

Chapter 7:

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The approach to improving the health status of women in Africa proposed in this report is based on two premises: (i) that women's health, apart from being desirable in itself as a basic human right, is a fulcrum for socioeconomic development; (ii) that interventions designed to improve women's health should be multisectoral in order to succeed. For policy makers, therefore, the challenge is not only to design, implement and fund health systems that are more responsive to women's needs, but also to ensure that the socioeconomic circumstances that trap women in ignorance, economic poverty, social disempowerment and disease are changed.

This process must begin with countering gender discrimination in the home, which finds expression, in the early years, in unequal task assignment, intimidation and physical violence. The process must ensure that girls benefit from the same educational opportunities as boys; that they are not subjected to harmful traditional practices; and that they have access to the higher education that opens doors to specialized training later in life and provides opportunities for positions of responsibility. By enabling women to have a voice through the establishment of social networks committed to their concerns and by encouraging their participation in politics at grassroots and executive levels of power, policy makers can rally themselves and others to their own cause and achieve the much-needed momentum in reforms to dismantle gender-based discrimination and other barriers to women's empowerment.

The benefits associated with investing in women's health in the African Region are considerable – not just for women themselves, but also for their families and communities, and for society at large. The health interventions required to realize these benefits are available, affordable and cost-effective. However, the implementation of these interventions faces major challenges, starting with inadequate political commitment at the highest levels of government, and the lack of funding required to support viable health care systems. Governments, development partners and regional organizations including the African Union should intensify women's empowerment by investing in interventions that promote women's health, education and human rights on a scale large enough to make a difference.

Policy makers seeking to improve the health and socioeconomic status of African women, have no greater ally than women themselves. As this report has sought to demonstrate, women already make an enormous contribution to the continent, particularly by virtue of their labour in the home and in the field. Undoubtedly, they can achieve much more, notably in the health sector which, to date, as this report has shown, has failed to meet even their most basic needs. Only when the truth is known about the vital role that women can play in social and economic development will the Region begin to realize its full potential and achieve the political stability, economic prosperity and health that is the birth right of its large and growing population.

 **Governments, development partners and regional organizations including the African Union should intensify women's empowerment by investing in interventions that promote women's health, education and human rights on a scale large enough to make a difference.** 

Recommendations

This report has identified six clusters of interventions that, with the appropriate level of investment, can improve the lives of women in the African Region. However, for the investment to bear fruit it must be backed by political commitment and leadership, and the resources and support of many players including governments, development partners, communities and women themselves.

1. Good governance and leadership to improve, promote, support and invest in women's health

Actions to address this recommendation:

Governments at Local and National Level

- Prioritize women's health issues in national development and political agendas, and ensure that these are supported by appropriate budget resources.
- Establish and/or support national bodies or institutions tasked with promoting and monitoring progress made in women's health and development.
- Promote good leadership through recognizing and rewarding local and national achievers in the areas of women's health and development.

International, Regional and Subregional Organizations

- Introduce measures to require accountability in countries that fail to meet their women's health related commitments, such as Millennium Development Goals (MDG), Maputo Plan of Action, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), African Charter, Campaign on Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality in Africa (CARMMA), etc.
- Encourage regional/multinational approaches for addressing common women's health challenges, such as girl child trafficking, female genital mutilation (FGM) and problems related to geographical/environmental factors.
- Advocate for the essential resources required to support the implementation of cost-effective health interventions in member countries.
- Ensure sociopolitical stability by being more proactive in wars and conflict within the subregion and developing robust regional protocols to protect and reduce the burden of wars and conflicts on women and girls.

Developmental Partners

- Mobilize resources required to fund the implementation of key cost-effective health interventions.
- Partner with governments to design mechanisms and protocols for improving accountability and management at all levels of resources for health care systems and women's health interventions.
- Work together with governments and other partners to coordinate their activities and programmes to support stated national agenda for women health.

2. Policy and legislative initiatives to translate good governance and leadership into concrete action

Actions to address this recommendation:

Governments at Local and National Level

African governments are urged to formulate policies and enact legislation designed to bridge the gender gap and to protect women and girls in the following areas: maternal health, education and employment, and harmful sociocultural practices (such as FGM, domestic violence and human trafficking).

