

Women's and Children's Health: Evidence of Impact of Human Rights

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Preface

Public health, medicine and human rights share a common goal: to improve the health, life and well-being of individuals, communities and populations. Moreover, they are deeply complementary. The right to the highest attainable standard of health cannot be realized without the expertise of health professionals. Equally, the long-established objectives of public health and clinical care can benefit from the dynamic discipline of human rights.

Human rights, as well as the relationship between health and human rights, have matured greatly in recent years. Today, it is universally accepted that human rights include not only classic civil and political rights, but also economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to the highest attainable standard of health. This right, which is enshrined in the Constitution of the World Health Organization, is to be realized progressively and subject to the availability of resources. More than ever before, it is now understood that human rights can be used by health workers to achieve their professional goals. As human rights become more operational, they become more effective as tools to help governments strengthen their health systems, deliver health care for all and improve health. However, the right to the highest attainable standard of health, and other human rights, can only be made operational if health professionals and human rights experts work closely together and are ready to learn from each other.

These are some of the issues that this report explores in relation to women's and children's health.

The past two decades have seen significant reductions in maternal and child mortality. The number of maternal deaths in the world decreased from 543 000 in 1990 to 287 000 in 2010. The maternal mortality ratio declined from 400 maternal deaths per 100 000 live births in 1990 to 210 per 100 000 in 2010, representing an average annual decline of 3.1%.

The number of deaths among children under five years declined from 12 million in 1990 to 6.9 million in 2010. The under-five mortality rate fell from 73 per 1000 in 1990 to 51 per 1000 in 2011. In many regions, the under-five mortality rate fell by at least 50% between 1990 and 2011. There is evidence that the rate of decline is accelerating as we approach 2015.

Recent initiatives, such as the UN Secretary General's Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health, have provided greater opportunities for guidance and coordination, and generated commitments to allocate more resources to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals 4 and 5 on child and maternal health. The subsequent establishment of two Commissions – on Information and Accountability and on Life-Saving Commodities – has also benefited women's and children's health.

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