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Improving International Maternal Healthcare

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Introduction

Maternal healthcare, the health of women during pregnancy, labor period, childbirth, and the postpartum period. This serves as a critical component of a country's overall quality of healthcare and, therefore, its commitment to human rights, especially towards biological women. Over time, global efforts have reduced maternal mortality, also known as the death of mothers, over the past decades. However, these changes are not drastic enough to significantly change the healthcare quality. Approximately 290,000 women die due to complications during pregnancy and childbirth every year. Additionally, it has been noticed that around 95% of these deaths occur in low-resource settings, namely, Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs). Many of the deaths can be preventable with access to skilled birth attendants, improved healthcare infrastructure, and safe medical interventions (Rifkin). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), each stage of pregnancy should have a positive experience ("Maternal Health Care").

This maternal mortality and maternal healthcare issue has been outlined in the Sustainable Development Goal 3.1, which is set up by the United Nations ("SDG Target 3.1"). The target is to lower the ratio of maternal mortality compared to live births ("Maternal and Newborn Health"). This issue is connected to a multitude of social, economic, and cultural factors, which include poverty, gender inequality, discrimination, and inadequate education regarding reproductive health. This leads to unsafe practices, nonskilled doctors, and less developed technology for maternal healthcare ("Maternal Health"). This report will discuss the challenges and opportunities that maternal healthcare is prone to and improve maternal healthcare worldwide ("Strengthening Maternal Health").

Definition of Key Terms

Maternal Healthcare

Maternal Healthcare refers to the specific health of women during birth processes, which include pregnancy, labor period, childbirth as well and postpartum procedures.

Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR)

The Maternal Mortality ratio, also known as the MMR, is the ratio of the number of maternal deaths to 100,000 live births. This number is regarding the processes during pregnancy, childbirth, or within certain days (approximately one and a half months) after a maternal death. This excludes accidental or unrelated causes of termination.

Antenatal Care (ANC)

Antenatal care is known as the healthcare that is provided to a pregnant woman during birth for the well-being of the mother and the unborn or born child/children. This is to ensure that no complications occur, prepare for the baby's delivery, and support the mother during these times ("Maternal Healthcare").

Skilled Birth Attendant

A skilled birth attendant is a qualified healthcare professional. This would include a midwife, a nurse, a doctor, or any other related position with the required training to manage normal deliveries and handle pregnancy emergencies. Usually, these processes would be supervised by an obstetrician or a gynecologist.

Postpartum Care:

Postpartum care is the care or medical support that is provided to mothers, biological women, and newborns after a birth has occurred. This type of care can range to weeks after birth, where recovery and preventing complications are addressed. This relates to the postnatal period ("Maternal Health").

Reproductive Health Rights:

Reproductive health rights are the ability of individuals to make and act upon informed decisions that are regarding reproductive health. These would include family planning as well as safe childbirth.

These would include the right to life, the right to access birth control, and the right to have safe access to abortion care, amongst a multitude of others.

Obstetric Fistula

Obstetric fistula refers to a severe and critical medical condition that is caused by prolonged and obstructed labor. This would occur without the aid of timely medical intervention and eventually result in significant physical consequences and social problems as well.

General Overview

Limited Access to Quality Care

Many women, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, face significant barriers to accessing quality healthcare. Geographical isolation, with long distances to travel and poor road infrastructure, can severely limit access, especially for women in rural areas. Poverty further exacerbates these challenges. Financial constraints often prevent women from affording transportation, healthcare services, and essential supplies. Moreover, the prioritization of basic needs like food and shelter over healthcare in impoverished households can lead to delayed or forgone care. The inadequacy of healthcare infrastructure also plays a crucial role. Shortages of well-equipped health centers and hospitals, coupled with a lack of essential equipment and poor sanitation, can compromise the quality and safety of maternal healthcare services.

