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Maternal Deaths Disproportionately High in Developing Countries

African women are 175 times more likely to die in childbirth than women in developed regions of the world

NEW YORK/GENEVA, 20 October -- New findings on maternal mortality by WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA show that a woman living in sub-Saharan Africa has a 1 in 16 chance of dying in pregnancy or childbirth. This compares with a 1 in 2,800 risk for a woman from a developed region. These findings are contained in a new global report on maternal mortality released today online by the three agencies at www.childinfo.org/maternal_mortality_in_2000.pdf.

Of the estimated 529,000 maternal deaths in 2000, 95 per cent occurred in Africa and Asia, while only 4 per cent (22,000) occurred in Latin America and the Caribbean, and less than one per cent (2,500) in the more developed regions of the world.

Experience from successful maternal health programmes shows that much of this death and suffering could be avoided if all women had the assistance of a skilled health worker during pregnancy and delivery, and access to emergency medical care when complications arise.

"Many women deliver their children alone or with family members or other untrained attendants who lack the skills to deal with complications during delivery," said Dr. Lee Jong-wook, Director-General of the World Health Organization. "Skilled attendants are vital because they can recognise and prevent medical crises and provide or refer for life-saving care when complications arise. They also provide mothers with basic information about care for themselves and their children before and after giving birth."

Reducing maternal mortality is a key factor in ensuring that all children, especially in the world's poorest countries, survive and thrive through adolescence.

"These new estimates indicate an unacceptably high number of women dying in childbirth and an urgent need for increased access to emergency obstetric care, especially in sub-Saharan Africa," said UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy. "The widespread provision of emergency obstetric care is essential if we want to reduce maternal deaths."

The maternal mortality ratio, which measures the number of deaths to women per 100,000 live births due to pregnancy-related complications, was estimated to be 400 per 100,000 live births globally in 2000. By region, it was highest in Africa (830), followed by Asia - excluding Japan (330), Oceania - excluding Australia and New Zealand (240), Latin America and the Caribbean (190) and the developed countries (20).

Worldwide, 13 developing countries accounted for 70 per cent of all maternal deaths. The highest number occurred in India where 136,000 women died, followed by Nigeria where there were 37,000 deaths.

In 2000, world leaders agreed to reduce maternal mortality by three quarters by 2015, as part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Tracking progress remains difficult, except where comprehensive registration of deaths, including causes of death, exists. For this reason, the use of indicators, such as the proportion of women who have a skilled attendant at delivery, is essential to track change.

The use of skilled attendants at delivery in developing countries increased between 1990 and 2000 from 42 to 52 per cent, suggesting a potential decrease in maternal deaths. Findings show the greatest improvements in Southeast Asia and Northern Africa and the slowest change in sub-Saharan Africa, which went from 40 per cent in 1990 to 43 per cent in 2000.

Most maternal deaths and disability occur as the result of one or more of three delays: a delay in recognizing complications; a delay in reaching a medical facility; or a delay in receiving good quality care. Efforts to address these delays are essential in order to save the lives of mothers and babies.

Education on family planning and the provision of family planning services of high quality can also make a difference.

"More lives could be saved if women had access to voluntary family planning to ensure that births are spaced properly, skilled attendance at delivery, and emergency obstetric care. UNFPA is committed to reducing the high levels of maternal death and disability that exist today," said Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director of UNFPA.

The death of a mother during pregnancy or childbirth is a human tragedy at the individual, family and societal levels. The chances of survival not only of the newborn child but also of the other children are substantially diminished when the mother dies.

As the focal agencies within the United Nations system for the health of women and children, WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA pledge to enhance - both individually and jointly in collaboration with their partners - their efforts in assisting countries strengthen their maternal health programmes.

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Annex A

WHO/UNICEF/UNFPA Estimates of number of maternal deaths, lifetime risk and maternal mortality ratio, by MDG regions, for the year 2000.

