



Health care for women still far below need and expectation, UN report finds



9 November 2009 – Many of the world's countries continue to fail to meet the health-care needs of women at key stages of their lives, such as when they reach adolescence or when they are elderly, a new United Nations report has found.

The report, issued today by the World Health Organization (**WHO**) in Geneva, said urgent action is required to improve the health and lives of women, despite considerable progress in recent decades.

Sexual and reproductive health services tend to focus exclusively on married women in too many countries, according to the report, noting that in those societies few services are made available to unmarried women and adolescents, and even fewer to marginalized groups such as sex workers, intravenous drug workers, ethnic workers and rural women.

Up to 80 per cent of all health care worldwide takes place in the home, and is almost always provided by women, who are often unsupported and unremunerated in these activities.

Launching the report, WHO Director-General Margaret Chan **said** it was "time to pay girls and women back, to make sure that they get the care and support they need to enjoy a fundamental human right at every moment of their lives – that is, their right to health."

Dr. Chan questioned: "If women are denied a chance to develop their full human potential, including their potential to lead healthier and at least somewhat happier lives, is society as a whole really healthy? What does this say about the state of social progress in the 21st century?"

The report observed that HIV, tuberculosis and pregnancy-related conditions remain the major killers of women aged between 15 and 45, but that as women age, non-communicable diseases – such as heart attacks and strokes – become leading causes of death and disability.

However, in many countries heart attacks and strokes are considered “male” problems, leading to an under-diagnosis of heart disease in women.

Females are also hampered from their lower socio-economic status, with a lack of access to education, income and decision-making positions limiting women’s ability to protect their health.

This is particularly true in the case of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, where cultural pressures mean many women lack basic knowledge about HIV and how to negotiate safer sex practices.

“We will not see significant progress as long as women are regarded as second-class citizens in so many parts of the world,” Dr. Chan said.

“In so many societies, men exercise political, social and economic control. The health sector has to be concerned. These unequal power relations translate into unequal access to health care and unequal control over health resources.”

The WHO report, entitled Women and health: today’s evidence tomorrow’s agenda, outlines proposals for reform to help women.

These include strengthening health systems so they can better meet women’s needs, changing public policy to deal with the social and economic factors that adversely impact women’s health and identifying mechanisms to promote women’s leadership in health care.

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