Social and Cultural Barriers

Social and cultural barriers significantly hinder women's access to healthcare and their ability to make informed decisions about their reproductive health. In many societies, cultural norms dictate that men hold primary decision-making power regarding women's healthcare, potentially leading to delays in seeking care or denial of necessary treatment. Harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation and early marriage, have severe health consequences for women. Gender inequality further exacerbates these challenges, with discrimination and violence against women impacting their physical

and mental health. Limited education and economic opportunities for women restrict their ability to access information, make informed choices, and advocate for their needs. Furthermore, low health literacy and lack of awareness about available healthcare services, women's rights, and the importance of seeking timely care can contribute to poor health-seeking behaviors.

Inadequate Investment

Insufficient investment in maternal healthcare programs significantly contributes to the ongoing challenges. Many low- and middle-income countries allocate inadequate resources to maternal health within their health budgets. Furthermore, declining levels of international aid and inconsistent funding streams can hinder long-term progress in improving maternal health outcomes. The lack of political will to address these issues is also a major concern. Maternal health may not be a high priority for governments, leading to limited political support and inadequate investment in necessary reforms. Corruption and inefficiency within health systems can further exacerbate the problem, diverting resources away from essential services.

Weak Health Systems

Weak health systems significantly undermine efforts to improve maternal health outcomes. Shortages of skilled healthcare providers, particularly midwives and doctors, are prevalent in many countries, especially in rural areas. Inadequate salaries and poor working conditions can lead to high rates of staff turnover, further exacerbating the problem. Data collection systems are often inadequate, resulting in inaccurate or incomplete data on maternal health indicators, which hinders effective planning, monitoring, and evaluation of programs. Even when data is collected, it may not be effectively analyzed and used to inform policy decisions and program improvements. Furthermore, poor coordination among different sectors, such as health, education, and social services, can hinder the effective delivery of integrated maternal health services. Inefficient referral systems can delay access to emergency care for women experiencing complications during pregnancy or childbirth.

A significant contributor to maternal mortality is the lack of access to emergency obstetric care. Complications such as postpartum hemorrhage, eclampsia, and sepsis require immediate medical attention, including access to skilled surgical and medical interventions. However, many women in low-resource settings lack access to these critical services, often due to long distances to reach specialized facilities, inadequate transportation, and insufficiently trained healthcare providers. This lack of access to timely and effective emergency care results in preventable maternal deaths and severe maternal morbidity.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Event
1948	In this year, the World Health Organization (WHO) gets established, and has a target and emphasizes maternal health and child care.
1978	The Alma-Ata declaration is presented, which creates a huge emphasize on primary health care and healthcare in general as a fundamental and crucial human right. This would include maternal healthcare as well (“Alma Ata after 40”).
1987	Safe Motherhood Initiative, an initiative that was launched at the Nairobi conference. They have an aim to half mortality rates and emphasizing skilled and trained care during pregnancy and childbirth.
1994	The ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development) establishes a agreement which states reproductive health rights, including maternal care as well as gender equality efforts.

2020

A virus called COVID-19 which caused a worldwide pandemic negatively affected the maternal healthcare primarily in low income and developing countries.

Major Parties Involved

World Health Organization (WHO)

The World Health Organization develops global guidelines for maternal health. These would include antenatal and postpartum care recommendations. Additionally, they aim to make progress towards the reduction of maternal mortality with the use of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

NGOs

Non-governmental organizations have been majorly involved in this issue, especially in creating awareness. For example, the organization Doctors Without Borders offers emergency maternal care in zones of crisis. Additionally, another organization 'Save the Children,' has implemented several community healthcare programs that target maternal healthcare as well as child health.

Norway

A developed country that has an advanced healthcare system that is aligned with the needs of maternal care. Norway offers effective maternal healthcare.

The United States

The United States: The US is a major donor to global health initiatives, providing substantial funding through agencies like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which plays a pivotal role in shaping health policies and programs worldwide. In its commitment to improving global health outcomes, the US supports a variety of programs focused on family planning, maternal and child health, and the strengthening of health systems in developing countries. These initiatives not only

aim to reduce mortality rates and improve access to essential health services but also emphasize the importance of education and community engagement in fostering sustainable health practices.

