Weekly News Review – 22 September 2017

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

Gender Equality at the Center of Development

Global health was a “central stage” at the UNGA, because, according to WHO D-G Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, “People are starting to realize that health is central. It's very important to fight poverty, very important for economic growth, very important for employment, very important for equity.” The World Bank puts women’s health and empowerment “at the center of development.” And “the path to longer and healthier lives for all Africans is within reach.”

Improving family planning and access to contraception and abortion care is a part of these grand concepts, and the data and action points to make that happen were on display. #SheDecides received a push with a big data project sponsored by the government of Belgium, which, “on the basis of big data and satellite imagery, will make up to date analyses of the precise access of girls and women to family planning in Benin and Senegal. The aim is to develop a broad data platform that can also be used in other countries to improve access to family planning.” MHTF reminds of the SDG’s maternal mortality targets, and to achieve them more data is required: “Of the 14 indicators of progress associated with the primary gender equity goal, SDG 5, most countries are measuring just three. To help fill these critical gaps, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has created a three-year, $80 million initiative to generate more reliable data that can improve the design and targeting of programs and policy intervention.” In Senegal, the Global Goals case study puts it clearly: “Achieving the family planning goal makes it more likely that we’ll achieve virtually every other Sustainable Development Goal.”

Health Information for All (HIFA) is continuing the discussion about why family planning and contraception information is important.

Data gathering needs to improve at the national level. A workshop in South Africa brought together young maternal health researchers from the UK, Kenya and South Africa to introduce the concept of “design thinking”, so that “social science makes a positive impact on the lives of citizens.” Sierra Leone, which ranks among the worst nations in maternal mortality, is undertaking a comprehensive review of the causes of maternal deaths. A study in Nigeria showed that women who accessed maternal and child health information over ICT platforms did so 34% of the time for family planning information, which can influence their decisions.

Beware once the data is collected. Sometimes dissemination gets garbled in Jargon; sentences like: “The skills-building workshop will be facilitated to enhance effective capacity strengthening and leverage existing resources to implement evidence-based initiatives.”

The economic case for better family planning is clear. UN Women cites, “when 10 percent more girls go to school instead of staying home bearing children, a country’s GDP increases on average by three percent. Yet, today, more than 200 million girls do not have access to
contraception.” The WHO emphasizes that gender inequality needs to be addressed at an early age for achieving real lifelong health and well-being effects. A compelling argument for replenishing the Global Financing Facility: “• When women have access to family planning, they are more likely to space their pregnancies; • When women space their pregnancies, they are more likely to give birth to healthy newborns; • When newborns are born healthy, they are more likely to grow up smart and strong; • Then a generation of healthy young people, brimming with ambition, will initiate a virtuous cycle of prosperity that will continue for generations to come.” The US economy even gets a boost from investing in global health abroad. In Nigeria, a call to take family planning seriously explicitly to curb poverty.

A few reports of glitches in the private sector: women’s RH product companies have a hard time getting financing, and access to generic RH supplies are “decades behind” other medicines.

Of course there is a political aspect, since “All politics is reproductive”, and even “Nonprofits must be political”. UNFPA sees a need to harmonize “the laws, policies and related frameworks in 23 countries in East and Southern Africa that create either impediments to, or an enabling environment for, adolescent sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.” (No strong movement in the many on-going US political and judicial battles this week, though links to stories are listed in the References below.) During Global Goals Week, “three African heads of state have warned their peers that without accountability and political intervention, the problem of child marriage is set to worsen.” But are politicians equipped to help? According to an Equal Measures 2030 study, “Many leaders are clueless on issues facing girls and women… Policymakers in developing nations may not know enough facts and figures about problems facing women and girls to help reach gender equality.” For example, “Only 6 percent came within 20 percent of the right figure in estimating their country’s maternal death rate, and only a quarter could do so on the issue of child marriage.”

**Family Planning Health Concerns and Alternatives**

Warnings: A groundbreaking report of fluoride exposure showed that prenatal exposure could lead to negative cognitive outcomes. A study from IPEN warns that women of childbearing age around world suffering “toxic levels of mercury”. Another found some risks associated with benzodiazepines, including Xanax or Zoloft. In Kenya experts warned of developing sepsis after a C-section. While “more than 300,000 women will die from preventable conditions during pregnancy,” a push for safe surgery, including access to cesarean delivery, which could “reduce neonatal mortality by 30 to 70 percent.”

Reassurance, with small caveats, from the ObG Project that “occasional air travel during pregnancy is generally safe.” The report of a possible “signal” of how the flu shot could affect pregnancy drew an immediate response from ACOG, declaring definitively, “It is Safe to Receive Flu Shot During Pregnancy.” More studies are finding links between climate change and women’s health: “exposure to unusually hot temperatures can lead to changes in length of gestation, birth weight, stillbirth rates, and neonatal stress. Climate change’s accelerating impact on global temperatures will make heat a more serious threat to maternal health going forward.”

University of Michigan Nursing professor Ron Stephenson is leading research, through the Center for Sexuality and Health Disparities, “on a broad range of sexual health problems; In addition to working with LGBTQ communities, the center focuses on women’s reproductive health and health in resource-poor countries.” U-M researchers are also making “progress on
extraordinary new artificial womb technology that could one day help extremely premature babies continue to develop outside the womb."

**Spreading the Message**

It takes strong individuals – public figures and private citizens – to spread the word about the value of family planning.

Ethiopia hosted its first national Social Behavior Change conference, which looked at several case studies applied to family planning and contraception information dissemination.

In Uganda, where in one district nearly 25% of girls get pregnant before 19, there were initiative on many fronts. King Oyo’s 22nd coronation anniversary celebrations included a “health camp” for free “HIV/AIDS testing, cervical cancer screening, safe male circumcision and other family planning services.” Other religious leaders in Uganda pledged to end FGM (where 100,000 girls are at risk). President Museveni called for an end to child marriage. The latest campaign targets men, encouraging greater involvement in planning, and an increase in the occurrence of vasectomy.

More religious leaders in Nigeria are calling for investment in family planning, including the Ooni of Ife, the Sultan of Sokoto, and the president of the Christian Association of Nigeria.

South African National Department of Health’s #SheConquers campaign has raised eyebrows with billboards encouraging school matriculation (“Books before babies”), asking, “Who says girls don’t want to be on top?” In Malawi, an activist working against GBV was arrested after her protest carrying a placard that proclaimed, “My pussy, my power.” A powerful female chief in that country also came out forcefully against child marriage.

ARHP looks at 6 Amazing Women in Sexual & Reproductive Health, while #SheDecides released a wonderful video about its “champions”.

Advocacy takes many guises: A Kenya artist won the top prize at South Africa’s ABSA L’Atelier Awards for her work exploring the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of women in African proverbs. In Chattanooga, a monthly brunch about reproductive health geared for African American women is simply titled, “Let’s Talk About Sex.” In Houston it’s a pop-up dinner series raising money for women’s health run by women chefs called “I’ll have what she’s having.” Northwestern University Medical School has “launched a website featuring animated characters Olivia the Ovary and Timothy the Testis to teach reproductive health to children.”

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