

Health

Women's health is an indicator of a nation's political, social, and economic development. As women are half of any given nation's population, productivity is lowered when women's health is poor. Women's health is important from human rights and economics perspectives. Nearly 380,000 women die from preventable causes related to pregnancy each year. The majority of maternal deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. However, maternal deaths declined by one-third globally between 1990 and 2008. Also, while women are marrying later throughout the developing world, large unmet family planning needs remain.

Unequal in Health

Women live longer than men, statistics show, but they may spend a greater proportion of their lives in poor health for a variety of reasons, attributable less to biological differences than to poverty and gender discrimination. Poor families may invest less in their daughters, giving them less nutrition, health care and education than their sons. Such disadvantages early in life have long-term consequences for girls' health and well-being. For example, adolescent childbearing, common in countries and communities that condone child marriage, poses health risks and limits life prospects for the teen mothers and their children. If women are undernourished they risk having low birth-weight babies who, in turn, face a higher risk of early death and poor health. An added threat to the health of women and girls exists in countries where there is a cultural preference for sons, such as China and India. Sex-selective abortions and female infanticide are responsible for millions of "missing girls." The resulting shortage of women relative to men can have alarming social repercussions. An April 2011 report in *The Economist* cited evidence that a skewed sex ratio in India has led to increased trafficking of girls, among other abuses (UNFPA, 2004).

Pregnancy and childbirth take a heavy toll on women's health in the developing world. According to 2010 estimates by the World Health Organization (WHO), 358,000 women die of preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth every year; 99 percent of these deaths are in developing countries. In contrast, in developed countries where women deliver their babies in hospitals and have access to care for pregnancy complications, maternal deaths are extremely rare.

The vast majority of the world's maternal deaths occur in the two poorest regions: sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. In sub-Saharan Africa, where high fertility multiplies the dangers that mothers face over a lifetime, one in 31 women is likely to die as a consequence of pregnancy or childbirth (WHO, 2010). In developed countries, that chance is one in 4,300. Outside of Africa, Afghanistan is the riskiest place on earth to become pregnant and bear children, with a one in 11 lifetime chance of dying from pregnancy-related causes.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic also threatens women's health in poor countries and communities. Where the virus is spread through heterosexual contact, women are more vulnerable to infection than men for physiological and social reasons, such as women's economic dependence on men, their lack of power to ask male partners to practice safer sex. According to a 2009 UNAIDS report, "An estimated 50 million women in Asia are at risk of becoming infected with HIV from their intimate partners who engage in high-risk sexual behaviors."

Recent Trends Encouraging

The good news is that today women are marrying later throughout the developing world. They are delaying first births and having fewer children than their mothers did. These trends reflect the fact that more girls are staying in school and more women and couples are practicing family planning. Estimates from WHO in 2010 revealed that maternal deaths dropped by about one-third globally from 1990 to 2008, thanks to a number of factors such as increased availability of contraception, prenatal care and skilled assistance during childbirth. Countries as diverse as Bolivia, China, Eritrea, Iran, Romania and Vietnam have made remarkable progress. Much more work remains to be done, however, for all countries to meet the Millennium Development Goal to reduce maternal deaths by three-fourths (compared with 1990 levels) by 2015.

More to be Done

Where countries have prioritized women's health in national policy, great progress has been made. Women should be encouraged to recognize and speak out about their health care needs, so policymakers may learn and take action.

Reference: BOOK title "Global Women's Issues: Women in the World today, extended version"