

Perinatale Versorgung von Frauen und ihren Kindern nach Flucht und Migration
(Perinatal care of women and their children after flight and migration)
4th International Conference on Obstetrics of Health Care for Women and Children
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Thank you for this opportunity and for its privilege.

Although I am live in Switzerland, at the pleasure of the UN's host country, I am not here to speak of Swiss conditions.

Although for a decade I worked in Australia's largest obstetrics and gynaecology hospital, I was young then ... have no reliable reflections to share worthy of your attention.

I am here because we need you. The world around us needs you and it needs better to understand just how critical is your role, for this world if it is to emerge out its present troubles, fairly, justly, sustainably.

Excellencies, dignitaries, inspirators, you trouble makers, subversives, energizers, healers – thank you.

Thank you – you dignify-ers of people at their most vulnerable and you guardians of us at our smallest and our most fragile;

Thank you – stewards as new life emerges, in all its shapes, sizes, colors and contours; thank you for being present both when new life brings intense incomprehensible joy and when it ushers in, at times inconceivable sorrow. Thank you for being there at our bountiful beginnings but also at our soul crushing conclusions.

Thank you. Those of you who still seek to uphold the highest standards even when essential services fail; when life-saving commodities stock out; when health systems crumble and betray; when governments deny what is necessary to uphold universal access to health.

Thank you to those of your life defending professions, from Vanuatu to Syria, from Yemen to Venezuela, from Eritrea to the Ukraine, who, understanding that birth waits for no man, serve as intimate first responders; who serve when crises of conflict, contagion and catastrophe impose their caustic shocks on communities, large and small.

Thank you for your death-defying acts. For your life defending acts: even as bombs rain down on hospital grounds; as bullets strafe the clinic's walls; as surgical theatres collapse under malicious intentional attack; as labour wards are swept away, whether by flood or fire; when circumstances put health workers at direct risk too. Thank you to those hundreds of you who have given you own lives in pursuit of life's protection.

Thank you for your resilience, although your stories are rarely fully told; although your courage is never fully seen as just this bold.

“Thank you for the times that your tears joined hers, after she told you that she had been raped; for the times you have known her sorrow, as in her arms, you placed not a healthy mewling newborn but a languid and silent corpse; thank you for comprehending why she asked you if her miscarriage was her god’s way of punishing her for sins, imagined or real.

Thank you for the times you heard the desperation that broke her voice when she told you that she simply could not care for this child that she was carrying; thank you for seeing through the feeling of shame that she could not conceal when she asked you if, wanting to have sex made her a whore like her mother said; thank you for taking in all those fears that colonized her face after you told her that her test results, her mammogram, her pap smear, her ultrasound, her surgery, did not go as expected.”¹

Thank you for enabling effective family planning, for preventing malaria in pregnancy, for guarding against mother to child transmission of HIV; thank you for doing what is needed to eradicate obstetric fistula.

Thank you. For you are the primary means by which culturally sensitive health care can be offered; by which deaths from unsafe abortions can be prevented; by which gender-based violence can be responded to appropriately and you are essential if we are to support the child who is bearing a child and perhaps even offer her protection at last.

Across a life cycle of life choices - from life making to life carrying to life delivering – the processes by which we are brought into our human being-ness, thank you. For in these intimate, private, personal dignifying humane and humanizing processes, you have accompanied us.

For this, we thank you and all who went before you. We thank you for contributions stretching back down the centuries – contributions unbroken in time, unbent in intent – for this solidarity, compassion and affinity - older than the world’s oldest profession ... [I mean, no one knows what came first - the chicken or the egg – but let’s just be clear that there always was a hen.]

Thank you for being “la sage femme” – for being wise women and for being wise about women - for being “mid wyf” – or - in translation from its old language origins, for being with women.

We all are here only because you were there.

¹ This section is based on reflections of Camila S. Espinoza, Certified Chilean Midwife as published at <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-surprising-part-of-your-job-as-a-midwife>

In your unique and persistent roles for our health in conception, pregnancy, labour, birth and early infancy, early motherhood and onward, you accompany - not only heal - us; you bear witness, not only observe – us; you stand for our dignity, for the universality of our humanness – not merely for science.

Because of this accompaniment, you figure large historically among the earliest and most persistent humanists; even if unacknowledged for this, you are among the first defenders of our most fundamental rights as human beings- our right to health, our rights to sexual and reproductive health and our rights to the fundamental dignities that these rights seek to enable.

