

## Profile

### Jill Sheffield: nurturing safe motherhood



UN Photo/Ky Chung

One day when Jill Sheffield was working as a volunteer for a family planning clinic at the Pumwani Maternity Hospital in Kenya, a woman walked into the clinic carrying a newborn baby on her front, and an older baby on her back. She had had 11 pregnancies, had six living children, and was just 27 years old. It was the mid-1960s and Kenya was one of only two African countries that had a national family planning programme, but to get contraceptives a woman had to have her husband's signature. This woman had not sought her husband's permission. Sheffield still remembers her response to this woman's plight: "I was the same age and had no children; I thought holy smoke, stuff the rules. I made sure she got contraceptives, and thought: I have to change this. From that day on I wanted to make sure that women everywhere had as much choice as they could because if you can't plan your fertility, you can't plan your life."

Sheffield went on to become the co-founder and President of Family Care International (FCI), a non-profit organisation that has made impressive contributions to maternal health and adolescent sexual and reproductive health. This year is the 20th anniversary of FCI and the Safe Motherhood Initiative—a global campaign to reduce maternal mortality that Sheffield has championed since its inception.

Sheffield had gone out to work in Kenya with her husband as a teacher and after 3 years they returned to the USA where she continued in education and also began working to help women like those she had met in Kenya. After serving as an Executive Officer for the International Programme of Carnegie Corporation of New York, she joined the Board of Directors of the International Planned Parenthood Federation/Western Hemisphere Region. Sheffield and others began to galvanise support to tackle issues that surround reproductive health choices. In 1985, at the conference to mark the end of the UN Decade for Women, a representative from WHO got up and said: "we think that about one woman dies every minute in childbirth around the world. Is anyone going to do anything about it?"

Sheffield knew that was her cue. FCI was created in response to this crisis, but faced many challenges. "There were so many governments, including my own, who were insensitive about contraception, unsafe abortion (or safe services), or adolescent pregnancy. We figured we could tuck all these issues under the skirts of the term 'Safe Motherhood'. It was a bit sneaky but it got us in the door." It was, however, difficult to convince governments and elected policymakers to care about this issue and it was "only when we started to bang on about the economic arguments, we began to get more traction", Sheffield explains. In 1987 with her colleague, Ann Starrs, Sheffield organised the first international Safe Motherhood meeting in Nairobi, Kenya,

which brought attention to the high number of maternal deaths and challenged the world to do something.

Today, Sheffield thinks Safe Motherhood is too narrow a term for what the field has become: "It needs refurbishment. It's not broad enough. Some women, especially young women, don't want to be mothers at all...and they die trying to avoid it. Women will always want choices", she says. Sheffield feels her own government is letting women and families down all over the world. "The US government doesn't see—can't see—won't see that abstinence only really isn't a winning strategy. It is an ideological strategy and the data tell us it's not working. But still they make huge investments in abstinence only education...for HIV/AIDS, for family planning, and population programmes." Sheffield admits to having a clock on her desk that tells her how much longer the Bush Administration has left. "488 days, 6 hours, and 31 seconds", she sighs.

The major challenge for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), according to Sheffield, is deciding to have the will to invest in them and just "do it". "For maternal health and morbidity it is deciding those lives are worth saving. Without a win on MDG5, the others are in grave danger", she warns. "If there's a silver bullet, it's educating girls, and then gender equity and empowerment of women", she adds. At the upcoming Women Deliver conference, she hopes to change the attitudes of those who can make a difference and persuade donors and finance ministers they can deliver for women and by doing so have far-reaching effects on economies and communities that will enable the ultimate goal of poverty reduction to be tackled.

Fred Sai, Chairman of FCI and a close friend, says: "If I were to characterise Jill in one phrase, I would say she is truly 'a pilgrim of the impossible'. There is nothing that she considers not worth doing. Jill is ambitious in the best possible sense, ambitious to succeed in achieving an objective of service to a group or to mankind as a whole. Over the past 20 years Jill has shown such enthusiasm, leadership, dedication, and personal sacrifice to the cause of the Safe Motherhood Initiative that no-one else can match. It is no exaggeration to say that but for her, the initiative would have been consigned to history as another of those international fads that come and go."

Sheffield's one wish is that women are able to plan the number and spacing of their children and for pregnancy to be safe: "Fred Sai often says: we honour our soldiers who die but we don't honour the women who die trying to be mothers, and they are heroes of our world too."

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