Weekly News Review – 6 October 2017

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

Leadership!

Dr. Natalia Kanem was named as the new Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). A Panamanian and the first Latin American to take the post, she had served as Acting Executive Director and had been UNFPA Representative in Tanzania. She committed to focus on “ending preventable maternal deaths, ending unintended pregnancies by meeting the demand for family planning, as well as ending gender-based violence and harmful practices, such as child marriage, by 2030.” The appointment was met with praise from family planning advocates and women’s rights groups, who “called on her to take a strong and supportive stance on divisive issues, including abortion, comprehensive sexuality education, and rights for sexual minorities.”

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom announced his leadership team, which represents 14 countries, all WHO regions, and is more than 60 percent women, “reflecting my deep-held belief that we need top talent, gender equity, and a geographically diverse set of perspectives to fulfil our mission to keep the world safe.” The team “could change the planet’s approach to health: As has been demonstrated time and again, when women are in leadership positions, they’re bringing a perspective to the table that has previously been missing, and this is particularly important when it comes to public jobs.” (When he was Ethiopia’s health minister, Dr. Tedros launched aggressive programs to reduce maternal mortality, which has resulted in a 30% drop between 2011 and 2016, according to recent Federal Ministry of Health statistics.)

The Rwandan cabinet has approved draft amendments to the nation’s penal code which could make abortion access in certain circumstances easier, removing a provision that requires getting court permission for the procedure. “We struck off the court requirement because it wasn’t helping the victims of such cases,” according to State Minister for Constitutional and Legal Affairs Evode Uwizeyimana.

African rights leaders called for “safe, legal and accessible abortion in the continent.” Michaela Clayton, director of one of the groups, the Aids and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa (ARASA), affirmed, “Laws that criminalise abortion do not prevent women and girls from having abortions, they only make them unsafe.” In Senegal (which has repressive abortion laws – see below), 64 mayors have budgeted for family planning, “important, first-time commitments” and “a strong indicator of growing local ownership for family planning.”

IPPF Africa Region bestowed its first regional awards for SRHR excellence; recipients included Dr. Shimelis Adugna of Ethiopia for Lifetime Achievement, Daniel Oyom of Uganda as Outstanding Youth Volunteer, and Dr. Mustapha Sidiki Kaloko, Commissioner for Social Affairs at Africa Union Commission, “for his great role and contribution in the advancement of SRHR in Africa and beyond.”
EuroNGOs, a coalition of European SRHR organizations, met and “agreed that their best chance of success lies in standing together and maintaining pressure,” including smarter advocacy and not allowing the US to set the agenda. Demonstrators took to the streets in Ireland, Argentina, Belgium, and Poland, where police raided the offices of some women’s groups.

Ariana Campero, the health minister of Bolivia, where unhealthy abortion is the third cause of death, highlighted the approval of Article-153 of the Penal System Code that allows women to have an abortion until eight weeks, with no penalty.

Prof Lesley Regan, the president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, called for nurses and midwives to be allowed to give women the pills that end an unwanted pregnancy as part of a relaxation of Britain’s abortion laws. Also in the UK, Diane Munday, 86, who was instrumental in pushing the 1967 Abortion act through Parliament, vowed to “finish the job” and push for liberalization. (A report on the family planning in the UK showed “high rates of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections as compared to other countries in the European region. A worrying trend is the rise of sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies among adults who are over 40, as the rates of divorce increase.”)

A researcher and a philanthropist in St. Louis, Missouri, had an idea to give nearly 10-thousand women no-cost birth control. From 2007 to 2013 the idea, which became the CHOICE Project, was put into reality. The most recent results, published in New England Journal of Medicine, “found that the CHOICE Project's teenage participants had significantly lower abortion and birth rates than women nationwide. They use better contraceptives, too: three-quarters of CHOICE Project teens chose LARC methods compared to 4.5 percent of the general population.”

Nurx, an app which provides birth control prescriptions and delivery, is offering free birth control to new users throughout the month of October, to “celebrate the failed ACA repeal.”

Other US advocates stepping up for family planning and reproductive rights include the ACLU and Planned Parenthood, which filed lawsuits in Maine, Hawaii, Arkansas and Iowa. In other cases, federal judges blocked anti-abortion laws in Florida and Kentucky.

Other advocacy efforts of note: A study from the Johns Hopkins Center for Communications Programs shows how targeted advocacy can work: “In Tanzania, pregnant women who were exposed to a national safe motherhood campaign designed to get them to visit health facilities for prenatal care and delivery were more likely to create birth plans and to attend more prenatal appointments.” WGNRR and Ipas Global released a comic strip series about Global Abortion Advocacy Achievement. And watch a fun video about the abortion pill – “Facts You Can Swallow” – from the Lady Parts Justice League.

“Leadership”?

The US House of Representatives passed a bill banning abortion after 20 weeks. Though unlikely to pass the Senate, reaction to the bill was immediate and intense: The bill is “designed to hurt poor women” and “dangerous” and simply “not pro-life”: Among other consequences, “banning abortion procedures after 20 weeks would mean women who find out their unborn child has no survival chances would be forced to carry the pregnancy to term — even if they believe the most compassionate option is to terminate the pregnancy.” To add to the patina of the attack on women, an avowedly anti-abortion congressman was forced to resign when it was
discovered he had urged his then-mistress to have the procedure herself. One writer from the Independent Women’s Forum noted, “the truth is that men (even “pro-life” men) benefit from the easy availability of abortion at least as much — if not more — than women.”

