

International Women's Day

Senator HANSON-YOUNG (South Australia)

(7.12 pm)—I rise this evening to speak on a matter of public interest, and one of international significance. Yesterday, women around the globe celebrated International Women's Day, an integral day that has been observed since the beginning of the 20th century. For the women of the world, the symbolism of International Women's Day is an occasion to reflect on just how far women have come in their struggle for equality, peace and development. It is also an opportunity to unite, network and mobilise for meaningful change for our fellow sisters in less fortunate circumstances.

This year's theme for International Women's Day is focused on empowering women and men to end poverty by 2015, the target date government leaders from around the world agreed on for the eight Millennium Development Goals. With only five years remaining in the 15-year action plan to tackle degrading poverty, 2010 is the year to raise public awareness about the centrality of gender equality in achieving sustainable gains in human development.

Mothers, as we know, play a crucial role in developing communities, which is why improving both maternal and child health is a Millennium Development Goal in its own right. Yet current statistics show that more than half of the 29 developing countries are not on track to achieve either goal. What we need to see is a commitment by world leaders to prioritise gender equality; recognising that, if we are to succeed in tackling poverty around the world, empowering women in their own communities is an essential ingredient to success. In particular, we need to see the political will to adequately resource, monitor and improve the budgets for sexual and reproductive health systems in developing countries. Providing knowledge and access to reproductive health technologies noticeably reduces fertility rates in poor countries.

Today, more than half a million women in the world die annually from pregnancy complications. According to the Population and Climate Change Alliance, more than 200 million women who want to control their pregnancies lack access to contraception, with a further three billion people under the age of 25 having no hope of ever having their sexual and reproductive rights met.

The two targets under MDG 5 are to reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio and to achieve universal access to reproductive health. We are failing miserably—we are nowhere near reaching this goal. Addressing the causes of maternal mortality is a global development imperative. It is intrinsically linked to the success of the other development outcomes.

Educating women, particularly young women, about their sexual and reproductive health from an early age has far-reaching effects beyond just better health outcomes. We need to recognise that, as long as global health initiatives continue to neglect sexual and reproductive health strategies and reproductive health supplies, interventions aimed at

preventing HIV and improving maternal and child health will ultimately be unsuccessful. If the Millennium Development Goals are to be achieved, particularly the maternal health goal, which has only seen a reduction of nine per cent in maternal deaths—far from the 75 per cent target— then the international community needs to at least double aid funding to programs to reduce the deaths of women and children and most developing countries need to also prioritise these areas and increase their efforts.

Australia currently spends just 13 per cent of its aid budget on health and a smaller amount of that specifically on reproductive health. In comparison, Ireland spends 34 per cent, the United States spends 32 per cent and Canada spends 30 per cent. The government's current commitment is to increase aid spending to 0.5 per cent of gross national income by 2015. We need to see a solid commitment from our government to increase this contribution to the internationally agreed target of 0.7 per cent if we are to make solid headway on Millennium Development Goals 4 and 5 for child and maternal health. While it is pleasing to see the government commitment to increase aid spending, we are nowhere near reaching our international obligations of 0.7 per cent. We need to see the government commit to that in this year's budget. That is the challenge for the government.

This issue can no longer be ignored. It is not good enough for us to simply allow other developed nations such as Britain to carry the load on such an important issue. As a key player in the global fight against poverty, Australia needs to take a stand, particularly in our immediate region, where our nation's wealth could be helping those most in need.

Papua New Guinea, our closest neighbour, has the worst maternal death rate in the Pacific and the second worst in the entire world, closely following Afghanistan. The fact that women in Papua New Guinea are 50 times more likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth than their Australian sisters is a situation that we can no longer ignore. Papua New Guinea is the largest recipient of Australian aid funding, yet the stories of maternal death show we need to work harder to save vulnerable lives. Australia needs to ramp up its efforts in funding and training health workers and midwives to work on the ground with families to help this Pacific nation curb its staggering maternal death rate. Engaging in activities to help tackle these issues in our own backyard must be priority, and I urge the government to seriously show its commitment to vastly improving these horrific statistics. Each year, 34,000 mothers and over 400,000 children die in our immediate region, and we know that Australia can play a positive role in turning around these alarming figures. We need to consider an increase in our health budget. We need to commit more of our aid funding to tackling this specific issue.

The most frustrating aspect of the imminent failure of Millennium Development Goal 5 is the fact that most instances of maternal mortality are preventable. To be truly effective and sustainable in the remaining five years, the scaling up of essential interventions must take place within a framework that strives to strengthen and integrate programs with health systems as well as promoting an environment supportive of women's rights and empowerment.

This week, as women around the world celebrate all that we have achieved, we must not forget how far we still have to go before true equality is realised for all women and girls. With 1,500 women and girls dying every day, more than one every minute, as a result of preventable complications occurring before, during and after childbirth, increased funding and health services are needed to combat MDG 5 before the 2015 deadline.

In 2009, the United Nations Population Fund revealed a staggering comparison: It would cost the world less than two-and-a-half-day's worth of military spending to save the lives of 6 million mothers, newborns and children every year. This is not something which we can simply say is too hard to tackle. We know that there are simple solutions— we just need to support them. It is time to face up to the reality that, unless reproductive health and the rights of women and children are made a priority and countries like Australia step up and commit the required funding that is needed, 2015 will not be remembered as the year of success for the eight Millennium Development Goals but, unfortunately, the year of failure.

We have five years to clean up our act. We have five years to help not just the mothers of the world but, particularly, mothers and children in our own region and in our own backyard.