, including water demand, food production, and global climate change at large; and rapid population growth has also consequences for the human dimension of development, including health and education and health that are needed to provide the new generations with the necessary skills."

He said programmes on population and especially reproductive health, has not been rapid in all countries, especially in the developing world and in Africa, where countries are being financed and encouraged to make family planning services delivery, and awareness to bridge the gap. The World Bank has large experience in working with governments in developing countries and less developed countries.

Also, speaking the Uganda Minister of Health, Dr. Seck, said that the country's population growth rate in Uganda remains high and that population growth rate in Uganda is still high, but not "very popular here."

On the several misconceptions about family planning, he said, "Many people, especially the younger generation, think that free contraceptives are "too easy" to use, for too long, and too many, or too close or too late," adding "It needs to be promoted as a key strategy in reducing maternal mortality at different levels."

The misperceptions about family planning also formed part of her address. For some reason, family planning as a concept has been misunderstood and maligned, she said, adding "We need to correct the image of family planning."

She regretted men's non-usage attitude to family planning saying "men are largely unsupportive to their wives during pregnancy and child birth." adding that "men must know that they have a role to play if they want their women to survive."

She added: "[Mr. Haug] pointed out that currently, 63 per cent of women of reproductive age in developing countries use a method of family planning as compared to 10 per cent in the 60s adding that access to modern contraceptives has the potential to reduce maternal deaths by up to 40 per cent even as such contraceptives would prevent 2.7 million needless infant deaths and the loss of 50 million years of healthy life, each year."

The conference was attended by over 1,000 participants from Malawi and other countries. The conference was attended by 1,000 participants from Malawi and other countries. The conference was attended by 1,000 participants from Malawi and other countries.