



Africa in her sights

Occasionally it takes a shining star to shed light on injustice. The fact that tens of thousands of African women were suffering through the lack of a basic medical procedure stirred Nataile Imbruglia to champion their cause

Antipodean superstar Nataile Imbruglia has thrown her considerable A-list weight behind the UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) campaign to tackle the childbearing injury obstetric fistula. Affecting women across Africa and Asia, it has lasting repercussions on their lives and that of their communities. In the West, fistula is virtually unheard of

Above Nataile is shown plans for the construction of a proposed enlarged facility to a West African hospital providing fistula treatment services; **Inset** UNFPA volunteers offer support and medical facilities to sufferers of obstetric fistula

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– in Africa, its effects are devastating. “I just think that every woman has the right to a safe labour,” Imbruglia explains. “As a woman, I can't imagine not being able to have a caesarean section if I was having an obstructed labour.” It's this obstructed labour, combined with the often huge distances from villages to any sort of medical facilities, plus a lack of experienced midwives in outlying communities that leads to the condition. “This should just not be happening in this day and age,” she adds emphatically. Obstetric fistula develops when the birth canal becomes obstructed

during labour and the baby puts pressure on the mother's inner organs. Many hours – or even days – of painful labour causes a tear in the birth canal, and the baby is usually stillborn. If untreated, the fistula results in incontinence and other medical problems that often carry a huge stigma of shame for the woman. The Campaign to End Fistula, one of the UNFPA's core mandates, is also backed by Richard Branson's Virgin Unite fundraising. Since 2003, and with Nataile as spokesperson since 2004, the UNFPA has worked to educate communities and ultimately eradicate



FR » L'Afrique dans son champ de vision

La superstar australienne soutient la campagne menée par le Fonds des Nations Unies pour la Population (UNFPA) en vue de réduire le nombre de femmes qui souffrent d'une fistule obstétricale, survenant à la suite d'une grossesse compliquée. Ce problème exceptionnel en Occident, touche deux millions de femmes dans plus de 40 pays d'Afrique, et chaque année environ 50 000 nouveaux cas sont diagnostiqués.

"Je pense que chaque femme a droit à un accouchement sans risque," explique Imbruglia.

Les fistules peuvent se développer lorsque le canal permettant le passage du nouveau-né est obstrué, créant une pression prolongée sur les organes internes de la mère. Le canal se déchire et bien souvent le fœtus meurt. Vu les longues distances pour accéder aux soins médicaux et un manque d'expérience des sages femmes, bien souvent ces cas ne sont pas traités.

Depuis 2004, Natalie s'est portée volontaire comme porte-parole de la Campagne de l'UNFPA pour éliminer la Fistule, visant à éradiquer son incidence et sa prévalence dans les pays en développement. "En tant que femme, cette question me touchait particulièrement, confie-t-elle, et j'étais atterrée par le peu d'attention que je recevais."

Le problème est que les femmes non soignées sont souvent rejetées, ainsi que leurs familles. Selon Natalie "pour la plupart de ces femmes, la maternité représente une des choses les plus importantes culturellement, et sans traitement, cette possibilité leur est déniée. Leur rendre leur maternité est tout à fait incroyable."

À Londres, en novembre dernier, un événement organisé pour collecter des fonds a permis de rassembler £500 000, ce mois d'avril une grande campagne de sensibilisation a été lancée à Bruxelles, et cet été, Imbruglia séjournera à nouveau en Afrique.

Sa détermination est sans limites. "À présent, j'ai rencontré ces femmes," affirme-t-elle "et pour rien au monde je ne les laisserais tomber. J'en fais une affaire personnelle."

Above Natalie visits a training centre set up to help educate women and girls providing them with skills, training and literacy classes; **Below** Local doctors are being trained so that they can treat patients with fistula

the condition in the developing world.

The task of treating the condition is enormous, with at least two million women already affected and an estimated 50,000 new cases diagnosed each year in over 40 countries in Africa and beyond. The stigma that affects women suffering from the condition means that in poor, rural communities a problem that is virtually unheard of in the Western world is wreaking huge personal and social havoc.