All countries in the African Region are encouraged to:

- Review all legislation and policies relating to women's health with the aim of improving such legislation to promote and/or protect their health by year 2015.
- Introduce policies (such as scholarship schemes and waiver of school fees) to promote girls' education to secondary school level, with the objective of increasing the proportion of girls completing secondary education by 30% annually.
- Remove all restrictive policies and laws that limit women's access to financial resources, property and health care services (e.g. spousal consent for family planning, comprehensive abortion care, spousal consent for loan acquisition and property).
- Advocate, budget for and promote at national and local level social education programmes that increase awareness of the negative health impacts of discrimination against girls and women.

Civil Society and Communities

- Advocate for policy makers to introduce health policies to promote and protect women's health.
- Sensitize and educate women and community members about national and local policies and legislation that promote and protect women's health.

International, Regional and Subregional Organizations

- Harmonize health policies among different organizations to maximize synergy in addressing the health problems of women throughout their life course.
- Implement measures to review the performance of member countries with respect to women's rights in accordance with agreed global or regional protocols.

Developmental Partners

- Assist member countries to implement and monitor policies designed to improve women's health in accordance with agreed regional and international commitments.
- Support experience sharing in relevant policy and legislation revision and implementation.

3. Multisectoral interventions needed to improve women's health

To improve women's health and enhance their social status, there is a need to shift from interventions rooted within the health sector to multisectoral approaches. Moreover, investment in women's health should be seen as a critical ingredient for overall socioeconomic development rather than as an outlay restricted to the fighting of disease.

Actions to address this recommendation:

Governments at Local and National Level

- Develop multisectoral national and/or local strategic plans for improving women's health which emphasize the linkages, roles, responsibilities and measurable targets for all sectors in achieving the agreed national objectives.
- Recognize the particular importance of the environment, food and agriculture, water and sanitation sectors to women's health; these sectors should be encouraged to implement appropriate technologies that minimize health hazards faced by women.
- Include in national budgets, identifiable budget resources in relevant sectors, such as economic planning, justice, finance, agriculture, environment, social welfare and education for improving women's health.
- Mandate institutions or ministries for women and gender affairs, where they exist, to coordinate multisectoral interventions for women's health.

Civil Society and Communities

- Multisectoral groups such as religious, traditional, professional, and male and female social groups to undertake active roles in improving women's health. They should partner the health sector to enhance women's awareness of key health issues, mobilize resources and support the successful implementation of proven health care interventions.

International, Regional and Subregional Organizations

- Promote intersectoral sharing of experiences and best practices at regional/international fora.
- Develop regional frameworks that define the roles and responsibilities of all the different sectors in women's health and development.

Developmental Partners

- Advocate for and promote the inclusion of other sectors in the planning, implementation and evaluation of their supported country programmes relating to women's health.

4. Empowering girls and women to be effective agents of their own interests

Actions to address this recommendation:

Governments at Local and National Level

- Ensure that there is at least 30% female representation in governance at all levels by introducing affirmative policies and legislation which encourage women's participation in local and national governance.
- Ensure that the needs and opinions of women are taken fully into account in all national policy designs and programmes by developing protocols that take gender into consideration.
- Provide opportunities for disadvantaged and less educated women to empower themselves by developing and implementing programmes that increase their access to microfinance and also to non-formal education, as was done in the Biruh Tesfa programme in Ethiopia.

Civil Societies and Communities

- Advocate for women and girls, particularly from marginalized and/or disadvantaged backgrounds, such as the disabled and abused women (e.g. the NUWODU programme in Uganda).
- Support and promote women's health (e.g. the Badienou Gokh initiative in Senegal).
- Engage communities, women and men in efforts to reduce social discrimination against women in leadership positions.

International, Regional and Subregional Organizations

- Advocate and promote gender balance in all their organizational activities.
- Partner with and support regional civil society women's organizations that advocate for and promote women's health, such as Forum of African Women Educationalists (FAWE) and Federation of International Women Lawyers (FIDA).

Developmental Partners

- Prioritize support for the implementation of national and local programmes that empower women in regard to their health and development, such as girl child educational programmes and economic empowerment programmes.
- Support women's leadership development training programmes.

