Weekly News Review – 15 September 2017

A round-up of the week’s most important, Africa-focused Family Planning and Reproductive Health reporting

Global trends, reports and movements

As the world prepares for the UNGA, a number of relevant global reports were released to set the agenda. The Lancet launched a commission for the future of health in sub-Saharan Africa, with the goal of establishing “a path to longer and healthier lives for all Africans,” including advancing reproductive health. The UNFPA report on the State of Midwifery in the East and Southern Africa region examined the workforce responsible for provision of Sexual Reproductive Maternal, New-born and Adolescent Health (SRMAH), looking at midwives and midwifery training: “why are women and girls are not still getting optimum SRMNAH care even when the workforce is available?”

Nigeria, where in Bauci state only 2.1% of married women use contraceptives, launched a four-year comprehensive “Green Dot” family planning campaign “to ensure that 7.3 million women have access to family planning.” Kenya’s “Why I Plan” is “a new platform for young, progressive Kenyans to create engaging campaigns on the future of Kenya, personal goals and the importance of family planning.” Cameroon’s United Vision fights against tendencies and trends that deny young people, women and girls their full rights of existence.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation released its “Goalkeepers” report on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, warning that without more effort, the 2030 targets will not be attained.

The agenda of the WHO meeting in Budapest, reflecting Dr. Tedros’s focus on universal health coverage, which was “once dominated by particular medical conditions and the training of health workers, was now focused on what has come to be known as ‘Health in All Policies’.”

For inspiration, look at this year’s crop of the 120 Under 40 global young champions of family planning. The Challenge Initiative has a “business unusual” approach to urban reproductive health, working, among other things, to improve contraceptive prevalence.

What is the trend in the US? There is so much movement it’s hard to say. House Republicans proposed a budget which is “filled with reproductive health restrictions” The Cassidy-Graham proposal to replace Obamacare would cause “an unacceptable spike in uninsured patients”, and means that “states could significantly pare back their insurance coverage to cover less expensive benefits, things like maternity care”. The White House is proposing a new rule and cuts to Title X funding which could mean “the end of free birth control.” On the other side of the aisle, Sen. Bernie Sanders announced a comprehensive single-payer health bill, which includes taxpayer-funded abortion coverage. The Global Gag Rule is placing the health and lives of girls and women at risk and endangering mothers worldwide,
In California, lawmakers backed a bill to protect workers’ reproductive health choices over opposition from religious groups while in DC the House blocked a similar health nondiscrimination act; Iowa is evaluating FP programs without Planned Parenthood which was forced to close all of its clinics; new abortion clinics are opening in Missouri, bizarrely and unfortunately with some help from Satanists: “The Satanic Temple argued… that the state’s abortion restrictions violate worshippers’ rights to free religious practice… challenging two Missouri laws: one that requires patients to look at unscientific anti-abortion propaganda and another that forces them to wait 72 hours between their initial consultations and a second appointments for their abortions. Satanic Temple members argue that their religion prizes rational, independent thought and that forcing Satanists to read anti-abortion pamphlets and “consider a religious proposition with which they do not agree” during the 72-hour waiting period constitutes a violation of their beliefs.”

Abortion court challenges in Arkansas and Ohio, and an electoral battle in Virginia (“For both sides of abortion debate, unusually high stakes in Virginia governor’s race). A confluence of the administration’s policies harmful to women: fighting for reproductive rights for undocumented immigrants. One suggestion for how to unify the left’s multiple constituencies – Choice, Black Lives Matter, etc. – is to rally around the concept of “bodily autonomy.”

Some reflections on abortion access in Italy (“legal but difficult to obtain”) and Germany (illegal according to the constitution but legal under statute). Ireland’s Taoiseach was non-committal: “I don’t accept the view that the unborn child, the fetus, if you prefer that term, should have equal rights to an adult woman, to the mother, I don’t share this view that the baby in the womb, the fetus, whatever term you want to use, should have no rights at all.” (Another Irish article reported “Men advised to ‘mind their own business” in the abortion debate). The Dutch government is urged to continue supporting She Decides. Indian doctors are ‘afraid to help’ child rape victims, and a Quartz article says India and the US both have “alarming realities” around reproductive rights. A not very pleasant reminiscence of when abortion was illegal in the UK (“a dark and bloody place”). The Women’s Media Center finds abortion rights in peril Sierra Leone, El Salvador, Poland, and the Dominican Republic.

Religious (and other) leaders

Religious leaders can have an effect on attitudes about, and thus uptake of, contraception. In Zambia, where a report says people are having fewer children, community-based health workers are promoting family planning and finding their biggest barrier is church teachings.

Nigerian traditional and religious leaders spoke of the need to strengthen family planning programs, with the Sultan of Sokoto declaring that Islam is not against family planning. The Church of Central African Presbyterian (CCAP) of the Livingstone Synod in Malawi is integrating sexual reproductive health rights issues within already established church youth clubs. Qatar “criminalizes premarital pregnancy, nearly always to the detriment of the women but not the men involved. In the US, Catholic hospitals “are multiplying, and so is their impact on reproductive health care.”

Other leaders promoting family planning in the news this week: Namibia’s first lady and Malawi’s Maseko Ngoni king.

Media reporting on family planning is another avenue of influence, with initiatives in South Sudan, Gambia, Nigeria and Uganda, and through mobile technology in Tanzania.
Mark your calendar

September 13th was World Sepsis Day, to fight against the burden of morbidity caused by the body’s response to infection, which is responsible for roughly 11% of maternal deaths and 8% of newborn deaths worldwide. An initiative in Nigeria calls for early detection. The 13th was also #BumpDay, consisting of people posting photos of their to pregnant bellies, "as a means of addressing the fact that many mothers around the world still lack access to vital care”.

The 11th to the 17th of September is Sexual Health Week in the UK, which this year focused on more open discussions about subjects related to porn. Also in the UK the 16th was set to mark the “Festival of Choice” to address “the global challenges faced by women around the world in securing and defending reproductive and sexual health rights.” The 16th is also Global Female Condom Day. (In Kenya, a former Miss Tourism Kenya teaches girls about female condoms: “My college only had a dispenser for male condoms. Even at the chemist, they only stock male condoms. It’s not fair for a girl. You want to protect yourself.”)

The Sexual Rights Initiative is looking for organizational sign-on to a joint statement on abortion rights in anticipation of the September 28 Global Day of Action for Access to Safe and Legal Abortion, and Imagine 2030 examines contraceptive product development, including an “all-in-one injectable”, as it looks towards World Contraception Day, September 26.

Medical discussions and research

Researchers found a hint of a link between the flu vaccine and miscarriage. Kenyan presidential candidate Raila Odinga’s claimed that the tetanus vaccine that was administered to Kenyan women in 2014 could cause permanent infertility and was roundly criticized by medical experts. While a report says that evidence for potential harms of light drinking in pregnancy is ‘surprisingly limited’, RCOG released a statement that “as there is no proven safe amount of alcohol women can drink during pregnancy, abstinence is the safest option.” (South Africa recorded the highest number of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder cases.) A study in Obstetrics & Gynecology concludes that telemedicine for medical abortion “is totally safe”, the conservative National Review nevertheless said they “pose health risks.”


Shout-outs to the University of Michigan’s Sioban Harlow who is studying GBV in the DRC, and Nursing and Medical School faculty who are teaming up on a Gates Foundation project to examine the growth, impact and effectiveness of maternity waiting homes serving rural Liberia. And also to colleagues at the University of Gondar who published a study on local LARC utilization.

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