



## **Giving Voice to the Voiceless: Grace Kodindo Calls Attention to Unmet Reproductive Health Needs in Africa**

### *Awarded Prestigious Millennium Development Goal Torch by Danish Government*

The statistics are astounding: More than 500,000 women die every year during pregnancy or childbirth, and virtually all live in developing countries. In May 2009, Grace Kodindo, MD, a Chadian OB/GYN and assistant clinical professor of Population and Family Health at the Mailman School of Public Health, toured six European countries, speaking on behalf of the women behind this grim statistic at screenings of the BBC documentary *Dead Mums Don't Cry*.

Dr. Kodindo's message throughout the tour was simple and direct: Women in poor countries die needlessly because they cannot access quality reproductive health (RH) care, a basic human right. As a global community, we know and can provide the necessary interventions to save lives.

*Dead Mums Don't Cry* follows Dr. Kodindo's work as the head of the primary maternity hospital in Chad in 2005, where she struggled to save women's lives in the face of profound poverty, a dearth of supplies, and minimal government support. During a touching moment in the documentary, after saving a 15-year-old from near death during delivery, Dr. Kodindo urgently notes, "We need people to change their way of thinking, especially about the status of women. Women are not something that we buy, we keep, we use to produce babies and then buy more of when they die. But [people] think like that."

For her commitment to achieving gender equity, Dr. Kodindo was awarded the prestigious Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 3 Champion Torch at the film screening in Copenhagen, Denmark on May 4. The award was presented to Dr. Kodindo by Danish Minister for Development Cooperation, Ulla Tørnæs; H.R.H. The Crown Princess of Denmark also attended the screening and ceremony. The MDG3 Champion Torch initiative comprises a critical part of Denmark's call to action on MDG3, whereby worthy representatives of governments, the private sector, civil society, the media, individuals from North and South, and international organizations are recognized for their commitment to MDG3 and for "doing something extra" in support of gender equality and women's empowerment. Recent MDG3 Champion Torch recipients include Ms. Valerie Kaboré, a film director and producer from Burkina Faso, and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

At each screening, *Dead Mums Don't Cry* was used to start an important discussion regarding comprehensive RH for all populations, including refugees and internally displaced persons and those in resource-limited settings throughout Africa and the world.

In Belgium, Dr. Kodindo spoke to members of parliament, students, and the general public, many of whom were shocked by the disproportionate number of women dying in Africa and the striking differences between healthcare in Europe and Africa. This proved to be a common reaction as Dr. Kodindo continued her tour in Norway and on to Ireland, speaking to academics and students at Trinity College in Dublin.

Dr. Kodindo challenged the Finnish, Swedish, and Irish parliaments to help attain worldwide access to comprehensive RH care, including adequate funding for and monitoring of RH services. Above all, she said, the international community must remain fiercely committed to its pledge of reducing maternal mortality by three-quarters and to achieving universal access to RH services by 2015. Both are targets of MDG5 - improving maternal health - which was established at the United Nations 2000 Millennium Summit.

This European tour was a joint initiative of the Reproductive Health Access, Information and Services in Emergencies (RAISE) Initiative and Countdown 2015. RAISE, developed by the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health and Marie Stopes International, works to ensure RH care in situations of conflict and disaster. At present, Dr. Kodindo works as the Medical and Advocacy Advisor for the RAISE Initiative. Countdown 2015 comprises a group of 18 European nongovernmental organizations that collaborate to secure funding for vital RH supplies and equipment.