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The Eve of World Population Day.

My name is Marilyn Peri, and I am from the Rural Community in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea.

I live in a village with no access to reliable roads or health services. To get to the nearest health facility, you must walk anywhere from 2–to–12 hours depending on where you live. And, this facility in fact does not even have a doctor on staff. In our district of 350,000 people, there is no doctor. To reach a doctor, you must drive at least 13 hours to a provincial hospital.

I am a nurse by training, and I work for the Community Based Health Care program, which is a project of the Nazarene Church.

As a Christian organization, we work to improve health, especially primary health care in our area. We also are very committed to improving reproductive health and confronting HIV/AIDS, because:

- Firstly, we recognize that the lack of health facilities in our rural communities has led to high maternal death in our area.

For example: I mentioned how far away the hospital is from where I live. This means that many of mothers die before reaching a hospital. This is something I have witnessed too many times. About two years ago, when I was conducting a midwives' training at the district hospital, a woman came in who had been in labor for 56 hours—almost three days of labor. Because there was no doctor, they could not do anything. And, because there was no ambulance or police vehicle, I borrowed a car from a local Catholic priest and drove this woman 13 hours to the Provincial hospital. Unfortunately, the baby died but in this case, we were able to save the mother's life.

- Second, my organization also focuses on HIV& AIDS. This is because Papua New Guinea has the highest rate of HIV infection in all of the Pacific Islands.

- Third, we recognize that there is low understanding and awareness of Family Planning in my community because of the lack of education on reproductive health, and also because of cultural taboos.

To address these problems, my organization works in a number of ways to improve family health.

- We train members of the community using a bottom-up approach. We train community health volunteers to go door-to-door, educating families about health topic including family planning, and also providing family planning commodities.
- We also involve men in our trainings, because in my culture they are gatekeepers for women who want to access any health services. We also include Church leaders and young men. And, we have seen real changes in the attitudes of men and boys who have gone through the training.

For example: We have had many men at the beginning of the training who said they would never allow their wives to use contraceptives. They said it would cause their wives to be unfaithful, and they would become polygamous and marry additional women if their wife had access to contraceptives. But after learning about the effects of repeated child bearing on their wives' health—and how it might affect their lives and that of their children if she died of poor health—we found that many men sympathize and support their wives getting family planning services.

- Finally, we help and support women through skills training (sewing & cooking), food security and nutrition, and raising of some affordable livestock (such as rabbits & chickens) for better family nutrition.

Even with this success, there are still many challenges:

- We find that our primary challenge is still male attitudes and the low status of women. This is because there is still some strong beliefs in my traditional community that wives are the property of their husbands and they have no right to access to family planning without their consent. Among some husbands, there is a lack of understanding and feelings of insecurity, which can result in violence against women if they take contraceptives without the husband's consent.

But, as I mentioned, we are breaking through this barrier with education and awareness.

Clearly, we have much more education to do but we are encouraged because we have seen real change in the attitudes among those men who have been through our training.

We find that men want to have health families, and want their wives to be healthy, so with time, we believe there is hope.

Having shared my work and stories I want you to know that we are saving lives with our work but we need your help. We need help to empower organizations in rural areas who are really implementing, providing and educating women, men and boys about health, especially reproductive health.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to allow me to talk about my organization and what we do on this very special occasion of World Population Day.