

The Regional Director's Foreword



Dr. Luis G. Sambo

I am pleased to share with you this Report which draws on a wide range of facts to demonstrate that the role of women in society goes far beyond childbearing and which also makes the fundamental point that women have – first and foremost – a right to good health. The Report goes on to argue that Africa needs to invest more in women's health, and, in particular, to give women the opportunity to unleash their potential for their own fulfilment and for the prosperity of their families and nations.

The Report was produced by a multidisciplinary Commission on Women's Health in the African Region established in 2009 in response to a resolution adopted by the WHO Regional Committee for Africa at its 58th Session in Yaoundé, Cameroon, 1–5 September 2008. The President of the Republic of Liberia, H.E. Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, is the Honorary President of the Commission.

The Commission, consisting of 16 experts, was mandated to gather evidence on the key factors influencing women's health in the African Region, and to recommend the appropriate actions across all sectors of society in order to achieve rapid and sustainable improvements in women's health. The Commission was also mandated to make the case for extensive investment in women's health as a contribution towards social and economic development.

The life course approach to understanding the evolution of health over time is used to identify interventions for improving women's health. The Report emphasizes women's right to health, and argues that healthy women represent an important resource of human capital that is largely untapped.

It is recognized that good scientific evidence on women's health in Africa is limited. It is also noted that during the various stages of their lives, women experience changes in their health needs. There is, thus, a need to generate disaggregated data to monitor the status of women's health, to support advocacy and to provide evidence for decision-making.

The Report shows that the African Region promotes women's empowerment and entrepreneurship. However, in respect to maternal health, the situation in the African Region is dismal, with the Region accounting for more than half of maternal deaths worldwide each year. It further shows that considerable socioeconomic benefits could be derived from improvement in women's health, which can be expressed in terms of labour productivity and national income.

This Report recommends an extensive review of the current approach to improving women's health in the African Region. To that end, governments should strongly promote investments in women's health and should take vigorous action to develop inter-sectoral initiatives and programmes that improve women's health and women's role in development.

The target audience of this Report comprises three categories of people. The first category consists of policy makers and senior government officials who have influence at the national level for the deployment

of resources for activities that can improve women's health and their social status. They include parliamentarians, senior civil servants and ministers of health, education, finance, planning and women's affairs. The second category of audience comprises representatives of local and international non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, civil society, communities, media organizations, pro-women activists, trade unions and professional associations. These audiences are important for the promotion of women's rights to good health. The third category of audience includes health workers, economists, sociologists, academics, research institutions and the business community who can influence events and opinions in favour of women's health.

In presenting this Report, it is my hope that it will serve to scale up actions by Member States, agencies and development partners focused on investing substantially in the physical, social and mental well-being of women, and on creating innovative approaches that will help improve the health and quality of life for all girls and women in Africa.



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