



Media Update

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UNFPA

Press Release

“From Despair to Dignity,” A Regional Conference on Fistula, 24th-26th March, 2015, Lahore, Pakistan

Lahore, 24 March 2015: The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) working with its partner, Pakistan National Forum for Women’s Health, and in collaboration with the Government of Pakistan, will hold a three day (24-26 March) Regional Conference on Fistula in Lahore, Pakistan, themed **“From Despair to Dignity”**.

Fistula is an abnormal tearing between a woman’s birth canal and bladder and/or rectum that causes her to leak urine and/or faeces uncontrollably. It is caused by obstructed labor due to lack of access to timely and skilled emergency obstetric care. An estimated 2 million women in developing countries are living with this condition, and some 50,000 to 100,000 new cases develop each year. It is estimated that 3,500 cases of obstetric fistula occur each year in the remote areas of Pakistan.

The impact of untreated fistula on the lives of women is devastating. In most cases, stigma pushes women living with the condition to hide and isolate themselves from their families and communities. It hampers them from participating in income generating activities thus pushing them into despair and poverty. Delaying the age of first pregnancy, increasing access to contraception, skilled birth attendants and emergency obstetric care are critical to the prevention of obstetric fistula.

Recognizing Fistula as a global public health problem, in 2003, UNFPA and its partners launched the global Campaign to End Fistula. Since then, UNFPA has



supported programs to prevent, and treat fistula, and to rehabilitate and empower fistula survivors. Over the last decade, in Pakistan alone, UNFPA has funded around 4,000 fistula repair surgeries, rehabilitated 500 fistula survivors and trained more than 900 health personals, including surgeons, on fistula repair surgery and care. UNFPA also established fistula treatment and referral centers that provide treatment for the hundreds of women living with fistula and awaiting surgery.

The campaign has not only helped to restore women's health, but has also brought a renewed sense of purpose. "My life has a meaning once more" said fistula survivor Gul Bano, who was treated for fistula few years back at Koochi Goth Women's Hospital in Karachi after living with fistula for two years following the birth of her stillborn baby. Today, Bano is an advocate and good-will ambassador and works with other women suffering from fistula.

There has been considerable progress but there is a long way to go before the need in Pakistan is met. The key objective of this Regional Fistula Conference is to provide an advocacy platform for mobilizing political support and commitment through knowledge sharing and dialogue on preventable maternal morbidity particularly obstetric fistula in Pakistan, and to call for evidence based policy change. International experts and surgeons from the region will be sharing their experiences and strategies on fistula programing and resource mobilization.

"Fistula is a human rights tragedy" said Ms. Sarah Masale Deputy Representative UNFPA Country Office, Pakistan. "To address this tragedy: we need to invest adequately in the provision of reproductive health services; we need to eliminate social and economic inequalities; we need to prevent child-marriage and early child-bearing; we need to keep our young girls in school".

"The existence of fistula is the barometer of maternal health in the country" said Dr. Shershah Syed, President, PNFWH. "Women with obstetric fistula are experiencing still born child and incontinence leading to social stigma which could be prevented by provision of basic and emergency obstetric care"

About the United Nations Population Fund:

UNFPA leads the global Campaign to End Fistula with the support of a wide range of partners. Since the launch of the Campaign in 2003, support has been provided by UNFPA to more than 50 countries, resulting in fistula treatment and care for an estimated 47,000 women and girls and training of thousands of health-care personnel in fistula prevention and management. The





Campaign's overall goal is to make the condition as rare in developing countries as it is in the industrialized world.

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