MDG region	Number of maternal deaths *	Lifetime risk of maternal deaths: 1 in:	Maternal mortality ratio (maternal deaths per 100,000 live births)
World	529,000	74	400
Developed regions*	2,500	2,800	20
Europe	1,700	2,400	24
Developing regions	527,000	61	440
Africa	251,000	20	830
Northern Africa	4,600	210	130
Sub-Saharan Africa	247,000	16	920
Latin America and the Caribbean	22,000	160	190
Asia	253,000	94	330
Eastern Asia	11,000	840	55
South-central Asia	207,000	46	520
South-eastern Asia	25,000	140	210
Western Asia	9,800	120	190
Oceania	530	83	240

* includes Canada, United States of America, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

Annex B

WHO/UNICEF/UNFPA Country estimates of number of maternal deaths, lifetime risk and maternal mortality ratio for the year 2000.

	Number of maternal deaths	Lifetime risk of maternal death: 1 in:	Maternal mortality ratio (maternal deaths per 100,000 live births)
Afghanistan	20,000	6	1,900
Albania	35	610	55
Algeria	1,000	190	140
Angola	11,000	7	1,700
Argentina	590	410	82
Armenia	20	1,200	55
Australia	20	5,800	8
Austria	3	16,000	4
Azerbaijan	100	520	94
Bahamas	4	580	60
Bahrain	3	1,200	28
Bangladesh	16,000	59	380
Barbados	3	590	95
Belarus	30	1,800	35
Belgium	10	5,600	10
Belize	10	190	140
Benin	2,200	17	850
Bhutan	310	37	420
Bolivia	1,100	47	420
Bosnia and Herzegovina	10	1,900	31
Botswana	50	200	100
Brazil	8,700	140	260
Brunei Darussalam	2	830	37
Bulgaria	20	2,400	32
Burkina Faso	5,400	12	1,000
Burundi	2,800	12	1,000
Cambodia	2,100	36	450
Cameroon	4,000	23	730
Canada	20	8,700	6
Cape Verde	20	160	150
Central African Republic	1,600	15	1,100
Chad	4,200	11	1,100
Chile	90	1,100	31
China	11,000	830	56

	Number of maternal deaths	Lifetime risk of maternal death: 1 in:	Maternal mortality ratio (maternal deaths per 100,000 live births)
Colombia	1,300	240	130
Comoros	130	33	480
Congo	690	26	510
Congo, Democratic Republic of	24,000	13	990
Costa Rica	40	690	43
Côte d'Ivoire	3,900	25	690
Croatia	4	6,100	8
Cuba	45	1,600	33
Cyprus	5	890	47
Czech Republic	10	7,700	9
Denmark	3	9,800	5
Djibouti	180	19	730
Dominican Republic	300	200	150
Ecuador	400	210	130
Egypt	1,400	310	84
El Salvador	250	180	150
Equatorial Guinea	180	16	880
Eritrea	930	24	630
Estonia	5	1,100	63
Ethiopia	24,000	14	850
Fiji	15	360	75
Finland	3	8,200	6
France	120	2,700	17
French Polynesia***	1	1,700	20
Gabon	200	37	420
Gambia	270	31	540
Georgia	20	1,700	32
Germany	55	8,000	8
Ghana	3,500	35	540
Greece	10	7,100	9
Guadeloupe***	0	8,300	5
Guam***	1	1,700	12
Guatemala	970	74	240
Guinea	2,700	18	740
Guinea-Bissau	590	13	1,100
Guyana	30	200	170
Haiti	1,700	29	680
Honduras	220	190	110
Hungary	15	4,000	16
Iceland		0	0

