The Worth Of Being A Girl
By Mayra Miranda

Information for this article was garnered from an interview at the United Nations Population Fund, June 4, 2013.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is a programmatic fund within the United Nations. On June 4-2013, UNFPA Programme Analyst, Prateek Awasthi spoke to UN and Millennium Development Goals Study Tour participants about UNFPA’s mission, goals, and role in population dynamics and health.

UNFPA has several goals, including achieving universal access to sexual and reproductive health care and family planning, promoting reproductive rights, and reducing maternal mortality. UNFPA also advocates for human rights and gender equality.

UNFPA strives to have a direct involvement in countries they serve. Approximately 90% of UNFPA staff work on the ground around the world. This means that workers can directly implement programs within a country. Awasthi noted, “Focus on numbers has taken away from individuals.” Therefore, emphasis on people is essential in moving forward.

Data collection on population trends, such as growth rates, age, fertility and mortality, is another critical function of the UNFPA, which it uses to inform governments in developing countries. Women are also an important focal point of the fund, as well as youth. Awasthi emphasized how empowering women can positively impact their communities.

In countries where UNFPA works, Awasthi mentioned the importance of making family planning and reproductive health information available to all women in order to enable them to make personal choices. In many regions of the world, women have been targets of socially constructed gender norms and ideologies that have restricted rights over their bodies. UNFPA is working at the community level to introduce information on contraceptives and to discuss gender base violence. The programs that UNFPA promotes recognize the importance of being sensitive to different social parameters, such as culture, religion and the role of men.

Another emphasis that UNFPA pursues is making sure that pregnant women are attended by skilled birth attendants, with the goal of increasing the number of skilled birth attendants within developing countries. According to its website, a 2011 report indicated that with 112,000 workers with midwifery training 3.6 million lives could be saved. Therefore, midwifes play an essential role in ensuring a safe delivery and can serve as an important variable in addressing maternal health.

Mr. Awasthi noted there are many communities where girls are not seen as valuable assets to a family's economic stability, resulting in a lack of will to provide them with equal opportunities. Essentially, this facilitates human rights violations toward young girls. Social, cultural, and religious factors have often limited the information made available to girls regarding their body and health. Awasthi referenced how female genital mutilation is an example of a practice with deeply held cultural and religious ties that is hard to break. The Girl Effect, a popular video shown by our host during the meeting, emphasized the importance of empowering and protecting the health and rights of girls. This provides them a chance at achieving good health, proper nutrition and the ability to fulfill personal goals.

In moving forward on the issues of women's empowerment and equality around the world, information must be disseminated to communities. Girls must be seen as an important component when discussing global health. UNFPA is working to include men in the conversation too. In patriarchic environments, forming alliances can facilitate the shift in protecting young girls. As Awashi warned, “The clock is ticking”. The importance of girls must be understood. A range of programs must be put into place.
Access to reproductive health and family planning is imperative. A women’s worth will become an important subject in further global health discussions and the post 2015 agenda.