Not to be outdone in restricting women’s health options, the Trump administration stripped an Affordable Care Act rule that prevented opt-outs from employers providing contraception insurance coverage. By allowing “your boss to dictate your family planning options”, thousands of women could lose access to free contraception and the need for abortion could increase. Some analysts say the courts will stop the new rules from taking effect, the prospect of which did not stop faith and reproductive justice leaders protesting that “Women deserve affordable access to the health care services they need without interference from their employers and politicians.”

Former Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price has resigned, but his successor will be just as anti-choice, and will push his efforts to transform Medicaid to undermine reproductive health.

“Leaders” in the US are not alone. In Kenya, the Kisumu County Assembly “rejected a proposal to lower the cost of birth control services arguing it would lead to slow population growth which would be politically disadvantageous.” Vladimir Putin is “targeting Russia’s abortion culture”, as “activists — usually devout members of the influential Russian Orthodox Church — have started seizing on the country’s demographic crisis as an urgent reason for banning the practice.” And British Conservative Party leadership hopeful Jacob Rees-Mogg, who has proclaimed extreme anti-abortion views, admitted that his investment firm “profits from pills used in abortions.”

(For more harrowing reminders of what happens when abortion is illegal, see these articles about Kenya, Senegal and El Salvador.)

**Advocacy and Education for Girls**

October 9-13 is European Week of Action for Girls, and many outlets examined the importance of family planning communication and access and sex education for young girls and adolescents. It starts with acknowledging that adolescents are sexual beings, as in Ghana where a project “transformed lives… improving the provision, knowledge and awareness of Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health (ASRH) services and provide capacity to deliver adolescent-friendly SRH services; increasing availability of family planning commodities and strengthening evidence based on factors affecting uptake of ASRH and family planning,” and reaching more than 450-thousand adolescents.

Increased knowledge can come from family conversations, even starting at age 10. A study from Nigeria in the Journal of Public Health in Africa concludes “both the parents and adolescents had good knowledge of adolescent reproductive health, [but] communication on reproductive health issues remains low. Therefore, training intervention to improve the adolescent-parent communication is recommended for the parents.” Another study in Ethiopia showed parents could be a barrier to accessing SRH services: “Awareness and use of youth-friendly services (YFS) was low, but many of the young people who reported using contraception may have been using YFS without knowing it. Importantly, respondents reported low levels of social autonomy and required permission to leave the house from either a parent or spouse, which could present a significant barrier to accessing health services, and especially SRH services.”
It is important to reach young married women, as Knowledge4Health released a toolkit to that end, noting “about one-third of married adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa say that they want to avoid a pregnancy in the next 2 years, but 67% of these are not using any contraceptive method.” The Evidence Project concurs with a study from Ethiopia which recommends, “Target SRH services to married young women and girls at health facilities: Married young women and girls in this study population are largely sexually active, and the vast majority have already experienced a pregnancy. When compared to unmarried girls, married young women and girls are more likely to have used FP, and the majority indicated that they would like to receive FP services from facility-based service providers.”

Sex education in schools also contributes. In Namibia, where pregnancy is high among young students, and another district is addressing the problem of girls not attending because of menstrual hygiene, the Minister of Education, Arts and Culture Katrina Hanse-Himarwa “has proposed compulsory contraceptives for school-going girls in order to prevent escalating teenage pregnancies.” The struggle for sex education continues across the US, where the Trump administration has tripled funding for “abstinence-only” education, and sex educators are regularly censored, in places like Kentucky, where “teens are becoming parents at a rate of 32.4 births per 1,000 girls — much higher than the [US] national rate of 20.3.”

Peer groups can be effective, like those in Uganda, or the two young women from Trinidad and Tobago highlighted by Women Deliver, or the youth ambassadors in West Africa (which has the world’s lowest contraceptive prevalence rate accompanied by the world’s highest fertility rate) or the International Federation of Medical Students Association, or the Miss Rwanda contestant who founded an NGO “that sensitises the youth on sexual reproductive rights.”

Resources aimed at reaching younger girls were released by PSI Impact/A360 Learning, HC3 (“LARCs with younger clients”), and the Independent Accountability Panel.

Technology can help

A Wired article describes a “disturbing rise in cyberattacks against abortion clinics.” But all technology news isn’t bad. Another Wired article announced the arrival of a modern redesign of the speculum. “More comfortable” Intrauterine Balls have been introduced as an option in Kenya. In Nigeria, Slide Safe, a health startup, allows people to order STD test kits and sex products, including condoms and lubricants, discreetly. In Uganda, Ask Without Shame is a hotline for anonymous advice on STDs and other sexual health matters, and Digi Health, a mobile and web solution to support collection and real-time data analysis during health outreach, recently emerged from a competition of 14 entrepreneurs in SRH. One university entrepreneur has successfully installed vending machines on campuses which stock morning-after pills, as well as pregnancy tests, sanitary products, painkillers and anti-histamine.

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