

## **Women's Health in the Post-2015 World: Ensuring No One is Left Behind**

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Dr. Jane Barratt of the International Federation on Ageing challenged panelists and more than 70 leaders from UN permanent missions, UN agencies, and the private sector at a panel discussion and luncheon Tuesday June 24 to consider what would propel the world to pause and take action on women's health. How can we define, and then begin to pursue, a successful approach to championing women's health in the Post-2015 world? The Business Council of the United Nations, with support from Pfizer, organized the event in the delegate's dining room at UN Headquarters in New York, where panelists, including Paula DeCola, Dr. Ana Langer, and Dr. Rama Lakshminarayanan, explored obstacles and opportunities in addressing women's health throughout the life course in the context of the emerging Post-2015 dialogue.



Jane Barratt, International Federation on Ageing  
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Ambassador Alya Ahmed Saif Al-Thani, Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the United Nations  
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In her opening remarks, Ambassador Alya Ahmed Saif Al-Thani, Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the United Nations, highlighted the importance of creating and strengthening the means to combat existing and evolving challenges for both women and children's health. Women and Children's health remains a priority for Qatar, Ambassador Al-Thani said, and most national legislation since 1995 has evolved to pay particular attention to advancing the status and equal protection of women in society, including incorporating advancement of maternal and child health into their national development strategy. "Women and children depend on the success of our combined effort to combat global health challenges," said Ambassador Al-Thani, "We need to enhance healthcare systems and national infrastructures to advance public health," especially for women. It's a global challenge but efforts must be coordinated and every nation has a role to play.

Ambassador Al-Thani was clear that though many, including Qatar, have taken strides toward bettering health for women, there is still much work to be done.



Paula DeCola, Pfizer  
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DeCola, senior director of external medical affairs at Pfizer, echoed these sentiments, adding that there needs to be a more holistic approach to women's health, broadening the conversation beyond the narrow focus of reproductive health. Instead, DeCola suggested we talk about the health of women—rather than women's health—throughout the life course. Investing in more medical research dedicated to women would be a good start. Most research, DeCola noted, is on men. She used cardiac disease as an example, where the majority of research is based on studies of men, but the symptoms for men and women vary greatly. "Women aren't just little men," she said, they need their own research.

Research on women's health, specifically, is crucial to understanding and treating women as whole beings-- "not just containers for another life or a vehicle to control population growth," said Langer, professor of global health and population and director of the Women & Health Initiative at the Harvard School of Public Health. This becomes particularly important when we consider the emerging epidemic of NCDs (non-communicable diseases), many of which are preventable by reducing smoking, prioritizing nutrition, and even decreasing indoor pollution. Women, she noted, play an important role as healthcare providers in many parts of the world, taking care of families, children and elder family members. The role of women in the health system can be greatly impacted by their own health. Health is not just a biomedical phenomenon, it's also social, said Langer.

Lakshminarayanan agreed, noting "Social determinants have a disproportionate effect on the lives of women and their children," and therefore, their communities. The senior adviser at the World Health Organization and Partnership of Maternal, Newborn and Child Health said gender inequality and violence against women should also be considered crucial obstacles to address, and that there should be a concerted effort to target adolescents—a critical time for potentially risky, health-related behaviors with long-term consequences—when thinking about the health of women. Universal health coverage, Lakshminarayanan hopes, will be an important part of the Post-2015 agenda for attaining healthy lives for all, at all ages. However, for it to be effective, "these packages of services need to be well-designed," she noted. A multidimensional approach, with key interventions delivered appropriately throughout the life course, are crucial to accelerating accomplishments in health.



Rama Lakshminarayanan, WHO; Ana Langer, Harvard School of Public Health; Paula DeCola, Pfizer  
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Ana Langer, Harvard School of Public Health  
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When asked by an expert from the Australian Mission to choose, if they could, just one health goal to push forward in the open working group for the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda, panelists supported broader, high-level targets that might address multiple parts of women's health. DeCola noted a goal on investing in women and girls would address larger inequality issues surrounding the health of women while Lakshminarayanan said she would advocate for ending preventable mortality. Langer also mentioned reducing the gender gap but said a goal for universal health coverage could be transformative, given it required not just access to care but also quality care for women.

To effectively address issues of health and healthcare, we need a firm handle on the means of implementation, said Lakshminarayanan, when asked by an audience member from the United States Mission how national governments could help support the international community; means of measurement for accountability, transfer of technology, and financing are all crucial to success and require country-level support and cooperation.

A better understanding of the role of the private sector is also crucial to the success of the Post-2015 agenda and making a robust effort toward improving the health of women. The Permanent Representative from the Mission of Canada to the United Nations asked panelists what it would take for the private sector to be willing to invest and lend their "brain power" to these goals. DeCola mentioned that the private sector has been part of solutions for many years and will continue to try to address development issues and provide access in unique and different ways. However, issues of infrastructure, she said, continue to provide a barrier for private sector commitments to be fully accessed and implemented. Barratt added that our health systems tend to be inflexible and that "sometimes it's difficult to unpack those systems to have a coalition of minds to create a solution."

It's evident that a siloed approach is no longer a suitable way to address the health of women. Perhaps, Barratt said, we need to be thinking not only about a life course approach, but also a generational approach, particularly noting the roles of women in the healthcare system and in their communities. For this, she suggested the NGOs on ageing and the NGOs in the youth movement might connect to help shape and define a constantly-changing health environment. Particularly as the Post-2015 development agenda becomes defined, addressing the biological, social, cultural, and environmental factors will be key to a transformative approach in progressing the health of women.

*By Elizabeth Tomaselli, Communications and Events Intern, United Nations Foundation*

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