	Number of maternal deaths	Lifetime risk of maternal death: 1 in:	Maternal mortality ratio (maternal deaths per 100,000 live births)
India	136,000	48	540
Indonesia	10,000	150	230
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	1,200	370	76
Iraq	2,000	65	250
Ireland	3	8,300	5
Israel	20	1,800	17
Italy	25	13,900	5
Jamaica	45	380	87
Japan	120	6,000	10
Jordan	70	450	41
Kazakhstan	560	190	210
Kenya	11,000	19	1,000
Korea, Democratic People's Republic of	260	590	67
Korea, Republic of	120	2,800	20
Kuwait	2	6,000	5
Kyrgyzstan	110	290	110
Lao People's Democratic Republic	1,300	25	650
Latvia	10	1,800	42
Lebanon	100	240	150
Lesotho	380	32	550
Liberia	1,200	16	760
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	140	240	97
Lithuania	4	4,900	13
Luxembourg	2	1,700	28
Macedonia, The former Yugoslav Republic of	5	2,100	23
Madagascar	3,800	26	550
Malawi	9,300	7	1,800
Malaysia	220	660	41
Maldives	10	140	110
Mali	6,800	10	1,200
Malta	1	2,100	21
Martinique***	0	12,300	4
Mauritania	1,200	14	1,000
Mauritius	5	1,700	24
Mexico	1,900	370	83
Moldova, Republic of	20	1,500	36
Mongolia	65	300	110
Morocco	1,700	120	220
Mozambique	7,900	14	1,000
Myanmar	4,300	75	360

	Number of maternal deaths	Lifetime risk of maternal death: 1 in:	Maternal mortality ratio (maternal deaths per 100,000 live births)
Namibia	190	54	300
Nepal	6,000	24	740
Netherlands	30	3,500	16
Netherlands Antilles***	1	2,000	20
New Caledonia***	0	3,300	10
New Zealand	4	6,000	7
Nicaragua	400	88	230
Niger	9,700	7	1,600
Nigeria	37,000	18	800
Norway	10	2,900	16
Occupied Palestinian Territory	130	140	100
Oman	80	170	87
Pakistan	26,000	31	500
Panama	100	210	160
Papua New Guinea	470	62	300
Paraguay	280	120	170
Peru	2,500	73	410
Philippines	4,100	120	200
Poland	50	4,600	13
Portugal	5	11,100	5
Puerto Rico	15	1,800	25
Qatar	1	3,400	7
Reunion	5	970	41
Romania	110	1,300	49
Russian Federation	830	1,000	67
Rwanda	4,200	10	1,400
Samoa***	5	150	130
Saudi Arabia	160	610	23
Senegal	2,500	22	690
Serbia and Montenegro	15	4,500	11
Sierra Leone	4,500	6	2,000
Singapore	15	1,700	30
Slovakia	2	19,800	3
Slovenia	3	4,100	17
Solomon Islands	25	120	130
Somalia	5,100	10	1,100
South Africa	2,600	120	230
Spain	15	17,400	4
Sri Lanka	300	430	92
Sudan	6,400	30	590

	Number of maternal deaths	Lifetime risk of maternal death: 1 in:	Maternal mortality ratio (maternal deaths per 100,000 live births)
Suriname	10	340	110
Swaziland	120	49	370
Sweden	2	29,800	2
Switzerland	5	7,900	7
Syrian Arab Republic	780	130	160
Tajikistan	160	250	100
Tanzania, United Republic of	21,000	10	1,500
Thailand	520	900	44
Timor-Leste	140	30	660
Togo	1,000	26	570
Trinidad and Tobago	30	330	160
Tunisia	210	320	120
Turkey	1,000	480	70
Turkmenistan	40	790	31
Uganda	10,000	13	880
Ukraine	140	2,000	35
United Arab Emirates	20	500	54
United Kingdom	85	3,800	13
United States of America	660	2,500	17
Uruguay	15	1,300	27
Uzbekistan	130	1,300	24
Vanuatu***	10	140	130
Venezuela	550	300	96
Viet Nam	2,000	270	130
Western Sahara***	70	26	850
Yemen	5,300	19	570
Zambia	3,300	19	750
Zimbabwe	5,000	16	1,100

*** For countries with less than 300000 population or no data, estimates from the 1995 report were used.

**Please note that minor changes may be made to the final printed report due before the end of 2003.