

Shaping the Future – No More Business As Usual

Raphael Rogans-Watson

The Friday afternoon plenary of the Women Deliver conference was titled *Shaping the Future – No More Business As Usual*, and who better to shake things up than the charismatic editor-in-chief of The Lancet, Dr Richard Horton? Other members of the panel included:

- Kavita Ramdas, President and CEO of the Global Fund for Women
- Dr. Dorothy Shaw, President of FIGO – the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics
- Laurie Garrett, Council on Foreign Relations, and a prize-winning author
- Andrew Francis, Member of Advocates for Youth's International Youth Leadership Council (IYLC), and Coordinator of Jamaica Youth Advocacy Network on Sexual and Reproductive Health (JYAN-SRH)

From the start, Horton injected the plenary with the energy of one who was looking for answers and action. He promised an interactive session, and immediately engaged the audience, asking them to move forward towards the stage. This lively tone was continued by Dr. Hans Rosling, (Professor of Global Health at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden, and – I later learnt – co-founder of Medecins Sans Frontiers), as he delivered his entertaining presentation on the history of Sweden's development. For those of you who haven't yet discovered this fantastic site already, I would urge you to explore www.gapminder.org, where you can watch Dr Rosling (described by Horton as “the George Clooney of global health”!) in all his glory, amongst many other resources. I will leave you to take what you will from Dr Rosling's online presentation, but consider his opinion as you watch it that “we are not two groups of countries, [developed and developing], but a continuum”. He pointed out that last year Africa reported its strongest growth in recent history, and what we really need is positivity and action. Regarding his graphs and all the statistics available, he argued for the “need to go beyond advocacy”, and instead use figures for the purpose of impact and implementation.

To my delight, Laurie Garrett then proceeded to stir things up even further by stating that she had been disappointed with the conference, citing the lack of concrete outcomes. She went on, saying, “we've spent two days discussing the figures and state of maternal health, which we all already know”; talking about the fact that we know the solutions, which we all already know; and debating tactics such as safe abortion and increased funding. From the applause she received, I'm sure she echoed the feelings of many in the room when she said that what we really needed were solid strategies! For example, how exactly will we harmonise the activities of 1,000s of NGOs, bilateral, and multilateral programs (see my other report; *Working on Common Ground*)?

The straight-talking Kavita Ramdas, who I have huge admiration for, then spoke plainly on the subject of women's rights and power relations. She appealed to women's rights activists to “get out of the vagina box and realise that we shouldn't just be talking about ‘women's issues’”, but should also look at economic disparities, people in power, and

matters that affect everybody. Ramdas declared that leadership for change in the world would not come out of the colonial countries, or from the ‘men in suits’ who traditionally dominate the international organisations. She cited Rwanda, where the parliament is 48.7% female, and where 70% of the population is covered by national health insurance. Yesterday I was lamenting the lack of leadership on the world stage, but now I felt hopeful in the realisation that leadership would not have to come from ‘the top’, but could emerge (perhaps more appropriately) from those very societies in the developing world that were being discussed.

Ramdas also made the following interesting points:

- That it’s easy to invest in children (i.e. to reduce child mortality), because they “are not a threat to the existing status quo”. But when you invest in women, there is the “fear of change in power relations and profound cultural shift.”
- That women’s rights are simply human rights, and human rights are about rights for all of us. **“The empowerment of one group should not be seen as the disempowerment of another.”**

Following this discussion on leadership and rights, Horton refocused the talk back onto strategies and to funding in particular, and it was interesting to note that every speaker on the panel felt that the current donor/aid system was flawed in some way or another. Some of the following criticisms were mentioned:

- The system of aid has “deeply inbuilt inequalities” in it that we need to challenge. An example given was that “70 cents from every dollar donated by USAID ends up back in the United States”.
- The application process for aid is too bureaucratic and contains too many restrictions, an obvious one being that one can often only apply in English!
- There are not enough checks and balances on aid. We spend years collecting and collating statistics on maternal mortality for every region, but where is the detailed information on the flow of aid?
- There is no mechanism whereby we can hear and learn about what works in one country, and use it in another.
- Where are the donors receiving their information from, and how can we be sure it is reliable and unbiased?

The session came close to an end with questions from the floor, which ranged from stories from different countries around the world, to further questions on leadership. It was altogether an interesting debate, and though it didn’t provide all the answers, I think many people felt more was achieved in this session than some of the earlier ones. This was mainly thanks to Horton’s energy, Rosling’s entertainment, Ramdas’ frankness, and Garrett’s refusal to tow the line and praise the conference! I left feeling more optimistic and less cynical than I had the day before!

I want to end with a quote by Andrew Francis, who was on the panel representing ‘the youth’, who by the way, are apparently all those under the age of 35. He appealed to all those present to “invest in young people now: they are not the future, they are the present.” As a young person myself, I also don’t see why we should have to wait for the

future to arrive until we tackle these vital issues. We need to invest our time and energy now, along with everyone else, engaging with the debate and challenging the status-quo.