

ICRH celebrates its 20th anniversary

5 December, 4pm in Het Pand, Gent (Belgium)

Speaking points of Mr. Alexander De Croo

(Belgian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Development Cooperation, Digital Agenda, Telecom and Postal Services)

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be here today.

During these last six weeks, I have been quite focused on sexual and reproductive health and rights. For a number of reasons:

- First of all, a rights-based approach is one of the central axes in my policy note. Human rights must be given a central place in Belgian Development Cooperation.
- Another reason, of course, is that we have so much expertise on the topic of sexual and reproductive rights in our country that is difficult not to talk about it. We also had World Aids Day last Monday.

- But I must admit that the subject has touched me personally. Let me tell two stories in particular that struck me during my first weeks in office.

The first story is that of Mira, a young woman of 28, living in Tanzania. Mira survived a gang rape when she was just 14 years young. During the rape, Mira was infected with HIV. Nine months later she gave birth to a son. Luckily at least, her son, born out of rape, was not infected with HIV during birth as Mira was treated with ARV-medication (= *Anti-RetroViral Drugs of aidsremmers*) on time.

Because of her early motherhood and the infection, Mira has not finished school. Her father stopped talking to her because he blames her for getting raped. She's trying to make the best of her life by raising her son and trying to set up a small jewelry shop.

It's not easy. As a single mother with HIV Mira can hardly get even the smallest credit to start up her shop. And a stable relationship long-term relationship with a man is even harder.

Another story that struck me, is the story of Jeanny, living in Niger. At the age of 5, her mum brought her to an older lady where she was victim of female genital mutilation (= *FGM*).

When she was 12, Jeanny was married off as the third wife of a 36

year old man. Birth control was and is a total taboo, inaccessible and unaffordable. So Jeanny bore her first child one year later, when she was just 13 years old.

Now at 23, she's been pregnant already 11 times: she had 3 miscarriages and 2 of her children died before the age of 2. Still, she has 6 children to raise and she is pregnant again with number 12.

But the FGM and the early and frequent child bearing have left her injured and incontinent. She is anxious to give birth again. The pain, the complications, the infections, the blood loss, the reconstruction of the FGM after each birth... she is scared and stressed.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is because of Mira, Jeanny and millions of other girls and women that are being violated, often over and over again, that we are here tonight.

As a policy maker, I have a particular political responsibility, which I will take up. For example, in drawing attention to sexual and reproductive health and rights in the running up to the Post-2015

Development Agenda.

But political actions remain insignificant when they are not complemented and reinforced by people on the ground, in academia, in society that stand up and break this cycle of brutal violence.

The International Center for Reproductive Health (ICRH) has shown important leadership on this issue these last 20 years.

By conducting research in the area of sexual and reproductive rights based upon the global agenda on population and development, established in 1994 in Cairo, improves people's lives.

The value of research cannot be stressed enough: the results contribute to knowledge about the root causes of these human rights issues and are vital to effectively address them.

I also value the Centre for their long-term strategies by increasing local capacity, supported with federal funding through projects of University Development Cooperation.

The Centre is also an active partner of Because Health, the Belgian platform for civil society organizations that focus on health in developing countries. ICHR presides the working group on sexual and reproductive health and rights, and provides appreciated information

for my administration and our policy work.

And of course, there is the relentless dynamism of professor Marleen Temmerman, founder and driving force behind the Centre.

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Professor/Marleen, engaged researchers, collaborators of the last 20 years,

I would like to say a sincere thank you. Thank you for all your efforts to change the life of Mira, Jeanny and all these other girls and women for the better.

And please: stay committed, stay involved, stay engaged.

So that tomorrow's children can be spared from the hardship their mothers had to endure.

Thank you.