Working for accompaniment and against abandonment specifically at the times of our greatest vulnerability; insisting on information and against misunderstanding when understanding ourselves and our needs is distorted by stigma and ignorance; providing reassurance and working to end fear - deploying knowledge, skill, science and craft to guide and enable the exercise of rights to be supported, not impeded, in what should be free and unfettered exercise of her rights to sexual and reproductive dignity – whomsoever he may be, wheresoever she may be, not matter whom or how they love.

Thank you for insisting on accompaniment for us all.

Friends,

The price of abandonment - the antithesis of this accompaniment - is something we simply cannot afford. The gravest and most costly of otherwise preventable human tragedies have always come as the offspring of reckless abandonment Martin Niemöller famously described such abandonment that 80 years ago set the stage for WW II: *“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out... Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”*

Today, it seems they/we come for people on the move. While millions of people cross international borders safely and with dignity each year, for many people their journeys could not be more different - long, circuitous and perilous – the poorest, those with fewest alternatives, those fleeing conflict, contagion, climate instability, the cruel crises of famine and feud, those escaping countries with the youngest of populations suffering the gravest of poverty’s impacts.

Crossing harsh deserts on foot; compelled to voyage in unseaworthy vessels; confined into overcrowded trucks; even if people begin their journey in relative health, the demands of their migratory journey, the conditions of their travel and the absence of accompanying access to essential physical and mental health care means many migrants – as a consequence of their migration – are subjected to poor physical and mental health outcomes.

It is estimated that around 70 per cent of the world’s people compelled into movement within borders are women and those aged under 18, with more than 12 per cent of the world’s 15-to 24-year-olds

migrating across borders and children making up perhaps more than a third of those crossing by sea into Europe and accounting for at least 30 percent of recorded deaths (UNICEF 2015a).

And in their journeys to enhance - even to save - tens of thousands are exploited, abused, are subjected to xenophobic attacks - thousands – and untold thousands more - are losing their lives.

These deaths of refugees and migrants often remain undocumented: how many have been executed, shot, perished, drowned? We do not know.

How many have lost their lives to starvation or dehydration? How many have been tortured, denied life-saving treatment, or have died from despair? We simply do not know.

Friends,

Each and every stage of that migration experience is shaped by a person's age, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, health and disability. And, although threat accompanies them where ever they go, support does not. Threats to their health and well-being travel are their relentless companions; relief, services and information are not.

Fleeing despair, persecution, conflict, in transit, migrants are at risk of violence: kidnapping, abduction and extortion; human trafficking; sexual and economic exploitation. In transit, the health needs more frequently remain unmet, particularly in relation to their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Imagine being in labour as you make a desert crossing on foot or nursing a tiny new born while trudging down a rail track in the depths of winter.

Fear of detection, detention and deportation drives many migrants away from health care at the very moment when care is needed most. Even where medical services are provided to migrants in transit, they may not include consultations with gynaecologists or other specialised services for survivors of sexual violence.

When detained migrants are further exposed to the determinants of poor health outcomes – from which depression, anxiety, and self-harm can result. We know that detention of children, even for short periods, is extremely detrimental to their physical and mental health.

And yet, international legal standards clearly confirm that migrants' enjoyment of the right to health without discrimination is not dependent on their legal status; that states have an obligation to ensure that all migrants, regardless of their status, have equal access to preventive, curative and palliative health services.

But with migration governance centred today more on the protection of borders than on the protection of people, many current migration policies and practices exacerbate the trauma migrants experience.

Mandatory detention is widespread. Yet child and family immigration detention should be prohibited by law and abolished in policy and practice for “The deprivation of liberty of children within the context of administrative immigration enforcement is never in the best interests of the child.”

Having experienced severe trauma and emotional distress, many migrants have often urgent mental health needs, that due to inadequate screenings and insufficient access to skilled staff, are not identified or addressed. This is particularly the case for those who have been subjected to sexual and gender-based violence. Experts, including child protection officer, should be present at borders to complete human rights-based screenings and referrals. Psychosocial support for migrants who have lost family members and for migrant women who have suffered miscarriages or other adverse pregnancy outcomes during their journey needs to be guaranteed.

Overall, migrants should be able to access health services without fear. For this reason, it is essential to advocate for firewalls, to separate immigration enforcement activities from public health service provision and make sure that they are respected. Health care institutions should be prohibited from reporting data on the legal status of their patients to immigration authorities. Health care providers should be clearly informed that they are not required to do so, migrants should receive specific assurances that they will not be reported to immigration authorities if they seek medical help and immigration authorities should not carry out enforcement operations in or near medical facilities or premises.

