International Conference on Family Planning: Invest in Women – It Pays!

By: Jill Sheffield, President of Women Deliver

Good morning. Thank you all for inviting me here today. I feel incredibly privileged to share this time with each and every one of the 2,200 participants at this year’s International Conference on Family Planning. The caliber and diversity of the attendees has already made for rich discussions and an amazing conference!

As the focus of this forum is family planning, it is essential that participants not only discuss the social benefits of investing in family planning, which include a reduction of unintended pregnancies, a decrease in maternal deaths, and a decline of unsafe abortions, but the incredible economic impact.

Family planning is a true life-saver. Unwanted pregnancies, lack of access to contraceptives and to skilled care before, during and after pregnancy lead to devastating and often deadly results, including unsafe abortion. Each year, about 20 million women have unsafe abortions, and many of them are young girls. Family planning has the power to avert these deaths by: dropping unintended pregnancies more than two-thirds; maternal deaths by 70%; newborn deaths by 43%; and decreasing the number of life years that mothers’ and newborns’ lose, due to disability and premature death, by over 60%. Additionally, upon access to family planning, unsafe abortions would see a 73% reduction.

If the world invested an additional $12.8 billion a year to meet the existing need for modern family planning and maternal and newborn health services, that investment would, in turn, save $15 billion a year in productivity that is now lost to maternal and newborn death. Those deaths are a huge loss. When we allow women to die during pregnancy and childbirth, we lose their potential economic inputs.

Women are at the forefront of the global labor force. They operate the majority of small businesses and farms in developing countries. In Africa, two-thirds of goods are physically brought to the market by women, and in Asia, women are responsible for 90% of rice productivity. In the past 30 years, over 552 million women have joined the global work force, and now almost half of all workers are women. The tremendous impact of their labor is clear -- women’s unpaid labor at home and on farms equals nearly 1/3 of the world’s GDP.

Furthermore, an investment in women is an investment in their entire household. Women’s work makes everyone more productive; as their income is more likely to be spent on food, medicine, education and other essential family needs. In short, when women survive, families thrive.
In order to make the contributions that their countries, communities, and families need, women must be able to plan the number and spacing of their children. When they cannot plan their fertility, they cannot plan their lives. The economic argument now joins the human rights and social justice arguments that are familiar to the field, and the evidence is growing that ensuring access to family planning is not only the right thing to do, it’s the smart thing to do.

Currently, there are inspiring signs of progress and greater global momentum; such as access to family planning is increasing, and maternal mortality is, at long last, in decline. The United Nation’s Secretary General’s Global Strategy for Women’s and Children’s Health has highlighted these issues on the global agenda, and the UN Commission on Information and Accountability on Women and Children’s Health provides a guide to maternal health and family planning investments by all sectors. The World Bank World Development Report for 2012 gathered evidence from ten years of investments in gender equality, with concrete policy recommendations on how we can move forward.

But, there are some things we can do better. First, we can tell the story better. We need to engage the media differently with this growing store of economic evidence. Family planning is not just a story for a lifestyle reporter – it should be covered by political and economic writers, as well. Secondly, we need to involve Finance Ministers and provide them with the research that their investments in women will help achieve the global development goals.

Finally, we start to look toward and plan for the future. Millions of adolescent girls and boys around the world do not have access to information, education, or services related to sexuality. Often times, they also don’t have education about how to prevent pregnancies or protect themselves from HIV. UNFPA estimates that there are nearly 2 billion young people today; the majority of which, live in the developing world. This education is critical. If we do it right, we can bring these young people into a world where it is clearly understood that for individuals and couples, the ability to plan their family is not only a human right, but an economic necessity if families, communities and nations are to thrive.

Like the future of our world, we must also consider the future of our field; contemplating and discussing the frameworks necessary, beyond the deadline of ICPD in 2014, and the MDGs in 2015. We need to start that conversation now, to ensure that sexual and reproductive health and rights isn’t left off the agenda.

The International Conference on Family Planning represents a sea of change in thinking -- family planning that is universally accessible can ensure a changed global landscape for women and their families. Invest in family planning… it pays. Invest in women…it pays.