

Art for women's health



The difference in the sexual and reproductive health status of women in developed and developing countries is vast. This disparity represents one of the starkest examples of social injustice of our time. About 530 000 pregnant women and 3 million newborn babies die every year because of complications related to pregnancy and childbirth. Almost all these deaths happen in developing countries.¹ Similarly, sexually transmitted infections, reproductive-tract infections, cervical cancer induced by the human papillomavirus, and other gynaecological disorders disproportionately affect the most vulnerable and disenfranchised populations of women.

Much could be done to rectify these situations if more people were informed about and mobilised to act towards the improvement of global sexual and reproductive health. Greater advocacy and support for sexual and reproductive health interventions—including information-based campaigns, for example—could lead to substantial changes in the dire conditions many women and their newborn babies currently endure. The intention of the Art for Health project is to contribute to these efforts in an innovative way. Specifically, the project uses contemporary art as a medium to increase people's awareness of sexual and reproductive health issues around the world, particularly those that negatively affect the lives of women and their families.

Participants at the XVIII World Congress of the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO)—in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Nov 5–10, 2006—will be able to view the first set of contemporary artworks produced for the Art for Health project at WHO's stand. The project is actively endorsed by the WHO Department of Reproductive Health and Research (RHR), which has commissioned 18 paintings and is sponsoring the first exhibition of a selection at the congress. The department is also using the artwork for promotional material and publications.

The paintings that will be featured at the congress portray women from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds. Within the images are messages by the women themselves that call on the viewer to join them in a unified effort to better their lives and those of future generations. The statements incorporated into the two representative pieces accompanying this Comment are modifications of famous quotes of outspoken women²

and exemplify these interconnected themes of solidarity, agency, and collective action. "Same sky, same women", for example, promotes awareness of an underlying tie connecting women around the world (figure 1). "I want to fight with dreams in my soul, with you" furthers this sentiment by asking viewers to engage in partnerships with women living in low-resource nations, partnerships that are characterised by mutual respect and geared towards the improvement of their sexual and reproductive health (figure 2).

The paintings to be displayed at the congress are by Elisabetta Farina, an accomplished artist dedicated to the documentation of women's struggles to achieve gender equity. Through artistic expression originally developed during the Pop Art movement, Farina produces empowering portraits of women seeking to confront and challenge their adverse life circumstances. The positive and appealing images of women she has created for Art for Health force us to reconsider stereotypical notions of underprivileged women as hapless

Published Online
November 5, 2006
DOI:10.1016/S0140-
6736(06)69642-6



Figure 1: Same sky, same women
Elisabetta Farina, 2006, acrylic on canvas.

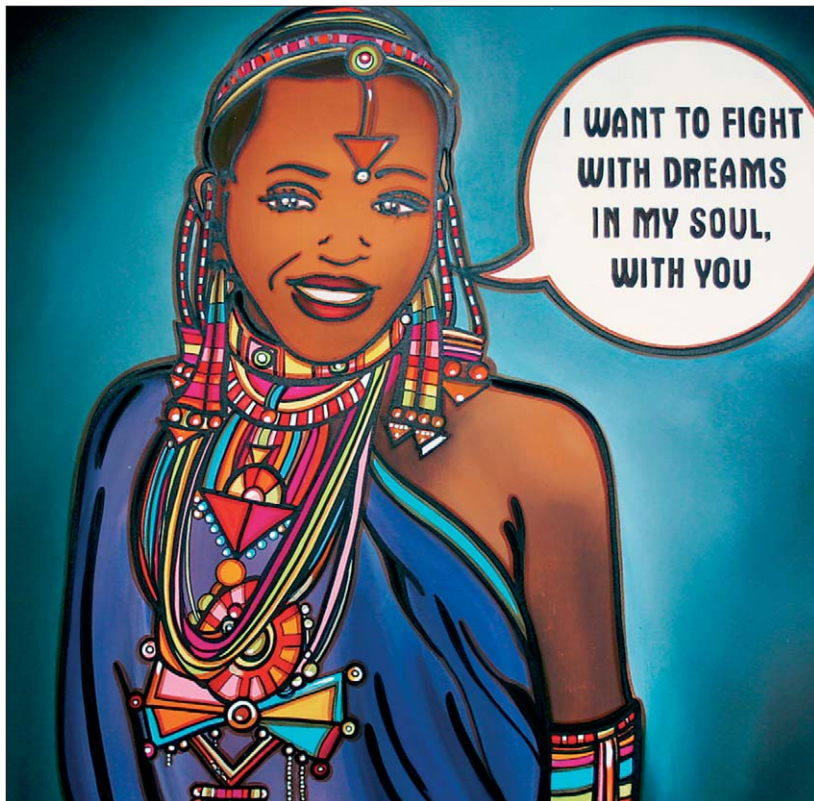


Figure 2: I want to fight with dreams in my soul, with you
Elisabetta Farina, 2006, acrylic on canvas.

victims, asking us instead to view them as willing partners in the advancement of women’s sexual and reproductive health. Her use of text in the paintings also works in a non-traditional way to invite the viewer to join a growing community committed to addressing the existing sexual and reproductive health disparities between developed and developing nations.

The idea of using contemporary art to effectively disseminate sexual and reproductive health-related information to a target audience beyond medical and

public-health professions originated from a collaboration between Farina, Willy Pasini, Francesco Aureli, and the three of us (MM, JAHR, AC). In his role as project director, Pasini—a sexologist and author of several books on women’s health—has concentrated the efforts of the Art for Health team on the creation of powerful images that make the complex biological and sociopolitical issues surrounding many sexual and reproductive health conditions more accessible.

Further exhibitions of the artwork created for Art for Health are scheduled to take place in several cities. For information about this project and the dates and venues of future showings, please visit the RHR website.³

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The views expressed in this Comment are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of WHO or its Member States. We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

- 1 WHO Department of Reproductive Health and Research. Reproductive health strategy. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2004.
- 2 1000 PeaceWomen Across the Globe. 1000 peacewomen across the globe. <http://www.1000peacewomen.org/typo/index.php?id=38&L=1> (accessed Oct 31, 2006).
- 3 World Health Organization. Art for health: contemporary art and women’s health. <http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/artforhealth/index.htm> (accessed Oct 31, 2006).