

Remarks for the Standing Committee on the Status of Women: Jill Sheffield, President, Women Deliver

Thank you, Madam Chair, and Committee Members, for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the status of maternal health worldwide. My name is Jill Sheffield, and I am the President and founder of Women Deliver, a global maternal health advocacy organization. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you all today at such momentous time for Canada, and for the world's women.

I first of all want to thank the Canadian Government, which has worked steadfastly toward improving the health of mothers and their children in developing countries over the past decades. In my thirty years in the maternal health field, my fellow advocates and I have known Canada as a true ally, and we appreciate your strong leadership and commitment. As you may know from the news, the most recent studies on maternal mortality demonstrate that we are making marked progress, though not enough and not fast enough.

Canada has an unparalleled opportunity to take the lead on these efforts, with its "legacy initiative" on maternal, newborn and child health, to be introduced at the G8/G20 Summits in June. Yet as Canada seeks to shape its future legacy, I urge you not to forget your legacy of the past, particularly as a key part of the global consensus of 179 countries on the importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights — including the right to safe abortion where legal — at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, in 1994. Canada has not erred from its commitments and now is not the time to do so.

Over the past decade and a half, there have been obstacles to addressing maternal health, but there have also been stories of inspiration, such as Bangladesh — which drastically improved its maternal and reproductive health policies in the mid-90's to eventually achieve a dramatic drop in maternal deaths and is now on target to reach MDG5 by 2015; or Rwanda — which has worked hard to rebuild itself after a devastating genocide, provide economic and educational opportunities for women, and is now home to the highest percentage of women Parliamentarians in the world.

Though these two countries are not yet part of the G20, they may be someday soon. We have a clear opportunity and responsibility to learn from, support, and lead in these efforts. And in late-June, all eyes will be on Canada to do so. We have five years left to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, a weighty promise set in motion at the turn of the millennium. The fifth Millennium Development Goal is of special import, as it is the goal to improve maternal health worldwide and reduce maternal mortality by three-quarters by the year 2015. This goal is also of special import because, to date, is it the goal toward which least progress has been made. In fact, the progress has been sorry — roughly one percent reduction in maternal deaths per year since the Goal was set.

What is more remarkable, however, is that, in order to address maternal mortality and to achieve MDG5 we do not need to wait for the discovery of a miracle drug or a medical breakthrough. We have cost-effective solutions and we know what works. I would not claim that maternal health is a simple issue to address, as it is not without some contention, but I want to underline that it is a necessary issue to address — if we are to advance as a global community into a millennium of stability, prosperity, and dignity. Global consensus has been achieved before, and it can be achieved again; in fact it must be, for the sake of women and girls worldwide.

Finally in closing, on June 7-9, Women Deliver is holding a global conference in Washington, DC. More than 3500 advocates, Parliamentarians, Health and Finance Ministers, First Ladies, advocates, and youth will convene to discuss and push for achievement of MDG5. Many in this audience will be attending. I invite you all to attend. As you well know, there are so few times in your career as Parliamentarians, that

a problem, a terrible injustice, which has brought suffering to millions of women, can be solved. This is our moment to make this happen