

International Women's Day Message from Dorothy Ngoma

Ms. Ngoma is Executive Director of the National Organisation of Nurses and Midwives of Malawi.



I am a nurse midwife and have been one for many years. What I think and what I say to you are based on my experiences as a nurse midwife meeting countless patients and families who are in extreme distress, facing disease and death at a level that is hard to imagine for people living comfortable lives or for people in developed countries.

Every day in Malawi, 16 pregnant women die in villages or in the hospital during childbirth. By the end of the year, 984 women out of every 100,000 giving birth will have died -- but not even one of these deaths will be registered by the media as a great scandal or something to be corrected. What would have happened if so many mothers-to-be died in a hospital like Mwaiwathu or Adventist Hospital in Blantyre -- let alone in New York or London? Do the lives of these poor women in poor communities have less value?

Many of you out there are the leaders and movers of this country and this world that we all live in. People, especially women, from poor communities who are the majority in this

country need support and hope that their lives are valuable enough for us to put resources on the table to save. Many don't really believe that a difference will be made. To them we just give lip service. But you can make a difference. **WE** can make a difference. Indeed, we are obliged to make a difference.

I believe that the world has enough resources to solve the problems it faces. How many hundred of billions of dollars have been pumped into failing banks and investment institutions these past few months, in order to save them from collapse? Could not the leaders of the world also do something similar to save large portions of humanity -- especially women and children -- from starvation, disease and death? Is this not as important a cause to support?

As we commemorate this International Women's Day, under the theme "end violence and support women in politics," let us look for the solutions that are possible to find. We can stop this continuing tragedy. Education, healthcare, water, food, nutrition and gender balance are crucial for achieving economic development and eradicating poverty while at the same time empowering women politically. These are basic human and women's rights and are a must for each and every woman living on this planet.

Free primary education is beyond the reach of women in most poor countries, yet absolutely vital to provide countries with qualified human resources to meet the challenges of the future. If female children and others are not educated, then how much poverty, violence and criminality will they cause as they grow into unhealthy, lawless, uneducated adults?

We need predictable donor funding for the public education system in order to:

- increase enrolment
- retain girls in school
- prevent early marriages and early pregnancies

Achievement of universal access to health care remains a distant dream in most poor countries. The world needs over 4 million skilled health care workers including nurses and midwives to protect and save lives, especially those of girls and women. Shortages are a challenge not only to Malawi and other developing countries, but globally. We need to provide:

- Access to emergency obstetric care when life-threatening complications occur.
- Family planning services that will increase the survival rate for both women and children.

- Eradication, or at the very least containment, of diseases like malaria, TB, HIV and AIDS.

The global human resource crisis of too few health care workers can be solved. We in Malawi and Africa can rise to the challenge. Give us the means and we can train hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands of new health care workers, to cope with the challenges facing our country and the world as a whole.

On this note let me congratulate the Head of State, Dr. Bingu wa Mutharika, for nominating Hon. Joyce Banda, M.P., to be his running mate during the May 2009 General Elections. We hope her office will make a difference to society at large and women and children in particular.

In terms of water and sanitation, 1 billion people, especially women, have access to safe drinking water, while 2.5 billion lack access to basic sanitation services. We must increase assistance and support to scale up implementation of water and sanitation interventions for the poorest and most vulnerable groups, especially women. It is essential that efforts be made to target those who entirely lack access to such basic services.

We implore government leaders to provide strong leadership while involving stakeholders and providing political momentum to successfully attain the Millennium Development Goals--especially those that target women -- by 2015.

Key strategies should include:

- Increasing and retaining the number of well-qualified health personnel, including nurses and midwives.
- Increasing the availability and supply of drugs.
- Improving health and educational facilities.
- Improving equipment and financial management.
- Accountability in all government systems so that services within the public sector are financed adequately.

Even as I present this to you, three women have died giving birth. Over 500,000 women die each and every year. One per minute, every hour, day, week and month of the year. An additional 500,000 women will die by 2015 due to unsafe abortions. Can we let this continue?

Failure to act with vigorous strength and conviction represents a fundamental social injustice and a violation of basic human rights, especially those of the poor women and children of our society. History will be our judge. I urge all of us to act.