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WOMEN AND GIRLS MUST BE AT THE CENTER OF THE GLOBAL ZIKA RESPONSE, GLOBAL HEALTH EXPERTS SAY

WASHINGTON, D.C. – With Zika outbreaks reported in 55 countries – and counting – global health advocates and experts gathered in Washington, D.C. today to discuss how women and girls are being left behind in the Zika response and to propose strategies to address gender inequality in global health outbreaks.

The event, organized by the Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE), Anis- Instituto de Bioetica, International Planned Parenthood Federation/Western Hemisphere Region (IPPF/WHR), and Promundo-US, in partnership with the Embassy of Sweden, brought together health and advocacy experts from the U.S., Brazil, and Puerto Rico to discuss why protecting the health and rights of women and girls before, during, and after pregnancy is key to responding to the Zika crisis.

Health and policy advocates noted that the failure to focus on the health and rights of women and girls in the Zika response exacerbates the existing public health crisis, as it did with Ebola. In the case of Ebola, many pregnant women were refused care during the outbreak. As a result, some women were not being treated for Ebola nor received the maternal health services and supplies they needed. We know that when women experience disrespect in the medical facility they can become distrustful and may not return, thus exacerbating the outbreak.

At the time of the panel discussion, more than 80 organizations and individuals from around the world called on governments, the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and other donor entities to adopt measures to ensure that women and girls affected by the Zika crisis can access and afford all necessary reproductive health services to avoid unwanted pregnancy, maintain or terminate pregnancies, and ensure safe child birth.

“We know that women and girls who face multiple oppressions – like poverty and racism – are disproportionately affected by the Zika virus,” said CHANGE President Serra Sippel. “It only makes sense then that donor governments, NGOs, and advocates should put the health and rights of marginalized women and girls at the center of the global response. We cannot effectively address the spread of Zika – or any other health outbreak – by leaving women and girls on the sidelines.”

“Zika must be dealt with from a rights-based approach. The Swedish government will continue to actively push for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights within the framework of Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy,” said Björn Lyrvall, Ambassador of Sweden to the United States of America. “We do this because these rights are absolute. Ensuring that women and girls AND men and boys have full autonomy over their lives, bodies and sexualities is a first crucial step towards fulfilling human rights and achieving gender equality.”

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“We need to amplify the voices of low-income women and girls, and women and girls of color, who are being disproportionately affected by Zika and are the least likely to be heard,” says Magaly Marques, Deputy Director of US Programs, Promundo-US. “We must remind governments, international agencies, and health officials that women at risk of infection as well as those already impacted by the virus receive accurate information and the care they need. We must also encourage men and boys, communities, and families to join women in their efforts to voice and exercise their rights during this difficult moment.”

“In Latin America and the Caribbean, the virus has exposed the region’s glaring inequalities and the failure of existing policies and programs related to sexual and reproductive health and rights—not just during Zika, but 365 days-a-year,” said Giselle Carino, Regional Director of the International Planned Parenthood/Western Hemisphere Region. “In a region where more than half of pregnancies are unintended and high rates of violence and sexual assault persist, government recommendations to delay pregnancy ignore the realities many women face and ultimately fail to uphold their rights and health during the epidemic.”

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