

The other side of the mat: Uniting for maternal, newborn and child survival and health

*by Melinda French Gates, Co-chair,
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*

When Bill and I meet people in the developing countries we visit, it's easy to see what we have in common with them, in spite of our different circumstances. Like us, they have hopes for the future. They have parents who love them and children who need them. They have intellectual curiosity, an entrepreneurial spirit and a determination to make life better for themselves and their children.

I am especially moved by the mothers I meet. They invite me into their homes, and we sit on the floor, often on opposite sides of a small mat, talking. I have young children myself, and I try to put myself in their position. What would I do if I were on the other side of the mat? What would I want for my children?

If I were a pregnant mother in Bangladesh, I would want a skilled attendant who knew how to help me deliver my baby safely. If I were a young mother in India, I would want to know the facts: that breastfeeding instead of using formula is one of the best ways to save my newborn from cholera. If I were a mother in Malawi and my daughter got sick with diarrhoea, I would hope that she could get the electrolytes she needed before it was too late.

Those would be my hopes, my dreams, my wishes. But for many, they are not the reality of their daily lives. The reality is this: In 2006, 9.7 million children died before they turned five – most from easily preventable or treatable causes.

In some countries I've visited, mothers don't give their children names for weeks or even months because they don't want to start caring about them. The chance that their children will die in those first weeks is just too high. When I hear such stories, I am jolted back to my side of the mat. How can such widespread tragedy be so common in the developing world?

On my side of the mat, when my kids are sick, they get antibiotics. On the other side of the mat, when their children get sick, they may be receiving a death sentence. Those of us in wealthy countries must try to put ourselves on the other side of the mat.

Fortunately, the story is starting to change. Governments around the world are doing more for children's health. Efforts to treat and prevent the world's most devastating diseases are improving the lives of millions of children.

To keep this momentum going, we must remember that these mothers love their children just as much as we love ours. We must see that these children have boundless potential. And we must help them realize their potential by bringing more governments, more businesses and more individuals to this work – to unite for maternal, newborn and child survival and health. When we do, all mothers will have a chance to see their children grow up happy and strong, and all children will have a chance to make their dreams come true.