

A Preview of the Problem:
The Burden on Women in Developing Nations
Summary of WHO: Women and Health Report 2009
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In 2009, the World Health Organization published a comprehensive report on the worldwide health of today's women. It seeks to demonstrate and explain what we know now about the health of women in different regions of the world. It is difficult to track changes in women's health due to the lack of records available in low-income settings. For this reason, WHO examines the current status of the world's women while setting an agenda for future progress. From their research, we can highlight a few key health factors facing today's women.

Women still face considerable inequalities in the development of ill-health and healthcare. Although women generally live longer than men, they face substantial discrimination in many parts of the world that prevent them from accessing the same health care as their male counterparts. Additionally, women experience unique biological and social processes that carry health risks and require special health care. Gender-based inequalities in education, income, and employment also limit the ability of women to properly address many of their unique health issues.

Geographic location also creates great disparities in women's health issues. At every age, women in developed countries live longer and are less likely to suffer ill-health than those in low-income countries. The current data on maternal mortality clearly demonstrates this imbalance--99% of maternal deaths occurring each year happen in developing countries. And even in the developed world, gaps in female health are found to be critically affected by social and economic factors.

Sexuality and reproduction are central to women's health. During the reproductive years, women's health has a great effect on not only women themselves but also on society's next generation. In developing countries, complications of pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death in young women between 15 and 19 years old. But with the appropriate care, maternal mortality can be a very rare event. In industrialized countries, there are on average nine maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, whereas this figure can be as high as 1,000 or more per 100,000 live births in the most disadvantaged countries. Although information is scarce, the records available show that there has been a decline in maternal mortality in some regions since the 1990s. This decline can be found most notably in Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. Although reasons for this decline are complex and often specific to each region, data does demonstrate a few trends--increased use of contraception to delay and limit childbearing, better access to and use of high-quality healthcare services, and broader social changes such as increased education and enhanced status for women.

Globally, HIV/AIDS remains the leading cause of death among women of reproductive age. Women are also more susceptible to sexually transmitted infections and are often treated later and go longer without treatment than their male counterparts. Women's biological vulnerability along with delays in treatment leads women to suffer far greater morbidity due to sexually transmitted infections than men do. Women in all parts of the world face a heavy burden of ill-health linked to sexually transmitted infections, including cervical cancer. Women in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa are most at risk, with one in approximately four women having

a treatable infection at any point in time. In general, sexually transmitted infections are more common among the young, and almost half of all infected persons worldwide are between 15 and 24 years old. Although many of these infections can be prevented and treated, women in many parts of the world have no access to appropriate information and services.

In their report, the WHO offers priorities for action. Included in this list are:

- a) increasing the number of births attended by skilled birth attendants in all countries with high maternal mortality rates;
- b) ensuring that a continuum of antenatal, delivery and post-partum care is available and accessible to all pregnant women;
- c) ensuring that all women have access to modern contraception,
- d) freedom to access safe abortion services (to the fullest extent permitted by law) including post- abortion care;
- e) screening and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and HPV.

Equally important are strategies to prevent and respond to intimate partner violence and sexual violence, and to empower women and increase their opportunities for participating in economic activities. It is vital to ensure that women have access to essential reproductive health care and services during humanitarian crises.

**Source: Women and health: today's evidence tomorrow's agenda, World Health Organization, 2009.*