

Maternal Health & Child Survival

Overview

- Maternal health and child survival are intricately linked - the health of a mother and the care that she receives during pregnancy, childbirth and the post natal period has a profound bearing on the outcome of her pregnancy and the health of her child.
- Approximately 536,000 women die each year due to complications with pregnancy or childbirth (WHO, UNICEF, World Bank, UNFPA 2007)
- 9.7 million children die each year before they reach their fifth birthday. The risk is greatest for newborn babies when the immune system has not yet developed, with 4 million deaths in the first month of life, 2 million within the first day (UNICEF 2007)
- Almost all these deaths occur in the developing world, and most are preventable.
- The leading causes of death for children under five - diarrhoea, pneumonia, malaria or measles – are preventable and treatable
- Poor maternal nutrition is a major risk factor for maternal deaths and can affect birth weight and the subsequent development of the child. Malnutrition is the underlying cause for 3.5 million child deaths (UNICEF).
- Female illiteracy and low level of education often leads to poor health outcomes for pregnant women and their children, acting as a barrier to health promotion and health services.
- Poor sanitation and lack of access to clean water increases the risk of infection, both to women during childbirth and their children.
- The majority of births in high risk regions take place in the home – 92 percent in Bangladesh - often in unsanitary conditions, increasing the risk of infection (WHO).
- Limited access to emergency obstetric care during childbirth is a major determinant of mortality, particularly in the event of haemorrhage or obstructed labour.
- Of all the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), MDG 5 has seen the least progress, with only a small decline in maternal mortality in the worst affected countries. For MDG 4, whilst there have been some success stories – in Bangladesh under-five mortality has fallen by 54 percent since 1990 – in 62 developing countries, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, little or no progress has been made (UNICEF).

Solutions

- Increase political will at the international and national level
- The solutions are known, implementable and affordable, yet maternal health and child survival have not been prioritised:
 - offer a continuum of care to all women and their children throughout pregnancy, birth and infancy, including family planning, skilled birth attendants, immunisation, micronutrient supplements, oral rehydration therapy and management of pneumonia, promotion of exclusive breastfeeding, insecticide treated bed nets and hygiene promotion, even in remote and rural areas
 - Increase the numbers of skilled midwives able to offer emergency obstetric care for women who experience complications.
 - Immunisation to protect against the major preventable diseases such as measles and introduce new vaccines for pneumococcal diseases and rotavirus
 - Hygiene promotion, point of use water treatment and improved sanitation
- Ensure universal access to education for girls and young women to remove inequalities that limit access to health services and reduce the likelihood of early pregnancy and unsafe abortion.