

Women's health at centre stage



Women and men are inseparable partners in ensuring the continuity of humanity. Women as mothers have unique roles from conception, pregnancy and child birth. They are the pillars of families, providing newly born children with critical nutrition and support. Women also provide men and children with homes, where the characters and values of people are shaped and communities are built. It is evident that giving priority to the health of women must take centre stage in all societies and health systems.

Reproductive health is defined by WHO as “a responsible, satisfying, and safe sex life with capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so”. There are health risks at every stage of the cascade in this definition which call for support from the health system and society. These risks include infections, fistula, infertility and unwanted pregnancies with related mental health implications that impact women's wellbeing and power dynamics in society.

Women also have cancers and tumours affecting the uterus and cervix, ovaries and breasts, while ageing in women comes with post-menopausal disorders and decalcified fragile bones.

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) made significant progress in women's health indices during the MDG period, when maternal mortality (MMR) and morbidity declined by 45%. However, this still leaves Africa far behind other regions of the world. The current MMR figures for SSA average 1000 deaths per 100,000 births compared with 25/100,000 in other regions. This is a matter for concern and shame.

Annually, half a million women die as a result of complications of pregnancy and childbirth: 99% of these deaths occur in developing countries, where preventable pregnancy-related complications remain the leading causes of death for women during reproductive years. These include haemorrhage, infections, preeclampsia and obstructed labour resulting in obstetric fistula afflicting mostly teenage mothers with devastating health and social consequences.

The WHO definition of reproductive health makes no reference to the menstrual cycle, an important component of women's health. This is a cyclical physiological phenomenon when the uterus prepares for pregnancy. Proper management of periods is an

important subject in women's health, having both financial costs for accessing period products and opportunity costs when women and girls cannot attend school or other activities due to period-related issues. Period management and access to period products should become a national issue so that facilities are made available for women and girls as needed. In 2021, Scotland became the first country in the world to make period products free for anyone who needs them, and some countries, including some in Africa, have eliminated the tax on period products. There should be a global campaign to destigmatise menstruation and increase easy and free access to period products.

Taking the first step

What should SSA countries do to achieve SDGs related to women's health? The first step is to raise the place and value of women in African societies. African communities should know that maternal deaths are preventable – not acts of God. They should cause their governments to prioritise women's health and fully implement to scale Safe Motherhood practices. Each death in every health facility and every village should be fully investigated and lessons learnt shared with communities.

It is well known that the acid test of a well-functioning health system is one that can mount a safe maternal delivery including an obstetric emergency in the middle of the night. It is also known that countries with the highest maternal mortality rates are also those with the lowest use of family planning methods. Therefore, access to these services through effective Community Health programmes is a high priority. Family planning prevents adverse outcomes and maternal and newborn deaths by reducing women's exposure to high-risk pregnancies and unintended and closely spaced pregnancies. Family planning will also support the achievement of the demographic dividend in countries by lowering the high population growth rates.

There are important interventions in other sectors that contribute to improving women's health, including ensuring that all girls are supported to go to school for as long as possible. The whole-of-society approaches should also be employed to engage cultural and religious leaders. The media are an important player in getting messages out to the population and keeping the visibility of women's health high at all times so that it becomes an issue over which political elections are won and lost and the quality of leadership is judged. Healthy women make healthy and happy communities.

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I need you here...

Taking your HIV medication EVERY DAY can help you be here when I grow up. I heard there's a "Triple Pill" that can make it easier.



Take a Triple a Day. Every Day.

Ask your Doctor if there is a Triple Pill for YOU.

The 2014 Namibian Guidelines for Antiretroviral Therapy and The World Health Organization recommend Fixed-Dose Combination Therapy Consolidated Guidelines on the Use of Antiretroviral Drugs for Treating and Preventing HIV Infection, Geneva, World Health Organization, 2013, (<http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/guidelines/arv2013/en>)

