

Information note: Maternal mortality is a human rights issue, says a new UN study

Discrimination Kills

Discrimination against women leads to preventable deaths and injuries during pregnancy and childbirth. Each year, hundreds of thousands of women and girls die and millions more become disabled as a result. A new study by the United Nations Human Rights office (OHCHR) states unequivocally that maternal mortality and morbidity is a matter of human rights.

“The scale of maternal mortality and morbidity across the world reflects a situation of inequality and discrimination suffered by women throughout their lifetimes, perpetuated by formal laws, policies and harmful social norms and practices,” according to the [study “Preventable Maternal Mortality and Morbidity and Human Rights.”](#) It will be the subject of a Human Rights Council panel discussion on 14 June.

Human rights challenges which lead to maternal mortality and morbidity are a reality in every region of the world, affecting countries at every development level. A human rights-based approach is essential to addressing this serious global problem.

“Women have a right to participate in decision-making processes that affect their sexual and reproductive health. Enable women and girls to be educated, have access to the right information, enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and the highest attainable standards of health, and the lives of many women and girls will be saved every day,” says High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay.

“Combating discrimination against women and girls is critical to eliminate preventable maternal mortality and morbidity,” she adds.

In addition to the tragic loss of life, maternal mortality also triggers and aggravates cycles of poverty that cause generations of suffering and despair. When mothers die, children, and especially girls, are at greater risk of dropping out of school, becoming malnourished, and simply not surviving. It affects millions of families every year. There is no single cause of death among men of fertile age that is close to the magnitude of preventable maternal mortality.

There is no time to lose. The international community, as set out in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), has committed to cutting three quarters of maternal mortality by 2015. Today, Goal 5 on improving maternal health remains the furthest from realisation among all the MDGs.

An advanced edited version of the OHCHR study is available at:

http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/14session/A.HRC.14.39_AEV-2.pdf

One Preventable Death is ONE TOO MANY

According to the most recent official estimate released in 2007, every year more than half a million women and girls die in pregnancy and childbirth. A recent unofficial figure put it at about 340,000. The suggested decline, while encouraging, must not lead to complacency. While it is difficult to accurately measure maternal mortality rates, it still means that more than 900 women and girls die every day due to pregnancy and childbirth. The vast majority of them could have lived if they were treated equally, without discrimination, and had access to the basic care we have known for over 60 years. When death is preventable, one death is one too many.