

Facing Huge Need for Contraception, Young Leaders Pioneer Innovative Solutions

At global family planning conference, spotlight on efforts to expand lifesaving information and services for young people

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA, 14 November 2013—The current generation of young people is the largest in history—and also at great risk for unintended pregnancy, maternal death and the life-altering consequences of becoming teenage parents. Youth themselves are speaking up to demand that family planning programs reach more of their peers and take account of their unique needs.

Attendees of the **2013 International Conference on Family Planning (ICFP 2013)**—many of them young women and men under age 25—spoke passionately today about the importance of providing contraceptive information and services to youth. Organized around the theme **“Full Access, Full Choice,”** ICFP is the largest-ever global meeting on family planning, and is taking stock of progress to ensure that everyone has the tools to plan their families and futures.

“Family planning is holistic. It gives young people the chance to stay in school, to finish their education, to start a business,” said **Barwani Msiska, attending ICFP as a Youth Leader from the Republic of Malawi.** “We talk about Africa rising, but we cannot achieve that great big idea if we do not invest in and protect our adolescents.”

According to the United Nations, every day 20,000 girls younger than age 18 give birth in developing countries, representing 95% of births to adolescent girls worldwide. Girls are at a dramatically heightened risk for pregnancy- and childbirth-related health complications, and 70,000 girls under age 18 die annually as a result. The benefits of empowering girls to avoid pregnancy include better health, increased economic productivity and the full realization of their rights and potential.

The plenary presentations at ICFP 2013 today highlighted emerging evidence of what works to reach young people with contraceptive information and services. One of the biggest challenges is that when adults try to engage with young people, the message often falls flat due to generational differences. “Peer-to-peer” programs that enlist youth to be leaders are essential.

“There is a barrier between young people and grownups, and when adults talk about family planning, young people often don’t say what they think. With peer-to-peer education, youth open up a lot more to other youth,” said **Maria Angelica Botero, a Youth Leader attending ICFP from the Republic of Colombia.** “What doesn’t work is when grownups pass on their taboos. We have to talk to young people in our language.”

Family planning programs must engage everyone in the community. Changing attitudes among men and religious leaders is paramount, particularly attitudes that sanction child marriage. In developing countries, 9 out of 10 adolescent girls who become pregnant are married, often to much older men, and a quarter of adolescent pregnancies occur in girls ages 10–14.

“As a young male who is a women’s rights advocate, I have been questioned by my peers, my family, my community. They say that men should be in power,” said **Dakshitha Madhuka Wickremarathne, attending ICFP as a Youth Leader from the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka**. “There are many political, religious and legal barriers to women making decisions about their bodies.”

Barwani Msiska of Malawi said: “When you walk into a church, you see someone young with a baby right on your pew. Religious leaders cannot pretend that young people are not having sex.”

As more efforts are launched to deliver contraceptive information and services to young people, it is critical to carefully monitor and evaluate their effectiveness. The best programs will need new resources so they can be brought to scale while maintaining quality.

It is vital that young people are front and center in making decisions about family planning programs and policy. “The biggest problem for young people is old people. We as adult leaders have to get over our discomfort about family planning and youth because it is about saving lives,” said **Kate Gilmore, Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund**. “As adults it is our responsibility to grow up, in order to facilitate safe passage from childhood to adulthood for young people.”

ICFP 2013 continues through the end of the week. It is jointly organized by the Ministry of Health of Ethiopia and the Bill & Melinda Gates Institute for Population and Reproductive Health at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

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MEDIA RESOURCES: Online media resources for ICFP 2013, including the press program and all press releases, are available [here](#). The ICFP 2013 plenary program is available online [here](#), and the full conference program can be found [here](#).

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