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Investing in Women Is Smart Economics, *Women Deliver* Conference Shows

LONDON –Skyrocketing health care costs and slow economic growth in developing countries could be combated by government investments in family planning, antenatal care for mothers-to-be and skilled care at delivery, according to reports prepared for an upcoming conference here.

Financial experts and leading economists are among more than 1,500 world leaders taking part in *Women Deliver*, a landmark gathering 18-20 October at the ExCel Conference Centre on reducing pregnancy-related deaths and disabilities worldwide. The theme of the conference is “Invest in Women: It Pays!”

One study estimates that the global economic impact of maternal and newborn deaths at US\$15 billion per year in lost potential production, half associated with women and half with newborns. At the moment, one woman dies every minute from complications of pregnancy and delivery – some ten million per generation – and four million newborns die every year.

The World Bank says much of the illness and death that strikes down women and their children each year could be avoided if they had access to stronger health systems capable of providing core programs of maternal and child health, nutrition, and family planning. Stronger systems could help developing countries to improve the health and well-being of millions of the world’s poorest people, boost economic growth, and reduce poverty caused by catastrophic illness.

“Investing in better health for women and their children is just smart economics, said Joy Phumaphi, the World Bank’s Vice President for Human Development, a former WHO Assistant Director General for Family and Community Health; and Health Minister in Botswana, 1999-2003. “Good health is often thought to be an outcome of economic growth, but increasingly, good health and sound health systems policy have also been recognized as major drivers of economic growth. Educating girls, equal economic opportunities for women, and fewer households living below the poverty line are also vital parts of a strategy to achieve lasting good health for mothers and their children.”

The Bank has scheduled a special Oct. 18 session on these themes for its Annual Meetings in Washington.

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Invest in women – it pays



At the moment, women's work in households, farms and care-giving equals about a third of the world's gross national product, according to repeated studies – and that is just unpaid work. In addition, women are the sole income earners for up to a third of all households. A mother's disability or death not only raises death and illness rates for her children and destroys families; it also lowers overall community productivity

Documents prepared for the gathering argue that spending on women's needs creates a "virtuous circle" that raises productivity and lowers overall health care spending. Investing in family planning, for example, lowers the rate of unintended pregnancies, which reduces unsafe abortions, which reduces health care costs. In some countries, up to half of all hospital spending on obstetrics and gynecology goes for treating complications of unsafe abortions.

"Investing in saving women's lives is an incredibly cost-effective thing to do," said Jill Sheffield, president of Family Care International, organizing partner for the conference. The package of services needed to make significant improvements in maternal health would cost less than US\$1.50 per person in the 75 countries where 95 percent of maternal deaths occur, she said.

"This amount is well within reach of donor countries and governments," Sheffield said. "Ministers of health, finance, development and economy are going to hear this message loud and clear at *Women Deliver*."

For more information, go to www.womendeliver.org For a specific fact sheet with additional data and economic analysis go to www.womendeliver.org/media/investinwomen.htm.

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