In addition to direct funding, the US collaborates with international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and local health ministries to implement evidence-based strategies that address pressing health challenges, such as infectious diseases, malnutrition, and access to clean water. The comprehensive approach taken by the US includes investment in health infrastructure, training healthcare professionals, and developing innovative technologies that can be adapted to local contexts.

Moreover, the US recognizes the interconnectedness of global health and economic stability, understanding that healthier populations contribute to stronger economies and enhanced societal well-being. By prioritizing global health initiatives, the US not only fulfills its moral obligation to assist those in need but also reinforces its position as a leader on the world stage, demonstrating a commitment to fostering international cooperation and promoting health equity for all.

The United Kingdom

The UK, through its Department for International Development (DFID), has been a prominent player in global health, exerting considerable influence and demonstrating a strong commitment to improving health outcomes in developing countries. Their strategic approach encompasses a wide range of initiatives that prioritize investments in maternal and child health, recognizing that these areas are crucial to achieving broader health and development goals. Among their key programs, DFID focuses on enhancing access to skilled birth attendants, which is vital for ensuring safe deliveries and reducing maternal mortality rates. Furthermore, they actively support family planning services, empowering individuals and couples to make informed choices about reproduction and contributing to healthier families and communities.

In addition to these efforts, DFID places significant emphasis on emergency obstetric care, equipping healthcare facilities with the necessary resources and training to respond effectively to complications that may arise during childbirth. This comprehensive strategy not only addresses immediate health concerns but also fosters long-term improvements in healthcare systems, thereby strengthening the capacity of local health services to deliver quality care. By collaborating with various

international organizations, local governments, and non-governmental entities, the UK aims to leverage additional resources and expertise, ensuring that their initiatives have a sustainable impact.

Moreover, DFID's commitment extends beyond mere funding; they actively participate in research and advocacy aimed at raising awareness about the importance of maternal and child health on the global stage. Their efforts contribute to shaping policies and mobilizing support for health initiatives, ultimately striving to create a world where every mother can give birth safely, every child has the opportunity to thrive, and health inequalities are systematically addressed and diminished.

Canada

Canada is a significant contributor to global health initiatives, with a focus on maternal and child health, reflecting its commitment to fostering well-being across diverse populations. The country actively supports a multitude of programs that not only aim to improve health outcomes for mothers and children but also address the underlying factors that contribute to these health disparities. In particular, Canada recognizes the interconnectedness of poverty, gender inequality, and access to quality healthcare, viewing these as crucial determinants of maternal health outcomes.

To this end, Canadian organizations partner with international agencies and local governments to implement comprehensive strategies that empower women and families. These initiatives often include education and awareness campaigns that promote reproductive health rights, provide training for healthcare professionals in underserved regions, and ensure that essential medical supplies and services are accessible to those in need.

Furthermore, Canada invests in research to better understand the challenges faced by mothers and children in various contexts, enabling the development of targeted interventions that are culturally sensitive and evidence-based. By leveraging its resources and expertise, Canada not only aims to improve immediate health services but also seeks to create sustainable systems that will ultimately lead to long-term improvements in maternal and child health globally. Through these multifaceted efforts, Canada continues to play a pivotal role in advancing health equity and fostering healthier communities around the world.

Japan

Japan provides significant development assistance, including support for maternal and child health programs in developing countries. They focus on improving access to essential healthcare services, strengthening health systems, and promoting sustainable development. In particular, Japan's approach encompasses a multifaceted strategy that not only addresses immediate healthcare needs but also emphasizes the importance of long-term capacity building within local health infrastructures. This commitment is evident in their collaborative efforts with various international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and local governments, aiming to create comprehensive healthcare frameworks that can withstand future challenges.

