

BELINDA STRONACH

Don't let abortion issue hijack maternal health agenda

Toronto Star
Belinda Stronach
May 2, 2010

On Parliament Hill, the global effort to improve maternal health in the developing world risks being reduced to a narrow debate over abortion. This is a profound disservice to millions of vulnerable women whose lives are at risk in pregnancy and childbirth. There is a time and place for everything and we need to manage the two separate issues smartly.

Abortion incites an emotional response on both sides of the issue. But what the women of Africa need from us right now isn't emotion or conflict. It's resolve and action.

They need and expect us to focus on the bigger picture — life and a healthier future for hundreds of thousands of women this year, next year and every year.

I myself believe strongly that all the world's women have the right to access to safe and legal abortion. In the developing world, unsafe procedures to end pregnancy are estimated to kill 68,000 women each year. Simply put, these lives can be saved.

But any serious effort to confront the maternal health challenges that exist in Africa demands more than just a debate on abortion. It demands a bigger and broader response.

As the host of this year's G8 meetings, Canada has a critical opportunity to help lead the world toward improved health outcomes for women and children in the developing world. But real progress will require the resources and the concentrated effort of donor nations. We must work together, putting aside differences, toward shared achievement.

According to the most recent data, an estimated 343,000 women die each year from complications related to pregnancy or childbirth — the overwhelming majority of them in the developing world. The latest UN statistics demonstrate the disparities that exist in our world: the risk of a woman dying from pregnancy-related causes during her lifetime is about 1 in 7 in Niger; in Sweden, the odds are 1 in 17,400.

That's why the United Nations established as one of its eight Millennium Development Goals the reduction of maternal deaths by 75 per cent by 2015.

A small number of countries are on track to achieve this target, but most lag far behind, making this the Millennium goal that has seen the least success. In particular, the chances of dying in pregnancy or childbirth remain distressingly high in much of sub-Saharan Africa. Too many children continue to lose their mothers. Too many countries continue to lose their women.

This must indeed be Canada's cause. This is our opportunity to lead. Canada has already taken the important step of telling the world that taking action to reduce maternal mortality will be a cornerstone of its G8 efforts. Now it needs to follow through with the critical additional resources and the global leadership required to mount a coordinated, meaningful and lasting campaign to save lives.

The needs are many, but foremost among them is the presence of more skilled health workers capable of delivering critical obstetric care and reducing the number of maternal deaths caused by hemorrhage, obstructed labour and other complications. Even today, fewer than half of all births in sub-Saharan Africa are attended by trained health personnel of any kind.

It is also crucial that developed nations take concerted effort to ensure that health systems in developing countries are modern and organized enough to provide the distribution of contraception, drugs and critical medical equipment. In the broadest terms, we must help the girls and women of the developing world gain universal access to reproductive health care.

BELINDA STRONACH

The debate about maternal health must never be allowed to stray too far from this basic truth: the vast majority of deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth can be prevented. We have within our power the ability — and, I believe, the moral obligation — to protect women and children, save lives and keep families whole.

2010 is our chance to build momentum and galvanize global support for real improvements in maternal health. This is our chance to give to the developing world the gift of generations — of babies safely delivered to mothers, of good health for child and parent, and the legacy they will make of their lives.