



Women's,
Children's and
Adolescents'
Health

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Rise, Respond, Recover

Renewing the promise to women's, children's and adolescents' health and wellbeing in the era of COVID-19

This PMNCH Board brief summarizes the latest evidence on progress, trends and recommendations to advance women's, children's and adolescents' health, drawing upon the progress update on the UN Secretary General's Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health presented to the World Health Assembly in May. This document provides a brief preview of the forthcoming action brief, Rise, Respond and Recover, to be launched on 13 July at an official side event at the High Level Political Forum, sponsored by the Government of Estonia with PMNCH, WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA and UHC 2030. The brief updates the September 2020 publication of "Protect the Progress" progress report, produced by Every Woman Every Child.

Recommitting to the health and well-being of women, children and adolescents, wherever they live

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified existing gaps in health and social systems, and how they are felt and experienced, predominantly among the most vulnerable. The pandemic has spurred leaders, governments, civil society and development partners around the world to use this unprecedented crisis as a window of opportunity to tackle injustices and inequities and achieve greater planetary health and well-being at this crucial moment in history. Investing in women's, children's, and adolescents' health and wellbeing, and in stronger health and protection systems, is a lever for achieving that and thus for keeping our 2030 promise.

Substantial progress has been made over the past several years in many critical areas related to the health and well-being of women, children, and adolescents, but this progress has often been uneven and inconsistent.

- More than 80% of **under-5 deaths** were concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia in 2019, while those regions account for only 52% of the global under-5 population.
- Globally, the number of **maternal deaths** dropped 35% between 2000 and 2017., Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, however, accounted for 86% of all maternal deaths in 2017.
- Inequities regarding stillbirths are even greater than for most other mortality indicators around pregnancy and birth. National stillbirth rates around the world ranged from 1.4 to 32.2 stillbirths per 1,000 total births in 2019. The rate in sub-Saharan Africa was seven times higher than the lowest regional average stillbirth rate found in Europe, Northern America, Australia, and New Zealand.
- UNAIDS 2020 estimates indicated that 9 in 10 paediatric HIV infections occurred in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Between 2003 and 2015, development assistance for adolescent health accounted for only 1.6% of total development assistance for health, despite a third of the total global burden of disease being estimated to have roots in adolescence.



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Impacts of COVID-19

The direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and including those flowing from the responses of governments to contain the spread of the virus, threaten the progress made in women's, children's, and adolescents' health. Many low and middle-income countries, where the needs are greatest and health systems the most fragile, have experienced the most severe effects.

- In April and May 2021, more than a year after the COVID-19 pandemic first prompted lockdowns worldwide, 39% of 124 countries surveyed reported a drop compared with the previous year in the coverage of **family planning services**, with 23 of them (19%) reporting a decline in coverage of more than 10%. Of those 124 countries, more than a third reported drops over the same period in the coverage level of **maternal health services** (antenatal and post-natal).¹
- More than one-third of countries recently reported disruptions to both routine facility-based and outreach **immunization** services.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, 41% of **women-owned businesses** closed, compared with 34% of those owned by men.² [April 2021]
- In 2020, there were an estimated 119 women living in **extreme poverty** for every 100 men aged 25 to 34. Due in large part to the effects of COVID-19, this is expected to increase to 121 women for every 100 men by 2030, with women from South Asia particularly affected.³ [April 2021]
- An assessment by UNICEF showed that the COVID-19 crisis is having a significant impact on the mental health of adolescents and young people, with 27% of the respondents reporting feelings of anxiety and 15% feeling depressed in the last seven days.
- Adolescents all over the world are experiencing disruptions to their access to health, social, and education services. The pandemic is changing much for adolescents and youth as they experience the transitions that will define their future wellbeing: completing their education, moving into the workforce, and forming life partnerships.

In addition to the impact of the pandemic on women, children and adolescents, the global response to COVID-19 has itself highlighted important gaps, including the absence of a gender-lens in COVID-19 related interventions and research; for example, fewer than 2 in 10 interventions considered gender in an explicit way despite the predominance of women in the health workforce and the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on women and girls.

The principle of leaving no one behind is at increased risk of being left behind. itself.

Halting this spiral away from equity must become one of the main priorities of all partners globally, regionally, nationally, and sub-nationally.

Protecting the promise



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PMNCH in its *Call to Action on COVID-19* campaign⁴ is urging governments to protect and advance the health of women, children and adolescents in the context of the response to COVID-19 through strengthened political commitment, financing, policies, and service delivery. The campaign rallies all partners to support national leadership in delivering on seven “asks”, including sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health (SRMNCAH) services, quality care, social protections, clean water, and sanitation, and prevention of violence.

These resources and commitments must be targeted to the greatest needs and gaps, including financing that enhances equity. The road to recovery affords us the unique opportunity to reassess the fractures in our societies, and with political leadership at the highest level, earmarked resources for SRMNCAH, and hard work, to address and correct deep-seated inequities.

To survive, thrive and transform, every woman, every child and every adolescent needs a concerted multi-stakeholder approach (including governments, the private sector, and civil society) to work together to come back from this crisis stronger than before. The multilateralism and partnerships that drove the successes before the pandemic must be reenergized to fully move beyond this crisis.

- ***National governments and global partners should work together to promote and support the collection, analysis, and use of real-time, quality data across all areas of relevance to women's, children's and adolescents' health.***
- ***Global partners should lead the effort to expand access to and use of digital health innovations that can improve access and efficiency in achieving better outcomes for women, children and adolescents.***
- ***Global partners should promote and invest in identifying and sharing lessons learned on sustaining services critical for the health and well-being of women, children and adolescents, in the context of UHC and SDGs.***
- ***Global leaders should immediately and unreservedly commit to an equity-based approach to ending the COVID-19 pandemic, including by taking the necessary steps to dramatically scale up access to vaccinations, therapeutic and testing options, and other vital tools and commodities, such as personal protective equipment (PPE) and medical oxygen.***

The progress made over the past two decades or more in women's, children's, and adolescents' health and wellbeing worldwide is a remarkable testament to the power of coordination, partnership, commitment, and solidarity. It has shown that the health, wellbeing, and rights of the most vulnerable not only can be improved but must be improved – to save lives and to give them the opportunities to thrive that they deserve as well as to make their communities and societies stronger and more resilient overall.

The Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health is needed today more than ever because it is an essential guiding force, through its emphasis on accelerating progress and reducing inequities, for creating more resilient societies.



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By playing a central role in highlighting the world's collective accountability for the health and well-being of women, children and adolescents, the Strategy will help lead the global charge to 'build back better and fairer' from the depths of the COVID-19 destruction, so that we can recover stronger and achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals for every woman, every child, every adolescent, everywhere.

¹ UNICEF dashboard -- Tracking the situation of children during COVID-19 (accessed June 2021)

<<https://data.unicef.org/resources/rapid-situation-tracking-covid-19-socioeconomic-impacts-data-viz/>>

²² CITATION: <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/addressing-covid-19-crisis-indirect-health-impacts-women-and-girls>

³³ CITATION: <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/addressing-covid-19-crisis-indirect-health-impacts-women-and-girls>

⁴ [PMNCH Call to Action on COVID-19 \(who.int\)](#)