5. Improving the responsiveness of health care systems to address the health needs of women

Actions to address this recommendation:

Governments at Local and National Level

- Enhance gender and sociocultural acceptance of women's health care services by introducing policies that ensure women's needs and opinions are taken into account in health care delivery at all levels.
- Implement all recommended cost-effective health care interventions for the various life stages of women.
- Urgently redesign the health care system to ensure that by 2020, all women of reproductive age, will have access to basic and emergency obstetric care whenever the need arises using criteria recommended by WHO.
- Improve women's access to reproductive health care services, in particular, by removing financial barriers through mutual health insurance schemes or through fee exemption policies.
- Bring health services closer to where women live through a variety of programmes including community outreach, community based health planning and services (CHPS) and through investing in strengthened health care systems generally.
- Address human resource shortages that cripple health care services – particularly for women in rural and disadvantaged communities – by instituting policies to correct maldistribution of care providers, train more staff, train mid-level staff in life-saving midwifery skills, provide incentives to retain staff and enhance public–private partnerships.
- Promote the use of information technology to improve women's access to care and also to enhance quality of health care services for women.
- Develop/strengthen effective national and local monitoring and evaluation systems for women's health care and services using recommended indicators.
- Develop quality of care indicators for women's health services and incorporate into facility accreditation criteria.
- Recognize and reward achievers or institutions providing high quality women's health services.

Civil Societies and Communities

- Mobilize resources to support improvement in health care services for women and girls.
- Engage the health care system as partners in promoting high quality, gender and culturally sensitive health care services for women.
- Educate and support women's utilization of existing health facilities.

Professional Organizations Involved in Women's Health Care

- Develop, promote and enforce professional ethics and guidelines to protect the rights of women.
- Partner with government to develop protocols and standards for reproductive health services.

International, Regional and Subregional Organizations

- Monitor progress made by member countries in achieving set targets for women's health services using agreed indicators and criteria.
- WHO to support a multicenter study on the use of non-physician clinicians to address women's health needs.

Developmental Partners

- Support governments in the implementation of cost-effective health care interventions for women's health particularly in member states with a high burden of morbidity and mortality amongst girls and women.
- Partner with government to source funding for health system infrastructure development particularly in the establishment of basic and emergency obstetric care facilities in deprived and underserved communities.

6. Data collection for monitoring progress made towards achieving targets for girl's and women's health

Actions to address this recommendation:

Governments at Local and National Level

- Review and revise vital registration systems and health information systems to strengthen the availability of sex and age disaggregated data for monitoring and evaluation of women's health interventions throughout the life course.
- Strengthen, encourage and fund national and local research institutions to conduct relevant qualitative and quantitative research to provide accurate data for the identification of women's health problems, and policy and programme development.
- Partner with international, regional, local and community organizations to mobilize resources for women's health research and data collection.
- Coordinate the multisectoral approach to women's health by promoting data collation across all relevant sectors in order to provide more comprehensive assessment of women's health for policy development and implementation.
- Ensure that strategic plans for improving women's health include effective mechanisms for collecting data for programme monitoring and evaluation.

Civil Society and Communities

- Sensitize women, men and communities on the importance of participating in vital statistic registrations, such as births and deaths.
- Encourage establishment of simple, community-based, vital statistic registers in all communities where formal services do not exist or are inaccessible. Religious organizations and traditional leaders can provide the setting for such registers.

Research Institutions

- Partner with communities, governments, local, regional and international research groups and agencies to conduct high quality quantitative and qualitative research into health problems affecting women.

International, Regional and Subregional Organizations

- Promote regional collation of women's health data as an integral part of regional policy development, programme development and resource mobilization
- By 2013 define and reach consensus on core indicators for monitoring progress in women's health improvements across all sectors in member countries.

Developmental Partners

- Support the strengthening of research and of vital statistic institutions that focus on women's health.

Monitoring Progress

In light of the above stated Recommendations, selected indicators identified for monitoring progress in the African Region include:

- Number/proportion of countries with developed and costed national multisectoral frameworks/mechanisms for improving women's health.
- Number/proportion of countries with specific budget resources for improving women's health.
- Number/proportion of countries with legislation in place to protect women against harmful practices and discrimination.
- Number/proportion of countries achieving the 30% target increase in secondary school enrolment for girls.
- Proportion of women in member countries earning below poverty level.
- Proportion of women appointed to office in member countries at national and local government levels including parliamentarians.
- Number of research publications on women's health from institutions in member countries.
- Number/proportion of countries with fee-free or insurance cover for maternal and newborn care.
- Annual rate of decrease in maternal mortality ratio in member countries.
- Proportion of unmet needs in family planning in member countries.