

## National Women's Day, World Breastfeeding Week and World Humanitarian Day warrant more than just lip service

August has been a month to commemorate, remember and respond. In South Africa, National Women's Day and month have been a blend of accolading the achievements of women through the decades and against all odds, and lamenting the harsh treatment of women through the societal scourge of gender-based violence, discrimination and mistreatment. Globally, the week starting 4 August was observed as World Breastfeeding Week, and 19 August was remembered as World Humanitarian Day. Why are these occasions important? They can be used to educate the public on issues of concern, to mobilise political will and resources to address national and global problems, and to celebrate and reinforce achievements of humanity.<sup>[1]</sup> They should be embraced as significant instruments for advocacy.

### Women's Day

Both National Women's Day and International Women's Day (8 March) can be utilised as tools to drive the trajectory towards women and girls thriving and not just surviving. Millions of women lose their lives globally every year, by and large to essentially preventable conditions such as cervical cancer and pregnancy complications.<sup>[2]</sup> In a world where women comprise more than half of the globe's population, women's health has been under-researched and under-funded historically, and continuing in the present day. Funding for women's health has lagged way behind women's needs, with 1% of research and development funds being allocated to female-specific conditions beyond oncology. Conditions mostly affecting women receive disproportionately lower funding relative to their burden. Women worldwide continue to be under-represented in clinical trials relative to disease prevalence. Sex disaggregated outcomes are often not reported. It has been stated that for women's health to be substantially improved, fundamental change in study design and systems is critical. Moreover, data must be improved to address persistent data gaps, and researchers must be better prepared to generate and apply inclusive evidence.<sup>[3]</sup>

The impact of advances in science and technology, while contributing to improved outcomes for women, has been uneven. The root cause of women's unmet needs cannot be addressed by technological advances alone. There is much more to consider for meaningful transformative progress for women. Pervasive societal gender hierarchies and dynamics such as deep-rooted patriarchal structures continue to systematically disadvantage women economically, socioculturally and politically, and negatively impact women's health.<sup>[2]</sup>

Therefore, any advance needs consideration beyond just the biological and technological lenses. Fundamental to design and implementation of health technologies for women are their needs and contexts. Furthermore, effective, scalable and sustainable women-centred health solutions are required, and for this we require women's expertise and leadership to be integrated across the innovation ecosystems and technology life-cycle.<sup>[2]</sup> Women need to be centred as builders of healthcare systems that affect their lives. They are not to be seen as mere beneficiaries. When health systems, research and innovations are designed without their input, in particular from those in underserved communities, women's needs will often not be met. Innovation without equity is just not innovative.<sup>[3]</sup>

### World Breastfeeding Week

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) released a joint statement on 4 August, the

beginning of World Breastfeeding Week, urging countries to invest in health systems and support breastfeeding mothers.<sup>[4]</sup> They highlighted that strengthening health systems to support breastfeeding shifts beyond a health imperative to include both moral and economic imperatives as well. The statement underscores that breastfeeding is one of the most effective ways to ensure a baby's health, development and survival in the earliest stages of life. It basically functions as their first vaccine, providing protection against diseases including diarrhoea and pneumonia. Given that investing in breastfeeding is an investment in the future, it is distressing to note that only 48% of infants <6 months old are exclusively breastfed. This is well below the World Health Assembly target of 60% by 2030, and they suggest that this is due to the overlapping challenges for new mothers, health workers and health systems, with millions of mothers globally not receiving timely and skilled support in healthcare settings when they need it most. The majority of mothers leave health facilities without proper guidance on how to breastfeed their babies and when to introduce complementary feeding. Health systems in many countries are often under-resourced, fragmented, or poorly equipped to deliver quality, consistent, evidence-based breastfeeding support, and investment in the latter remains critically low. With the theme of Breastfeeding Week this year being 'Prioritize breastfeeding: Create sustainable support systems', the WHO and UNICEF have urged governments, health administrators and partners to invest in high-quality breastfeeding support, by:

- 'ensuring adequate investment in equitable, quality maternal and newborn care, including breastfeeding support services;
- increasing national budget allocations for breastfeeding programmes;
- integrating breastfeeding counselling and support into routine maternal and child health services, including antenatal, delivery, and postnatal care;
- ensuring all health service providers are equipped with the skills and knowledge required to support breastfeeding, including in emergency and humanitarian settings;
- strengthening community health systems to provide every new mother with ongoing, accessible breastfeeding support for up to 2 years and beyond; and
- protecting breastfeeding by ensuring that the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes is applied in all health facilities and systems.'

### World Humanitarian Day

World Humanitarian Day was observed on 19 August, with the United Nations (UN) putting out a call to '#ActForHumanity' with sharper urgency, demanding protection, accountability and action.<sup>[5]</sup> Global outrage should be transformed into global pressure towards those in power, so that humanitarian workers and civilians can be protected, international humanitarian law can be upheld and the lifelines claimed to be supported can be funded.<sup>[5]</sup>

The term 'humanitarian' conjures up disaster relief, aid workers or even non-profit leaders. Basically, a humanitarian is someone dedicated to reducing suffering and protecting human dignity.<sup>[6]</sup> Humanitarians put people first, and this does not have to be limited to contexts such as war zones. Humanitarians run to the rescue after natural disasters, or during health emergencies. A humanitarian is someone who helps others in crisis. Humanitarian work extends beyond borders. Humanitarian action is guided by the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. Helping people is based on

need only, irrespective of race, religion, or politics. Anyone using their skills to reduce suffering can be considered a humanitarian. At the core is the belief that human suffering can and should be reduced, and that hope and compassion can change the world.<sup>[6]</sup>

A bomb attack on 19 August 2003 in Baghdad, Iraq, killed 22 humanitarian aid workers. In 2008, 19 August was designated World Humanitarian Day by the UN. Annually, World Humanitarian Day focuses on a theme of bringing together humanitarian partners globally to advocate for the survival, wellbeing and dignity of people affected by crises, and for the safety and security of aid workers.<sup>[5]</sup> This year, the UN emphasised that humanitarian workers are the ones holding the line, and keeping people alive, often at great personal risk, in particular, when bombs fall and disaster strikes. However, these humanitarians are increasingly becoming targets themselves. The UN stressed the need to honour those who step into crises to help others, and to stand with the millions of people whose lives hang in the balance. It sends a clear message that the humanitarian system is stretched to its limits, underfunded, overwhelmed and under attack. Despite attacks violating international law, which is meant to protect aid workers, those responsible are not held accountable. Both humanitarian workers and the people they serve are forsaken. Attacks on aid workers are breaking records, and this cannot continue.<sup>[5]</sup>

August has now passed. It is vital that the advocacy around National Women's Day, World Breastfeeding Week and World

Humanitarian Day continues into the months to come. Our voices need to reverberate loudly when protection is denied and accountability absent. These crucial occasions should not be considered once-off advocacy activities: the gains of the month need to be implemented, and pressure for change maintained to ensure that the 31 days were not just full of empty talk.

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