

Advocating for Life-Saving Changes



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Beatrice Rwakimari, former MP in Uganda, was one of 24 participants in a workshop to strengthen the role of African women leaders in defining priorities in family planning and reproductive health.

Photo by CEDPA

In a village 350 km away from Kampala, a 16-year-old girl was in labor. Like many young Ugandan girls from poverty-stricken families, she had been forced into an early marriage and was expecting her first child.

As a teenage girl, she was not physically or emotionally prepared to give birth. When she went into labor, her mother-in-law did what most rural residents do and rushed her to a traditional birth attendant in the village. Even if the girl had wanted her to give birth at a health clinic, the family did not have money or the transportation to take her to the nearest facility, which was over 20 km away.

During childbirth, the teenager had complications. The traditional birth attendant shrugged them off. She had delivered hundreds of babies in that village. Why would this one be any different? After two days in labor, the girl died.

There are many interventions that could have saved the life of the girl from the village. There could have been incentives in place to ensure she waited to marry. She could have been educated on reproductive health and family planning. The traditional birth attendant could have been trained to recognize early danger signs. Transportation could have been made available to take her to the health facility.

This is one of hundreds of tragic stories from her community that compelled Beatrice Rwakimari to run for parliament more than a decade ago.

“The main reason I wanted to join parliament was to help the women in my community,” said Beatrice. “When I went to parliament in 2001, reproductive health and maternal health were my passion.”

Understanding how simple interventions could save lives, Beatrice campaigned hard to ensure policies were implemented to save the lives of women and girls in her community and throughout Uganda.

“The biggest challenge was the insensitivity of the executive about reproductive health. Most male ministers were not as passionate about reproductive health as we women were,” explain Beatrice. “They would say, ‘That’s not our priority.’ Their focus was on roads or production of electricity.”

Though Beatrice helped to raise the priority level of reproductive health in Uganda during her time in office, the need for expanded access to services remained.

Beatrice has since retired from parliament and founded ARISE, a non-governmental organization that advocates for the needs of women and girls in her community. She is one of 24 participants who attended a Health Policy Project workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, to strengthen women’s participation in defining country priorities for family planning and reproductive health in Africa. The three-week workshop has convened women leaders from Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi and Uganda to build their skills in leadership and advocacy.

The Women Leaders for Family Planning and Reproductive Health workshop is an activity of the Health Policy Project, led by Futures Group. CEDPA, one of the partners on the project, is conducting the workshop, which covers skills building in leadership and mentorship; advocacy; governance and accountability; gender and social inclusion; and networking. Upon returning to their own countries, workshop participants will ensure that women’s voices are prominent in defining national and regional priorities for family planning and reproductive health.

“As a leader of ARISE, this workshop comes at a critical time,” explains Beatrice. “The information I am gaining here is enormous and will help shape the strategic plan of my organization to better serve my community.”

About the Health Policy Project

The USAID-funded Health Policy Project (HPP) builds capacity around the world for improved health policy, advocacy, and governance. HPP contributes to improved health outcomes through strengthening the efficiency, effectiveness, and equity of health systems. It is implemented by Futures Group, in collaboration with the Centre for Development and Population Activities, Futures Institute, Partners in Population and Development – Africa Regional Office, Population reference Bureau, RTI International, and the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood. For more information, please visit www.healthpolicyproject.com or contact info@healthpolicyproject.com