

## The Unfortunate Facts of Life in 2007

### ...about Maternal Mortality<sup>1</sup>

- Maternal mortality is defined as the death of a pregnant woman during her pregnancy or within 42 days of pregnancy termination.
- More than 536,000 women die during pregnancy and childbirth every year. That is one every minute, or 10 million per generation – about the same as in 1987.
- Fully 42 percent of all pregnancies everywhere experience a complication. In 15 percent of all pregnancies, the complications are life-threatening.
- Most maternal deaths (61 percent) occur just before, during, or just after delivery, often from complications that cannot be predicted and are difficult to prevent.
- Girls under 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s.
- Survival rates depend upon the distance and time a woman must travel to get skilled emergency medical care. The “three delays” raise mortality rates:
  - *Delay in seeking care:* women may have to get permission from family males, or may not recognize the emergency, or may fear hospital practices.
  - *Delay in arriving at an emergency care facility:* transportation may be unavailable or unaffordable or take too long.
  - *Delay in receiving care from providers:* richer patients or males may be seen first; facilities may lack staff, equipment or supplies; or care may be unaffordable.
- Because of different levels of investment in women’s needs, huge disparities exist in the lifetime risks of maternal death for women in rich and poor countries, and between the rich and poor in all countries.
  - *Fewer than one in 16,400 women will die in pregnancy or childbirth in the ten top-ranked countries; but one in seven will die in Niger, at the bottom of the list.*<sup>2</sup>
  - *This rich-poor disparity is the largest among all the public health indicators tracked by the World Health Organization.*
  - *The poorer the household, the greater the risk of maternal death: 99 percent of maternal deaths occur in developing countries.*
- Nearly all these deaths are preventable with increased political will and adequate financial investment.

### ...about the Costs

- The health of mothers is inseparable from the health of newborns, to the point that the World Health Organization now talks in terms of “maternal-newborn health.”<sup>3</sup>
- Newborns whose mothers die of any cause are three to 10 times more likely to die within two years than those whose mothers survive.<sup>4</sup>
- More than 1 million children are left motherless and vulnerable every year.
- Of the 130 million babies born worldwide each year, about 4 million die in their first month of life – and 98 percent of those deaths are in developing countries.<sup>5</sup>
- Girl children are often pulled from school and required to fill their lost mother’s roles.
- A mother’s death lowers family income and productivity, affecting the entire community.

- more -

Invest in women – it pays

### ...about Practical Solutions

- ✚ Maternal mortality could be cut by nearly three-quarters by improving women's access to comprehensive reproductive health services, including family planning and strategies to prevent or manage abortion-related complications, within the broader context of efforts to promote human rights, poverty reduction and gender equality.<sup>6</sup>
- ✚ An estimated 200 million women want to delay or avoid pregnancy but don't use effective family planning. The demand is expected to rise 40 percent by 2025.
- ✚ Care by skilled nurses, midwives or doctors during pregnancy and childbirth, including emergency services, and care for mothers and newborns is essential.
- ✚ About 35 percent of pregnant women in developing countries have no access to or contact with health personnel before delivery, and only 57 percent give birth with a skilled attendant present.
- ✚ Education can inform women about their bodies and give them options for life beyond childbearing. Of 137 million illiterate young people in the world, 63 percent are female.<sup>7</sup>
- ✚ Stigma and taboos on discussing sex-related matters are killers: only 5 percent of HIV-positive people worldwide are aware of their status. Frank discussion about sexual behavior and its consequences could save millions of lives.<sup>8</sup>
- ✚ Discrimination and violence against women rob society of resources, production and creativity. Domestic violence cost Chile more than 2 percent of its gross domestic product in 1996, or US\$1.56 billion in women's lost earnings. In Australia, the estimated loss is \$6.3 billion per year; in the United States about \$12.6 billion.<sup>9</sup>
- ✚ Solutions must come in the context of broad efforts to improve women's legal rights and economic status, because in countries with similar levels of economic development, maternal mortality is highest where women's status is lowest.
- ✚ With increased political will and adequate financial investment, most women and infants can survive so that their families, communities and nations can thrive.

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated all information in this fact sheet is from UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, "Facts About Safe Motherhood," [www.unfpa.org/mothers/facts.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/mothers/facts.htm) (accessed June 20, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), UN Population Division, and The World Bank, *Maternal Mortality in 2005*, World Health Organization, Oct. 12, 2007, p. 3

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization, *Moving Towards Universal Coverage: Issues in maternal-newborn health and poverty*, three-part series of papers, Geneva, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 2007*, UNICEF, New York, 2007, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> This section from Population Resource Center, "World Health Day 2007," [www.prcdc.org/World\\_AIDS\\_Day.pdf](http://www.prcdc.org/World_AIDS_Day.pdf) (accessed March 30, 2007)

<sup>6</sup> *The Lancet*, Executive Summary, Maternal Survival Series, September 2006, London, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, *State of World Population 2005: The Promise of Equality*, UNFPA, New York, 2005, p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> UNFPA, *State of World Population 2005*, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> UNFPA, *State of World Population 2005*, p. 65.