The link between the UNFPA campaign and Natalie Imbruglia soon becomes obvious. "It felt that, as a woman, this issue struck a chord with me," she says. "It didn't seem like it was being talked about at all. I was alarmed by the lack of attention it was receiving. I felt that my voice would be better used for these women in Africa because no one was really talking about it – it's a bit of an 'icky' subject for most people."

The problem extends beyond the immediate physical condition. Fistula often ostracises the women affected by it and their families – provided they are fortunate enough to have their husbands and relatives standing by them.

"Support is paramount. If you've been ostracised, it's a daunting future that you face. To be honest, they're so elated that someone is helping them, they're just so happy. To see their dignity restored is a wonderful thing. For many of these women, to be a mother is the most important thing culturally in their lives, something that is denied to them without treatment. To give motherhood back to them is just amazing."

Buoyed by a huge London fundraising event last November, which raised over €700,000, this April saw a huge advertising, fundraising and public-awareness campaign launching in Brussels. As part of this renewed momentum, Imbruglia will be



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journeying back to Africa in the summer.

"The ultimate goal is to wipe out fistula for good," she says, "or make it as rare in Africa as it is in the Western world. We can see the goals being achieved, which is wonderful. We've had meetings with the husbands and fathers to tackle the taboos of the condition and a lot of them heard about it on the radio, about the hospitals where they can go. We have to work with the men and the communities' spiritual leaders, the emirs. A lot of attention is paid to them, so they have to be involved. Religion is such a big part of everyone's lives there. If we can see that we have the support of the emirs, then it becomes really positive."

Considering that Imbruglia has already had a glittering career in her 32 years, including multi-million album sales and numerous acting credits as well as a successful marriage to Daniel Johns, frontman of rock group Silverchair, she considers the juxtaposition between her professional and her humanitarian work a logical one.

"I always wanted to do something of worth. But I've always had a fear of not being able to do something properly. I think I needed to get to an age where I was old enough to handle it and know that I could be a good spokesperson for a cause," she says.

Her determination is tangible, and the campaign is on course to make a real difference to Africa's women. "I've met these women now," she states, "and I can't let them down. It's personal."

Above Natalie's connection to the women whose lives she is helping to change is "personal" now, she says; **Below** With husband Daniel Johns, lead singer with rock group Silverchair

NL» Afrika in het vizier

Australische superster Natalie Imbruglia steunt de campagne van het bevolkingsfonds van de Verenigde Naties (UNFPA) om vrouwen met obstetrische fistels te genezen. Het bevallingsletsel is in het Westen vrijwel onbestaand, maar treft twee miljoen vrouwen in meer dan 40 Afrikaanse landen. Naar schatting zijn er jaarlijks 50.000 nieuwe gevallen.

"Elke vrouw heeft recht op een veilige bevalling", aldus Imbruglia.

De aandoening treedt op wanneer het geboortekanaal versperd raakt en de inwendige organen van de moeder onder druk komen. Het geboortekanaal scheurt en de baby wordt vaak doodgeboren. Omdat medische hulp ver weg is en ervaren vroedvrouwen schaars zijn, blijft de kwaal vaak onbehandeld.

Imbruglia is al sinds 2004 woordvoester voor de UNFPA-campagne die de aandoening in de ontwikkelingslanden bestrijdt. "Het probleem raakte mij als vrouw meteen", vertelde ze. "Het is zorgwekkend dat dit zo weinig aandacht krijgt."

De kwaal leidt vaak tot de uitstoting van de vrouwen en hun gezinnen. Imbruglia legt uit: "Veel van deze vrouwen beschouwen het moederschap als het hoogste culturele goed en zonder behandeling verliezen ze dat. Het is fantastisch dat zij een nieuwe kans krijgen leven te geven en moeder te worden."

Een geldinzameling in Londen in november 2006 leverde 500.000 pond op. In april 2007 startte een

grootscheepse sensibilisatieactie in Brussel en deze zomer bezoekt Imbruglia Afrika opnieuw.

Ze wil hier mee doorgaan. "Ik heb deze vrouwen ontmoet en kan ze niet teleurstellen. Ik heb me geëngageerd."

For more information about the Campaign to End Fistula or to make a contribution, visit endfistula.org



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