

Two weeks before the meetings of the G8 and G20 heads of state, more than a hundred parliamentarians from Europe, the Asia-Pacific region, Africa and the Americas met in Ottawa on June 10 and 11 to talk about maternal health at the Sixth Annual Global Parliamentarians' Summit.

Taking as its theme: *Balancing the Scales of Women's Lives in the Countdown to 2015*, the Summit stressed the role of parliamentarians in achieving the Millennium Development Goals, specifically MDGs 1, 5 and 6. Maternal health, the central subject of the discussions, had already been targeted as a priority by Canada's Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Stephen Harper, for discussions at the up-coming on June 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> G8 Summit in Huntsville, Ontario.

The Summit deliberations were opened by Canadian MP **Raymonde Folco**, Chair of the Canadian Association of Parliamentarians for Population and Development, and Summit host. Stressing the importance of the Summit in achieving development objectives, Ms Folco was delighted to see the participation by parliamentarians from every corner of the globe, and from both developing and developed countries. That diversity, enhanced by the participation of representatives of civil society, aboriginal peoples and the scientific community involved in the struggle for women's rights, led to a dialogue that produced fruitful exchanges of ideas during the two-day Summit.

The first working session on "successes and challenges in placing women and girls at the centre of the development agenda" enabled parliamentarians from several continents to present regional realities in terms of the place of women and girls in their society, emphasizing the challenges and possible solutions in that field. Powerful testimony was delivered by **Dr Massouda Jalal**, minister responsible for the Status of Women in the Parliament of Afghanistan. The almost total lack of progress in that country with respect to the place of women in society brought out the necessity of international assistance in achieving cultural, political and social change.

Difficult conditions also exist in the developed countries. MP **Niki Ashton** of the Parliament of Canada talked about the major problems faced by aboriginal women in Canada, including maternal mortality rates that are higher for them as a group than for the rest of Canada's population. Despite these conditions she felt that Canada has to do more to help the developing countries achieve the MDGs.

Although there has been progress in some parts of the world in terms of women's rights and women's health, international assistance is still a very important factor in achieving MDGs worldwide. That was the message delivered by Deputy **Maria Antonieta Saa**, Chair of the Inter-American Parliamentary Group (IAPG), during the first day of the meeting, as she described the challenges and problems faced by women in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Africa, a continent that is very much affected by problems of development and women's health, enjoyed broad representation by **parliamentarians from Senegal, Uganda, Rwanda, Cameroon, Ghana and Zambia**. A sharing of experiences in the field of maternal health brought out some progress, as well as obstacles to improving the situation of women and girls in these societies. Time was set aside for parliamentarians to talk about various projects developed in their countries, with help from the international community.

Delegates who had taken part in previous international meetings of this kind repeatedly expressed their satisfaction with the fact that input from the South – the recipient countries – was much in evidence throughout the Summit. It was an integral part of the discussion in all working sessions. Those who were

not among the scheduled speakers were able to express themselves in plenary discussions and in working group sessions.

A complete session was set aside for the donor countries, who repeated their commitments, while pointing to delays in the achievement of the MDGs for 2015. Presentations by **parliamentarians from France, Great Britain and Australia** stressed the obligations of those countries to the countries of the South, in explaining the problems that still exist, even in developed countries, in achieving MDG5: maternal health. **Eleni Theocharous**, a member of Parliament from Cyprus and a representative of the European Parliament, presented the main features of European policy for achieving MDG5.

Lunches during the Summit provided more opportunities for discussion among the participants. Dr Margalit Lorber talked about “The Feminization of HIV/AIDS and its Impact on Maternal Health”, and Dr Meera Shekar discussed “A Framework for action for scaling up nutrition – and its links to population and reproductive health”. One significant development at the Summit was the Canadian launch of the 2010 edition of the Handbook for Parliamentarians on the MDGs.

Representatives of such organizations as the **World Bank/International Monetary Fund**, which also fund development worldwide, attended the discussions to hear the viewpoints and requirements of the developing countries, as described by parliamentarians.

A broad consensus emerged from the two days of debate on the major role of parliamentarians in progress to achieve the MDGs, specifically 1, 5 and 6. At the same time, speakers deplored the absence of members of the Canadian government from the deliberations at the Parliamentarians’ Summit: Leonard Edwards, the personal representative of the Prime Minister of Canada for the G8 and G20 summits, was alone in accepting an invitation to attend the Summit. The limited attendance by parliamentarians from the government side raised questions about political will on the part of Canada’s leaders in relation to the issue of maternal health.

The parliamentarians concluded their Summit by adopting a strong parliamentary declaration addressed to the Canadian Prime Minister and the leaders of the G8 and G20 countries. The Declaration is intended to be a call for action by the world’s governments. Parliamentarians urged the developed countries to provide more substantial funding to improve women’s health and women’s rights in terms of sexuality, reproductive health and family planning, particularly in the developing countries and for the most vulnerable groups. They also recommended that mothers and children be guaranteed access to health care. Moreover, assistance in reducing maternal mortality must reflect the real needs of the developing countries and the broader context of the struggle against poverty, illiteracy, sex-based violence, malnutrition, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and violations of women’s rights. The recommendations in the Declaration submitted to the Prime Minister of Canada should be given a prominent place in the discussions at the two summits of the G8 and G20 heads of state.