

Eight Lives: Stories of Reproductive Health



Beatrice



Saratou



Maria



Natalia



Eunice



Maria



Rokeya



Sugna

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September 2010

Publication available at: www.unfpa.org/public/home/publications

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Eight Lives:

Stories of Reproductive Health

CONTENTS

PREFACE IV

INTRODUCTION V



Maria

Breaking the cycle of female genital mutilation/cutting

1



Beatrice

A message of hope on HIV prevention

7



Rokeya

Improving women's lives through family planning

13



Natalia

The anguish of sexual violence and trafficking

19



Saratou

Ending the silence and lessening the suffering of obstetric fistula

25



Maria

Becoming a mother as a teenager

31



Eunice

Midwifery: Changing the world one birth at a time

37



Sugna

Maternal health: The pursuit to deliver with dignity

43

WHAT WOMEN AND GIRLS NEED	48
ENDNOTES	50

PREFACE

Ensuring universal access to reproductive health, empowering women, men and young people to exercise their right to reproductive health, and reducing inequities are central to development and to ending poverty. This was recognized more than 15 years ago at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo and was reaffirmed in 2007, when universal access to reproductive health became a target of the Millennium Development Goals.

Much progress has been made since the Cairo conference. The concept of reproductive health is now accepted around the world, and in most countries policies and laws have been adopted to protect individuals and to guide programmes to improve access to maternal and child health, to make family planning more widely accessible, to prevent and treat HIV and to provide support to those living with the virus. Through these interventions, many lives have been saved and countless others have been made better. Yet much remains to be done.

UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is proud to present three publications that assess the situation of sexual and reproductive health at this critical time and look at universal access from many different angles.

This publication, *Eight Lives: Stories of Reproductive Health*, relates the tales of eight women who have endured the challenges of poor reproductive health. Each story gives a voice and a face to those most affected by the failures of a dysfunctional health system — and by gender inequality, violation of their human rights, blatant disregard for their social and cultural circumstances, and abject poverty. But it is the commitment and passion with which these women have transformed their personal experiences into change within

their communities that is the overarching message. It reminds us to make certain that the global response to sexual and reproductive health puts people, especially women and girls, first.

The two other publications are:

- *How Universal is Access to Reproductive Health? A review of the evidence.* Using the latest available data, this report takes a hard look at trends since 1990, and differentials. It demonstrates clearly that intensified efforts are needed to extend reproductive health to all.
- *Sexual and Reproductive Health for All: Reducing poverty, advancing development and protecting human rights* provides the ultimate response to a few key questions: What is universal access to reproductive health? Why is it important? How far have we progressed? And where do we go from here?

My hope is that these publications will contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexity and the centrality of reproductive health, and that they will lead to accelerated progress, along with heightened commitment and an all-too-real sense of urgency.

Thoraya Ahmed Obaid
UNFPA Executive Director
August 2010

INTRODUCTION

Reproductive health is about supporting women and young people, especially those who are the most disadvantaged, to make choices in their lives. Access to reproductive health services gives women the opportunity to make autonomous decisions and have healthy sexual and reproductive lives. It helps women to decide if and when to have children and under what conditions, and affords pregnant women access to skilled care before, during, and after childbirth. It contributes to safe deliveries and healthy babies. It also helps women to live their lives free from sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

Quality reproductive health care transforms lives. It can prevent young girls from becoming wives and mothers when they are still children, giving them a greater opportunity to stay in school for as long as they wish. It gives women and girls greater opportunities in life, to enter the labour market and contribute to the well-being of their families and communities. It promotes a more equal world in which women and girls are respected and can live their lives free from violence and coercion.

Reproductive health is about guaranteeing human rights. Yet, too many women and girls do not have equal rights within their communities. This puts their health, especially their reproductive health, at stake. Reproductive health problems remain the leading cause of ill health and death among women in developing countries. Impoverished women, especially those living in developing countries, suffer disproportionately from unintended pregnancies, maternal death and disability, sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, and gender-based violence.

UNFPA created this publication because reproductive health is all about the story of women and their quest for justice and equality. When we interviewed

one woman, she was surprised at first to learn that she had any story to tell. Yet, every woman has a story to share about her reproductive health.

The eight women profiled in this publication are living testaments to the dramatic consequences of poor reproductive health in its different forms. But their lives are also testament to the positive change that can happen when women are empowered to transform their situations and are afforded access to good quality, integrated sexual and reproductive health care and services.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations recently launched the Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health, a worldwide effort to save the lives of, and prevent injuries in, more than 16 million women and children by 2015. It involves a wide range of partners and focuses on strengthening health systems and integrating services so that women can go to one place to have their total health needs met — for family planning, maternal health care and HIV and AIDS services.

UNFPA strongly believes that universal access to reproductive health affords women and girls a chance to better realize their dreams, beyond becoming mothers and caring for their children, if that is what they want.

These eight women represent millions of others in low- and middle- income countries who have overcome obstacles, confronted injustice and demanded the right to a better future. We honour their courage and hope that these few pages on each of their lives will give readers a sense of their strength and resilience, and remind us of what needs to be done to ensure that reproductive health becomes a reality for all.



Maria

► *Egypt*

Breaking the cycle
of female genital
mutilation/cutting

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