

Maternal Health in Afghanistan

“To reflect on [women’s health issues] is in fact a duty and a debt of recognition not only for the dignity of every woman, whose right to treatment and access to means for improving health must be acknowledged, but also in relation to the special role that women are called to exercise in the family and in society. In this respect we cannot fail to remember a great number of women — children, adolescents, wives, mothers of families, the elderly — who live in conditions of poverty, with a total lack of health services, and who are burdened by the difficulties involved in supporting a family in vast areas of the world, often aggravated by disaster and war.”

Pope John Paul II, Address to the International Conference on “Women’s Health Issues,” Feb. 20, 1998

Facts about Maternal Health in Afghanistan

- Maternal and infant mortality are currently worse than ever in the country’s reported history.
- Compromised maternal health has caused the maternal death rate to climb to 160 deaths per 1,000 live births, (versus 7 deaths per 1,000 live births in the U.S.). Half the women of childbearing age who die will die as a result of complications of pregnancy or childbirth.
- 1 out of 5 infants are born with low birth weight due to the poor health of their mothers. 85,000 children under 5 die each year from diarrheal diseases and 15,000 from tuberculosis.
- 70 % of Afghan women suffer from iron deficiency anemia.
- In some regions, 20 % of women of reproductive age experience night blindness associated with vitamin A deficiency. Goiter prevalence is 65 % for this group of women in some regions.
- 87 % of maternal deaths are considered preventable, meaning they could have been prevented with better pre-natal care and medical assistance during delivery.

Some Reasons for the Decline in Maternal Health

- Most women do not have access to a doctor or physician to assist with birth. The health care in Afghanistan is plagued by chronic deficiencies in infrastructure, including destroyed or nonexistent hospitals, lack of trained medical professionals, and poorly managed and badly distributed hospital systems that do exist.

- Only 12 % of the population ever had access to electricity and this is now down to 6 %, largely due to fighting that destroyed much of the country’s infrastructure.
- Finding potable water sources and clean sanitation systems post-war have become extremely difficult. This has led to an increase in infections and water-borne diseases, which can be deadly to pregnant women and infants.
- Although the Taliban have been overthrown and many opportunities for women and girls have improved, a long-standing tradition of gender discrimination still persists, making women and children the most vulnerable sector of Afghan society.

Prayer for Mothers in Afghanistan

Life-giving God,
We leap for joy when new life is born,
yet many Afghan mothers wring their hands
in fear of preventable though imminent death
for themselves and their children.

God, we know that it is unacceptable to you
that we allow such ominous conditions in our world.

Let us stand for life,
the lives of Afghan mothers and their children
that they may have the chance to live
and at the birth of children, leap for joy.

Source: “Afghanistan: Overview of the Health Sector,” Dr. Peter Kaivon Saleh, March 28, 2005



Maternal Health in Iraq

“My thoughts go to Iraq and all those caught up in the war that rages there. I am thinking in a special way of the defenceless civilian population that in various cities has been subjected to harsh trials. The building of peace is a permanent effort. The reality of these days demonstrates that in a dramatic way.”

Pope John Paul II, April 8, 2003

Facts about Maternal Health in Iraq

- Maternal deaths because of pregnancy have grown to 30 deaths per 1,000 live births, with 25 % of these deaths occurring during pregnancy. In 1989, this number was only 12 maternal deaths per 1,000 live births.
 - Less than 50 % of health care facilities are capable of providing emergency care for birthing women. The number of women delivering children at home has increased from 65 % to 80 %.
 - The health problems of pregnant women are complicated by deteriorated ambulance services, telecommunication links, and referral services to specialists, poor capability to monitor pregnancy, and general lack of security.
 - Less than 60 percent of women receive tetanus immunizations.
 - In 1996, 78 % of pregnant women received pre-natal care, but this has fallen to less than 60 %.
 - 50 - 70 % of pregnant women suffer from iron-deficiency anemia as well as other problems, including malaria, so lack of pre-natal care is a serious problem.
 - The proportion of low birth weight births increased from 4.5 % in 1990 to 21.1 % in 1994 and while statistics have not been counted recently, the UN reports that this number is increasing.
- war in Iraq. The water and electricity supplies have been disrupted and drugs and medical equipment are very sparse. The health system is estimated to be running at only 40 percent capacity.
- War and violence have also caused a huge loss in human resources because of fear of violence in and around health facilities. Women are often not willing to leave their houses or travel more than short distances because of lack of security.
 - Health care personnel often go for long periods of times (e.g. 3 months) without being paid. Because of this, further human resources are lost. Well-trained medical professionals do still exist, but continued training and payment is lacking. Only 5.59 doctors exist for each 10,000 people in the population.

Prayer for Mothers in Iraq

God of peace and life,
Let us remember today
the mothers in Iraq who watch war
explode landscapes and lives.

They are the victims of
a devastated health system,
destroyed hospitals, and
the flight of medical professionals.

Help us to take up their victimhood,
recognize their dignity in jeopardy,
and work for their safety and health.
Amen.

Some Reasons for the Decline in Maternal Health

- Many hospitals were damaged or looted during the

Source: United Nations, August 2003, <http://www.unfpa.org/rh/docs/iraq-rept04-08-03.doc>