Moreover, Japan's initiatives often include the provision of training and resources for healthcare professionals, ensuring that knowledge and skills are transferred effectively to local communities. These programs are designed to empower women and children by enhancing their access to prenatal and postnatal care, immunization services, and nutrition education. By investing in the health of mothers and children, Japan recognizes that such efforts are foundational to achieving broader developmental goals, including poverty alleviation and gender equality.

Additionally, Japan actively engages in research and data collection to better understand the specific health challenges faced by different regions, allowing for tailored solutions that reflect the unique cultural and socioeconomic contexts of the communities served. Through these comprehensive measures, Japan not only contributes to immediate health improvements but also fosters resilience and sustainability within the healthcare systems of developing countries, ultimately aiming for a healthier, more equitable global society.

Germany

Germany is a major donor to global health initiatives, providing funding and technical support to various programs, including those focused on maternal and child health. Their commitment to these critical areas highlights a recognition of the profound impact that healthy mothers and children have on the overall well-being of communities and nations. In line with this, they emphasize the importance of addressing the root causes of poor maternal health, such as poverty and gender inequality. By tackling

these foundational issues, Germany aims to create sustainable solutions that not only improve healthcare access and quality but also empower women and promote gender equity.

Furthermore, Germany actively collaborates with international organizations, governments, and non-governmental organizations to enhance the effectiveness of these initiatives. They invest in innovative strategies and research that further our understanding of maternal health challenges, ensuring that interventions are evidence-based and tailored to the specific needs of diverse populations. In addition, Germany's support extends to training healthcare professionals, improving health infrastructure, and advocating for policies that prioritize the health of women and children globally.

Through these multifaceted efforts, Germany not only seeks to alleviate immediate health concerns but also strives to foster an environment in which every woman has the opportunity to receive adequate healthcare before, during, and after childbirth, thereby contributing to the reduction of maternal and infant mortality rates worldwide.

Possible Solutions

There are multiple solutions that can be applied towards creating progress in maternal care. Firstly, creating awareness, especially in developing countries, about the prevalence of maternal health issues and the significant consequences that may arise from neglecting them is paramount. This awareness campaign could encompass educational programs, community workshops, and the distribution of informative materials that highlight the importance of maternal health and the need for proactive measures ("Strengthening Maternal Health"). Such initiatives not only inform individuals about the risks associated with inadequate maternal care but can also empower communities to advocate for better healthcare resources and support systems.

Another critical solution would be to expand access to skilled birth attendants and, more broadly, to emergency care services. The existing shortage of trained healthcare professionals, which encompasses midwives, nurses, and obstetricians specializing in maternal care, poses a serious challenge to improving maternal health outcomes. By increasing the number of skilled birth attendants, we can ensure that mothers receive personalized care that is responsive to their unique needs, thereby enhancing the overall quality of care provided during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period. Training programs aimed at equipping local healthcare workers with the necessary skills and knowledge

would be instrumental in bridging this gap, ensuring that mothers are not only attended to during delivery but also supported throughout their entire maternal journey.

Additionally, the establishment of data centers dedicated to enhancing data collection and research can serve as a crucial step toward substantial progress in maternal care. By investing in comprehensive research initiatives, we can gather valuable data that elucidate the underlying causes of maternal health disparities and inform the development of targeted interventions. This data-driven approach can lead to innovations in healthcare delivery, enabling policymakers and healthcare providers to craft evidence-based strategies that effectively address the specific challenges faced by mothers in various contexts.

Lastly, strengthening healthcare systems, particularly in rural and remote areas, is essential for addressing the significant disparities in maternal health. Initiatives could begin with the establishment of temporary healthcare facilities supervised by trained professionals to ensure safe pregnancy deliveries. Over time, these temporary setups could evolve into permanent healthcare infrastructure, providing a consistent and reliable source of maternal care. Such development is vital to guarantee that women in underserved areas have access to the necessary resources and support, thereby reducing the risks associated with childbirth. By prioritizing these improvements, we can create a more equitable healthcare landscape that fosters the health and well-being of mothers and their children across all regions.

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