



TALKING POINTS –STRENGTHENING GLOBAL HEALTH THROUGH INVESTMENTS PROMOTING WOMEN’S WELL-BEING

Global health initiatives that factor in the unique needs of women and girls, have a multiplier effect, essential to durable improvements in the well-being of societies. When women are healthy, families, communities and whole nations benefit.

BENEFITS: How a focus on women’s health can drive better global health outcomes

TP1. The health of a child is intimately linked to the health of the mother

- In developing countries, a mother’s death in childbirth means likely death for her newborn. A 2010 study in Bangladesh showed that an infant whose mother died was approximately eight times more likely to die in the first year of life than one whose mother remained alive, which may be largely due to lack of nutrients from breastfeeding.ⁱ
- Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months and continued breastfeeding together with appropriate foods can have a major impact on children’s survival, growth, and development. Poor and insufficient breastfeeding results in over 800,000 child deaths annually.ⁱⁱ Breastfed children in developing countries are at least 6 times more likely to survive in the early months than non-breastfed children; are 6 times less likely to die from diarrhea in the first six months; and are 2.4 times less likely to die from acute respiratory infection.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Some 165 million children under age 5 in developing countries suffer from stunting, a consequence of chronic nutritional deprivation that begins before birth if the mother is undernourished or when pregnancies are spaced less than three years apart.^{iv} Stunted children may never regain the height and corresponding body weight lost, and additionally can experience diminished adult intellectual capacity and premature death because vital organs never fully develop during childhood.^{vi}

TP2. Women’s empowerment can increase children’s well-being

- A project in Bangladesh tested a range of interventions to reduce childhood stunting, including improvements in maternal and child health, agricultural production, sanitation, and women’s empowerment. Women’s empowerment had the greatest individual impact, reducing stunting by over 20% (22.6). Investments in women’s empowerment undertaken in combination with other interventions magnified the impact of those efforts, as well.^{vii}

TP3. Family planning leads to healthier lives

- Family planning helps women bear children at the healthiest times so that mother and child are more likely to survive and stay healthy. Generally it was found that universal family planning could prevent up to 29% of maternal deaths worldwide.^{viii}
- A USAID-supported analysis found that if all birth-to-pregnancy intervals were increased to 3 years, 1.6 million under-five deaths could be prevented annually. Children born close together are at increased risk of contracting and dying from infectious diseases and have higher rates of malnutrition.^{ix}
- Family planning can improve infant survival by enabling young women to delay pregnancy. Babies born to mothers under 18 are more likely to be premature, have low birth weight, and suffer from complications of delivery.^x

TP4. Maternal, newborn, and child health investments save money

- Families with healthier and better-nourished mothers and children spend less on healthcare, allowing families to hold on to their savings.^{xi}
- Reducing medical care expenses reduced financial hardship, allowing poor families to provide for immediate needs and invest more in their future – for example, in housing, education, and income generating activities.^{xii}
- Family planning is a highly cost-effective intervention to promote healthy families, increase opportunities for economic development, and enable strong and vibrant nations. The UN has said that every dollar spent in family planning can reduce the need to spend on other interventions promoting development by up to US\$6.^{xiii}

TP5. Investing in women's and children's health reduces economic losses

- Investing in better maternal health increases the number of women in the workforce and promotes the economic well-being of communities and countries. Untreated pregnancy and birth complications mean that 10-20 million women become disabled every year, undermining their ability to support their families.^{xiv}
- Healthy women work more productively, and stand to earn more. Addressing under-nutrition in pregnant women and children can increase an individual's lifetime earnings by up to 10%.^{xv}
- The health, economic, legal, and societal costs of gender-based violence to an individual, a family, a community, and a nation are devastating and lasting.
 - According to a World Bank report, Colombian women who suffer physical violence have 14% lower earnings than women who do not suffer violence. Colombian society experienced a loss of approximately 4% of GDP in 2003 due to the indirect costs of domestic violence.^{xvi}
 - 16% of women surveyed in Cambodia reported that in the past year they had lost income as a result of domestic violence.^{xvii}
 - In Brazil, productivity loss due to intimate partner violence-related injuries accounted for some 12% of the total health budget or 1.2% of GDP.^{xviii}
 - In Uganda, about 12.5 % of women report losing time from household work such as washing dishes and fetching water due to intimate partner violence.^{xix}
- When women control their fertility, it has far-reaching, transformational effects. Families can invest more in children's health and education. Girls from smaller families are more likely to complete their education. Women with fewer children are more able to seek employment, increasing household income and assets.^{xx}

