

Profile

Suzanne Petroni: pushing equity for girls and young women

Next year, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), based in Washington, DC, USA, will celebrate its 40th birthday, and singing loudly will be its Senior Director for Gender Population Development, Suzanne Petroni. "Our main focus is on promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls, particularly in low-income and middle-income countries", she says. "Our work goes deep into the causes and contexts of gender inequity, as we seek to better understand, for example, how to end the harmful practice of child marriage, how to increase access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, and why it is that suicide has overtaken maternal mortality as the leading cause of death among adolescent girls globally."

At ICRW, Petroni has recently worked on a project in partnership with the World Bank in urban Bangladesh. "What we are seeing in the slums of Dhaka is a grim picture of girls, who are often being married off by 15 years of age, typically working long hours with low pay in garment factories, with young children at home and limited or no access to family planning services, while at the same time being at risk of sexual violence at home or on the street", she explains. Like much of her work at ICRW, this research aims to influence public health policy and, importantly, will help local organisations use the research to strengthen programmatic efforts on the ground and promote advocacy work.

Petroni's passion for women's rights was evident in her upbringing. Born in Queens, New York City, USA, she was brought up in the suburbs of New Jersey to "good feminist parents who instilled in me the belief that, as a girl, and then a woman, I could achieve anything I wanted to". Playing sport as a girl strengthened that belief, and made her realise the power of sport in building personal and interpersonal qualities. She champions the idea of giving girls access to sports as a means of empowerment. In Mumbai, she has worked in a programme where girls gain skills and build their confidence by playing kabaddi. "It is quite a rough sport, but we have seen how girls not only enjoy the participation and physicality of playing it, but also how it helps foster a sense of cohesion with peers. After playing kabaddi, girls will often get together to discuss and promote the concepts of gender equity and women's rights", she says.

Academically, Petroni studied International Relations in the liberal environment of the University of California, Davis; after completing a Masters in Foreign Service at Georgetown University, and a brief stint at NASA, she moved into international policy work on gender equality at the US Department of State, where the then Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, for whom Petroni had served as a research assistant at Georgetown, was a major influence. "The 1990s were halcyon times for women's rights in

US foreign policy", Petroni recalls. "Under President Clinton, Hillary Clinton, and Secretary Albright I was able to help develop policies to support adolescents' and women's sexual and reproductive health and rights across the world." María Antonieta Alcade, Director of Advocacy for the International Planned Parenthood Federation's Western Hemisphere Region, worked with Petroni as a youth advocate for gender equality in Mexico when Petroni was at the US Department of State, and recalls: "I had the great pleasure of meeting Suzanne Petroni at the ICPD+5 process where she was a member of the US delegation and I was a youth activist. She was one of the strongest supporters of youth voices then and her commitment to youth empowerment and sexual and reproductive rights has been fundamental in the advancement of these agendas ever since."

But Petroni recalls the shock at the US Department of State after the arrival of George W Bush to the White House in 2001. "Suddenly we went into reverse gear, having to abandon policies and programmes that we had spent so long developing and supporting", she says. Bush's reinstatement of the Mexico City Policy, which severely restricted US funding of overseas family planning services, had Petroni heading for the door, and the start of a new phase of her career. At the non-profit Summit Foundation, Petroni designed and led grant-making programmes on youth leadership and sexual and reproductive health. A focus of her work was in the creation of a youth leadership programme in Central America, which enabled young people to act as role models to their peers, helping to spread the values and rights of gender equity in communities. Seeking a deeper grounding in the evidence base for her work, Petroni obtained a PhD from George Washington University in 2011, before joining ICRW the following year.

The 2030 agenda is seen by Petroni as a golden opportunity for progress: "It is welcome that adolescent girls and sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights are explicit in the Sustainable Development Goals." But she adds that "our major challenge now is to articulate and transform the broad terminology of the 2030 agenda to the next level, to establish and track closely indicators of gender equality and of young women's health and rights". Next year's *Lancet* Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing, of which Petroni will be an author, will be the roadmap to set out how the current generation of science and policy experts can transform the lives of future generations of young people. "We have a huge opportunity to amplify the progress we have made in recent years on a truly global stage", she says. "It is such an amazing time to be working in the field of gender equity."

Richard Lane



See [Editorial](#) page 2029

See [Comment](#) page 2031

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