Timely and accurate information on health and health rights must be made available to migrants at all stages of their journey, along migratory routes, at reception points, and in communities where migrants live and work while health professional training and awareness raising campaigns about the realities facing migrant populations are crucial.

This mobility of people across international borders - the foundation of our modern globalized world – dates back to the very creation of borders themselves. Many of us were born of migrants or are indeed migrants ourselves. And our children too will want to cross borders. To whom among them would we wish health and dignity denied? For whom among today’s migrants can we say – they have no rights.

Yet women, men and child migrants are being left behind, excluded from national health systems and inadequately served by humanitarian and development programmes.

Friends, it is striking that over the centuries, in every culture and tradition, that in all era – there you will find evidence of the accompaniers – of the mid-wfys – those skilled at “being with women” – those on the front lines of defence of universal human rights, including of the most intimate of rights which is to dignity in reproductive and sexual health and wellbeing.

These rights are premised on a foundational proposition for which there is no conscionable alternative: that born we all are free and equal in dignity and rights.

After all, is there a baby who at birth is less than simply human? Is she made the lesser by the pigment of her skin? Are their first cries any less miraculous just because some of their cells have XX chromosomes while others have XY; or because he has an extra copy of chromosome 21?

Are we born carrying within ourselves at birth, any justification for contempt of another or for receipt of the other's hatred in turn. Really? Are we born with an instinct that if white, I am superior? If masculine, I am more competent? If my limbs are intact and my spine sturdy, then I am more worthy? If my parents happen to worship in one way, I am saved while another is damned?

Most certainly we are born into toxic milieu – into communities and societies in which the bigotries of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia are socially and politically manufactured, but born with these callous toxic ideas prêt a manger? Absolutely not. In the words of the incomparable Nelson Mandela *“No one is born hating another because of the color of his skin, or her background, or their religion. People learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love....”*

And so we must ask if hate is not present nor justified at our very commencement, whenever is it in our life course - by which dystopian schedule - should hate's intrusion become somehow acceptable?

Friends,

And today, we witness a self-made rising toxic tide of hate for the “other” – xenophobia's sour soup stirred up by reckless would-be political profiteers - peddlers of fear, pimps of prejudice, the pushers of the narcotics of bigotry. And their casualties? -- the rejected, the reviled, the excluded and the marginalised – accompany them.

For, in this world of ours, let there be no doubt that walls, borders and fences do not erode our obligations to each other. Walls within this human family, on a small, climate distressed, resource stressed planet, in a globalized world, home to the largest population of the youngest people in all of human history? Walls are untruths.

At this time, in this interconnected world, no country or people can rightfully abandon others, isolate themselves, stand apart, or bury their heads in the sand of myopic self-interest or absent itself from the global table of rights-filled solutions.

There is no wall so high nor border so patrolled; no special identity nor privilege made so rarefied; no surveillance system so comprehensive nor unmanned drone so swift; no enmity so heartfelt nor friendship so rare that, on this domicile planet, there can be placed between you and me such a distance that your rights do not count with me; that my rights do not matter to you; that their rights do not register with us.

No such distance exists upon this village planet, except, that is, in the fabrications of fantasist, sinister, popularist ideologies whose destructive force feeds off a mendacious manipulation of desperation,

despair and disillusion. A fabrication of a fictional criminalization of the “other”, woven out of massive demographic changes , the muck of deepening inequalities and poison of acts of criminal terror.

What are we to do? What can we do? Accompany them. Accompany those who would be locked out, left out, kept out – accompany the migrant, the refugee. Accompany those whom false walls seek to deny or deprive or exclude.

In the middle ages, the fear of the power of accompaniment, saw midwives tortured by burning and hanging as heretics and witches. Today still accompaniment can be a demanding courageous project. For in our mid-wifery of this troubled, turbulent world, let us not forget that every country that has joined the United Nations has done so freely and without coercion by signing on to a promise to uphold universal human rights. Basic justice-loving principles – enshrined in UN Charter, elaborated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and detailed through a range of international covenants, conventions, treaties and declarations.

Human rights are not primarily about law, judges and courtrooms although that is where their formal obligations are confirmed. Human rights are our shared definitions of the person and the nature of being human.

The science of human anatomy is a codification – a typology – bringing order and system to the physicality of the human being. Grey’s anatomy is its core compendium.

