

Women's health: addressing the challenge

A special Commission was set up by WHO Afro office under the leadership of Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. It reported in December. Bryan Pearson attended the launch, and summarises the recommendations

Women's health has risen high on the international development agenda in recent years, as the evidence mounted of the key contribution they made to society. A host of different initiatives have followed all targetting initiatives to move the agenda forward.

This report will hopefully stand tall amidst the activity. It was commissioned following a resolution taken at the 2008 WHO Afro Regional Committee meeting held in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

The Commission, consisting of 16 experts, was mandated to gather evidence on the key factors influencing women's health in the African Region, and to recommend the appropriate actions across all sectors of society in order to achieve rapid and sustainable improvements in women's health. The Commission was also mandated to make the case for extensive investment in women's health as a contribution towards social and economic development.

In introducing the report, WHO Regional Director for Africa, Dr Luis G Sambo told the audience that the report 'demonstrates the enormous role of African women in social and economic development and the potential to achieve much more if they are healthier. It highlights the interplay between biological and social determinants of women's health and argues that women's health needs to go beyond sexual and reproductive concerns. It identifies critical actions that need to be taken to improve the social status of women and promote gender equity.'

He went on 'The report also points out the need to ensure that decisions impacting on women's health are taken at the highest political level. More specifically, it calls for policy orientations, legislative frameworks, and inter-sectoral actions that promote women's health. The importance of empowering women by educating the girl child; increasing representation of women in decision-making positions and addressing gender-based cultural and social barriers are emphasised in the report. The report also gives insights into why investing in maternal and child health is a wise health and economic policy decision. It notes that women health is a human right. Saving a mother's life also means saving her children, who are ten times more likely to die when the mother dies.'

And so to the report itself. It argues that women's health is the foundation for social and economic development within the African region. It argues that it should be promoted and defended as a human right,

and focuses in particular on the unacceptably high level of maternal mortality in sub-Saharan Africa. It calls for a fundamental rethinking of approaches to improving women's health informed by an understanding of the sociocultural determinants that are so important in shaping it.

A core contention of the report is that a range of adverse socioeconomic pressures, including inadequate healthcare, prevents African women from realising their full potential. Interventions to improve women's health, focusing solely on 'public health' issues miss the fundamental interconnectedness of health with other factors in society; recognising this interconnectedness is the starting point for emphasising the multisectoral approach required in the African region.

The report takes a multidisciplinary approach to its evidence gathering, looking at challenges faced by women at different stages in their lives. The approach tries to highlight how key interventions at early stages can have a positive impact both on their health and, subsequently, on their socioeconomic status.



Addressing the Challenge of Women's Health in Africa

Report of the Commission on Women's Health in the African Region



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Key findings

1. African women bear an unacceptably huge burden of disease and death

It says that 'the state of maternal health in Africa is dismal, with the region accounting for more than half of all maternal deaths worldwide each year, and sadly the situation is not improving significantly'. It goes on to note that while HIV/AIDS and maternal mortality continue to predominate in the morbidity and mortality statistics of the region, other problems loom with non-communicable diseases, such as cardiovascular complications, cancers, diabetes, and chronic respiratory diseases growing rapidly in their incidence.

2. Underinvestment in women's healthcare is one of the many challenges to be overcome

The report shows that the failure of health systems in the majority of African countries to provide accessible care of adequate quality is one of the main drivers of the adverse trends in women's health indicators. Health funding remains woefully inadequate and the majority of modern healthcare services in the region are clinic-based, physician-oriented and urban-centred, leaving the predominantly rural population woefully underserved.

Women are the main providers of healthcare. They are the primary caregivers at home and in the formal healthcare system. However, they are rarely represented in executive or management level positions, and tend to carry out lower level tasks which, though essential, do not match their full managerial potential and other abilities.

3. A multisectoral approach is imperative to improve women's health

Ill health is both a symptom and a cause of women's disempowerment. Lack of information and economic poverty also play an important part, feeding into sickness just as they are fed by it. The report shows that by simple changes within the household, dramatic improvement in women's lives can result. For example, procuring household appliances is a labour-saving investment that will enable girls to spend more time on their education, and women to focus on their children or work in more economically productive activities.

4. Women's socioeconomic empowerment is essential to achieve better health outcomes

Educating women promotes socioeconomic empowerment. However the empowerment will be incomplete unless women are also facilitated to participate fully in the job market and can enjoy the fruits of their own labour.

5. Violence against women is an unacceptable degradation of women's rights.

At its worst, gender discrimination takes the form of male-on-female violence. Sexual coercion and sexual violence are prevalent in many countries and tend to increase in crisis situations such as natural disasters and armed conflicts. Violence against women becomes particularly pernicious in certain harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, estimated to be inflicted on more than 2 million girls between the ages of 3 and 12, every year. Over 92 million girls and

women above the age of 10 are thought to be living with the indignity and pain resulting from such abuse.

6. There are immense socioeconomic benefits from improving women's health

There is a large socioeconomic benefit to be derived from improving women's health. This benefit finds expression in greater productivity by a health workforce. Because women are the dominant source of farm labour in the region, and the mainstay of Africa's economy as a whole, investing in their health would generate significant economic gains.

The Commission also made a heartfelt plea for investment in data gathering. In an increasingly evidence-based environment they had found it difficult at times to back up their assertions with hard rather than empirical evidence. Because women bear a large burden of disease during their reproductive period, monitoring their health outcomes at this phase, and evaluating the quality of care provided to them really does need doing better.

So what is new you might ask? And the truth is that there is little that is new here, however its significance may be in that the report has been assembled under the Chairmanship of a serving Head of State. The challenge now is: can WHO Africa Region either directly or via the EU, get the buy in from African governments that it so needs if this is not to be just another report that gathers dust on a shelf.

The five pages of recommendations for action are also not rocket science: good governance and leadership to improve, promote, support and invest in women's health. Policy and legislative initiatives to translate this into real action. Multisectoral interventions; empowerment of both girls and women to be effective agents of their own interests; and the improvement of responsiveness of the healthcare system to address the health needs of women. The report notes that civil society can achieve a lot, but governments must lead. Without the political will, maternal health will remain a serious blot on Africa's landscape.

Members of the Commission

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