BARRIERS: Some of the most significant challenges to women's health

TP1. Limited access to education

Women are two-thirds of the almost 960 million illiterate adults worldwide.^{xxi} Limited access to education decreases the likelihood that women are able to prevent HIV infection, delay sexual activity, or to protect themselves. Educated mothers are more likely to use health care facilities, including services to prevent child mortality; worldwide, the risk of a child dying prematurely decreases by about 8 per cent for each year its mother spent in primary school.^{xxii} Education also accelerates behavior change among young men, making them more receptive to prevention messages.

TP2. Lack of gender-balanced approach in healthcare^{xxiii}

- Women cannot achieve gender equality and sexual and reproductive health without the cooperation and participation of men. It is men who usually decide on the number of sexual relationships, the timing and frequency of sexual activity, and use of contraceptives, sometimes through coercion or violence.
- Men often make the decisions around health care, including when to become pregnant, how often pregnancies should occur, and what type of services can be accessed once pregnant.^{xxiv}
- A 2007 assessment of global health programs shows that men and boys can become valuable allies in addressing reproductive health issues, from maternal mortality to violence against women.^{xxv}
- Studies are beginning to highlight the importance of engaging women and men together. An evaluation of one intervention in South Africa that brings together men and women found significantly greater improvements in gender norm-related risk behaviors in men: men report fewer sexual partners, higher condom use, as well as less transactional sex, perpetration of IPV, and substance abuse.^{xxvi, xxvii}

TP3. High rates of gender-based violence (GBV) for women

- Overall, 35% of women globally have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate-partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.^{xxviii} A USAID funded study in Bangladesh found that the cost of domestic violence against women to be about 2 percent of the country's GDP— nearly equal to the amount of the government's annual expenditures in health and nutrition.^{xxix}
- Gender-based violence is associated with a range of severe short and long-term health problems for women, including injuries; unwanted pregnancies; pregnancy complications; sexually transmitted infections including HIV; mental health issues including depression, distress and substance abuse; and, in the extreme, femicide.^{xxx}
- Women who experience violence from their partners are more likely to have their children at risk for health problems, such as premature births and low birth weight as well as other developmental challenges, anxiety disorders, and an increased risk for future perpetration of or experiences with gender-based violence.^{xxxi}

- The risk of HIV infection among women who have experienced violence may be up to three times higher than among those who have not.^{xxxii}
- Yearly, at least 2 million girls are at risk for female genital mutilation in at least 28 countries resulting in a variety of health complications and increased risk of childbirth complications and newborn deaths.
- Social norms can contribute to the persistence and acceptance of GBV.

TP4. Women's traditional family responsibilities

- Women prepare most of the family food and use solid fuels for cooking. As a result, girls and women are exposed to indoor air pollution estimated to result in almost 50% of the 1.3 million deaths worldwide due to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) among women each year.^{xxxiii} COPD from exposure to indoor smoke is over 50% higher among women than among men.
- As women enter the formal labor market, they face a number of challenges, including securing quality child care and space to breastfeed due to lack of appropriate infrastructure, policies and flexibility in the workplace.^{xxxiv}
- In rural areas, women and girls are the primary gatherers of firewood and water; this increases their vulnerability to GBV, due to the long distances traveled under unsafe conditions.
- Women and girls are often responsible for caring for the ill, increasing their exposure to disease.

TP5. Mistimed and poorly spaced pregnancies

Births occurring too close together, too early, or too late in a woman's life decrease mothers' and the infants' chances for survival.

- A recent analysis found that, in one year across 172 countries, family planning prevented more than 272,000 maternal deaths, a 44 percent reduction.^{xxxv}
- Approximately 16 million girls between the ages of 15 and 19 give birth each year; complications from pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death for this age group in developing countries.^{xxxvi}
- The risk of maternal death increases as the number of children per woman rises from 2 to 6 or more. A recent study found that maternal deaths declined by 7–35 percent as the number of children per woman fell.^{xxxvii}

ENDNOTES

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