

*Every minute of every day, another woman dies needlessly in pregnancy or childbirth.
For every woman who dies, another 20 experience serious complications.*

What do we Mean by Maternal Health?

Maternal health involves a number of issues relating to pregnancy and childbirth.

These include: women dying of pregnancy related deaths; complications of pregnancy and childbirth, such as haemorrhage; sexual and reproductive health and rights; family planning; reproductive tract infections, including sexually transmissible infections (STIs); abortion; unintended pregnancy; HIV and AIDS; obstetric care; breastfeeding; postnatal depression; nutrition; malaria; postnatal care; child health; the roles and status of men and women; and violence against women.

What is the Maternal Health Situation in the Pacific?

Pacific countries have made some progress in improving maternal health. For example, the percentage of women being delivered by skilled birth attendants has increased. However, progress has varied across countries with several Pacific countries still having very high rates of maternal deaths.

Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Solomon Islands, Kiribati and the Federal States of Micronesia report the highest rates of maternal deaths in the region. The sub-region of Melanesia has the worst reported rates of maternal deaths in the Pacific. A woman in PNG is around 50 times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than a woman in New Zealand. A woman's risk of dying in pregnancy or childbirth in PNG is 1 in 55.

Many women in the Pacific do not have access to skilled birth attendants, safe and clean birthing equipment, supplies and facilities, including emergency care if they need it. Women living in remote areas may face journeys of several hours or more to get to a health facility or trained health workers.



Sexual and Reproductive Rights and Maternal Health in the Pacific

- Many people living in the Pacific are still not able to access quality and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights information, education, services and supplies. This includes access to sexuality and relationships education, family planning, health examinations and medications.
- Consequently, the Pacific has high rates of sexually transmissible infections (STIs) and unintended teenage pregnancies, as well as low use of modern contraception in many areas. This impacts on maternal health in multiple ways.
- If a woman has an STI, pregnancy can exacerbate the infection. At the same time, if a woman has an STI this can impact on the pregnancy and birth, or even getting pregnant as some STIs cause infertility. For example, chlamydia can cause a baby to be born with an eye infection. HIV positive women planning to have children and the children of HIV positive women can also face serious health risks if they do not have access to related services.

- Teenage pregnancies are associated with serious health risks, including a higher chance of delivering a pre term and or low weight infant, or having a stillbirth. Infants of early adolescent mothers are more likely to die before their first birthday than are the infants of older mothers ages 23-29¹. Furthermore, adolescent mothers face an increased risk of complications related to pregnancy and childbirth.
- Access to family planning can improve maternal health by reducing unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortion, as well as decreasing the risk of complications during pregnancy or childbirth. Evidence shows that a three - four year gap between pregnancies decreases the risk of complications in pregnancy or childbirth.
- Stigma, geography, high levels of violence and discrimination against women, poor infrastructure, and malaria are all further factors that impact on maternal health in the Pacific.



“Too many women die during pregnancy and childbirth because their right to sexual and reproductive health is denied.”

Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations

What is the Maternal Health Situation Globally?

- Maternal health continues to be a pervasive global concern with tragic and far reaching consequences for families, communities, countries, and the world as a whole.
- Although most maternal deaths are preventable (88-98 percent), pregnancy remains the leading killer of women in their reproductive years in developing countries.
- The number of maternal deaths has not dropped in 20 years. Indeed, in some regions it has worsened.
- Complications of pregnancy leave over 10 million women a year with disabilities.
- The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the main international framework for development. MDG 5 on maternal health is the goal where there has been least progress across the globe. MDG 5 is often called ‘The heart of the MDGs’ as if it fails, all of the other MDGs will also fail.
- Recently, there has been an increase in global momentum to increase action on improving maternal health. For example, the 2009 G8 summit in Italy discussed maternal health as a priority.

Why Invest in Maternal Health?

The situation in the Pacific region is critical: Several countries in the region have high rates of maternal deaths and poor access to sexual and reproductive health services and supplies.

It is about fundamental human rights: Maternal health is strongly linked to several human rights, including the right to health and the right to equality.

It is a vital and cost effective strategy for social and economic development: The estimated global economic impact of maternal and newborn deaths is US \$15 billion lost in potential production per year. Delivering a package of services essential to making significant improvement in maternal health is estimated to cost less than US\$1.50 per person in the 75 countries where 95 percent of maternal mortality occurs.

It saves children's lives: There is a strong link between the health of a mother and the health of her children. Children of women who have died or are disabled as a result of childbearing are less likely to lead a healthy life.

We know what needs to be done and that huge improvements are possible: Egypt, Honduras, Malaysia and Thailand all halved their maternal mortality ratios over the last several decades.



ALL PHOTOS BY PEDRAM PIRNIA, PROVIDED BY THE ASIA PACIFIC ALLIANCE NEW ZEALAND COALITION.

What Needs to be Done to Improve Maternal Health in the Pacific?

Access to quality and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning. The World Bank estimates that up to 40 percent of maternal deaths and 20 percent of child deaths could be prevented by family planning methods.

Access to quality care for pregnancy and childbirth

- antenatal care
- skilled attendance at birth, including emergency obstetric and neonatal care
- immediate postnatal care for mother and newborn

Access to safe abortion services when legal and safe post-abortion services where not (as per paragraph 8.25 of the Programme of Action for ICPD¹). Unsafe abortion accounts for 13 percent of all maternal deaths worldwide.

Strengthen health systems. For example, by integrating sexual and reproductive health into primary health care and providing quality training for health professionals.

End violence and discrimination against women. Rates of violence against women in a number of Pacific Island countries are among the highest in the world. A recent study in the Solomon Islands found that two in three women between the ages of 15-49 had been abused in their lifetime through physical partner violence and/or sexual partner violence. 55 percent of women had been forced into sex against their will.

Support and investment by everyone involved, including parliamentarians, donors, health professionals, men and communities:

New Zealand must continue and increase its investment in maternal health and overall sexual and reproductive health and rights in the Pacific.

Family Planning International · PO Box 11-515 · Wellington

Telephone (04) 801 384 4349 · Fax (04) 382 8356 · international@familyplanning.org.nz

¹ Para 8.25: "In no case should abortion be promoted as a method of family planning... Prevention of unwanted pregnancies must always be given the highest priority and every attempt should be made to eliminate the need for abortion... In circumstances where abortion is not against the law, such abortion should be safe. In all cases, women should have access to quality services for the management of complications arising from abortion..."