Human rights likewise – is but a textual codification not of our skeletal structure or musculature but of our human-ess. Its core compendia describe the characteristics/elements of this human-ness, which when absent or eroded or defied enables us to recognize and understand that we are “de-humanised”.

This “textual” account – defining the essential grounds/preconditions for human dignity – are hard won understandings, forged 70 years ago in the worst of times and they reflect patterns of common understanding across across diverse traditions, culture and philosophies.

Human rights: principles that do not prevent our diversity – they protect it. Principles that do not limit our diverse expression – they ensure it. Principles that do not restrict our access to culture or belief or opinion – they guarantee them and set out, what’s more, the terms and conditions under which we may exercise these rights without cost to the exercise of any other person’s rights.

And, the opposite of human rights upheld? Selfishness, bullying, bigotry, injustice, oppression, tyranny – toxic stepping stones – a perverse paving of pathways to privation, suffering, conflict and, ultimately, atrocity. Contempt for the “other”; hatred of the foreigner; distrust of those who look or love or worship differently ... aided and abetted by clampdowns on freedom of the press; stepped-up surveillance in cyber space; encroachment on public movement; closure of national borders to people fleeing persecution; gagging of activists and the deprivation even of life saving services such as those

essential for sexual and reproductive health: The pounding of these malicious fists may grow louder and louder on the doors of our dignity, of our privacy, of our freedom but still they must be resisted.

After all, humanity has travelled down this path before and we know only too well where it leads ... to a dead end – to death-ridden ends. Small, mundane acts of every day contempt, flourishing into common garden-variety intimidation, inflating into brutalizing discrimination against the “other”, fuelling popular persecution under whose caustic clouds we then so casually descend into conflict's callous catastrophe.

In this, there is no north or south, no right or left, neither east nor west. There is only the humane and the inhumane. Our rights to not be subjected to hate, or violence or discrimination. Our rights to not be coerced, deprived of liberty, or to be denied voice. Rights from the court room to the board room to the school room, to the examination room to the bedroom. Accompany this honorable, humanising journey.

Friends, you don't have to be like me to respect my rights. I don't have to be like you to uphold your rights. We do not have to agree with each other to defend each other's rights. Rights are not a beauty parade or a reward system. They are not some kind of nepotistic prize for good behavior as defined by arbitrary standards.

Rights are not some kindly dispensation by the powerful to the powerless. Rights are that which cannot be taken from us. Rights are for the best and the worst of us; for each and every one of us; to the exclusion of none of us, in the interests of all of us. And against attack they must be defended.

Stand up for rights! Use our rights to defend their rights. Accompany them.

We can and must be:

- Midwives who provide dignified access to care, regardless of a patient's identity or status;
- Doctors who seek healing without toxic differentiation by color of their patients' skin, language spoken or religion worshipped,
- Scientists who pursue our right to evidence-based knowledge without fear or favour, and who deploy its fruits for the betterment of a planet under strain; a climate undergoing hurtling change and a people undergoing inconceivable suffering;
- Authors who love the truth; who protect fact and diversify voice.
- Innovators and creators – so that more rapidly and comprehensively we replace inequality, unfairness and exclusion with something more equal, inclusive and more sustainable.
- Dissidents who speak truth to power, and not for our own elevation but rather for the elevation of that in which we believe, that which we know to be true.

Rights activist and artist Billy Holliday stood up for rights when, with a poet's voice, she sang out against the lynching of black Americans in the US' southern states:

"Southern trees bear strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root / Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees".

Today, in this world that so casually betrays hard won principles, that flourishes so readily xenophobia, seeds so easily the toxic harvest of hatred and bigotry, there is strange fruit again budding on populist trees: – assassinations of human rights defenders; imprisonment of journalists; arbitrary detention of political dissidents; removal of activists' passports; rejection at our borders of the refugee in flight; indiscriminate rounding up of people wrongly denied access to citizen rights; bullying of children for their gender identity; sexual violence against women just because he can; the rape of little girls covered up through marriage; defunding of essential services; deprivation of choices over our own bodies!

Should such daily, banal manufactured cruelties pass us by unremarked? Are basic qualities of equalities to be eroded without resistance? Are we to abandon rather than accompany?

NO! Stand up we must and stand up we will. Every day, in any way we can, where ever we are – we must stand up. Stand up so that we do not abandon; stand with those whom we must accompany; stand out for that which is most precious – the fact, the reality, that born you and I are, equal in dignity and rights.