Partnering to provide improved estimates of maternal mortality

Each year, over 500,000 women die as a result of pregnancy-related causes, and many others suffer lifelong health complications. Reducing maternal mortality is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals, but it is also among the most difficult to monitor owing to difficulties in measuring maternal mortality. In some cases, measurement is complicated by a lack of data; maternal deaths often go unrecorded in countries that lack reliable civil registration of births and deaths, or where the cause of death is not adequately classified or reported. Even in those countries with robust civil registration systems, maternal deaths are often misclassified or attributed to other causes – particularly if the pregnancy status of the woman is not known or recorded.

UNICEF is collaborating with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to improve the information base on maternal mortality. Building on more than a decade of inter-agency collaboration and cooperation, UNICEF, WHO and UNFPA are pooling their expertise to pioneer a new approach to estimating the number of women dying from causes related to or aggravated by pregnancy. The methodology developed for the project will correct existing data discrepancies and generate estimates for countries that currently lack data.

The group’s joint work will also enhance data collection and dissemination by compiling and reviewing country concerns to ensure widespread acceptance of final estimates on maternal mortality, obtaining the most recently reported national data from their country and regional offices and organizing interregional consultations to discuss underlying statistical issues.

The time is now

The progress that has been made in fighting gender discrimination is positive: girls are catching up with boys in school attendance and performance, and in a few developing countries and regions have surpassed them; more women are economically active and in higher level positions than ever before; and the number of women in parliament is increasing year after year. But, in addition to showing how far we have come, the assessment of this report underlines how far there is to go.

Eliminating gender discrimination will produce a double dividend, fulfilling the rights of women and girls to education and the economic and social advances they bring to ensuring that violence, abuse, exploitation and discrimination against women have no place in society. Every person who argues that women have an equal place in decision-making forums, every community that demands girls go to school, and every government committed to ensuring that violence, abuse, exploitation and discrimination against women have no place in society brings the double dividend of gender equality a step closer for this and future generations of women and children.

Tackling gender discrimination requires a different approach to policymaking. Generally, the key actors in policy decisions are governments. In areas such as debt or trade, for example, economists, members of the public and business leaders may be influential, but the decision to act rests with the governing authorities. Although governments and donors have a key role in addressing gender discrimination and inequality through legislation, policies and funding for key programmes, the core agents of change are an altogether more diverse group that includes all members of society, and women and girls themselves. These are the individuals and groups who hold the power to eliminate gender discrimination and inequalities through everyday attitudes, behaviours and practices.

The challenge to achieve such change is as exhilarating as it is daunting. It is not simply a question of producing a big decision by an important body, which would be in many ways a simpler task to conceptualize and approach. It requires societies to examine openly and honestly the extent of gender discrimination and rights violations suffered by women and girls, and commit themselves to eliminating its root causes. Although challenging at times, this process will be worth the reward. Every person who argues that women have an equal place in decision-making forums, every community that demands girls go to school, and every government committed to ensuring that violence, abuse, exploitation and discrimination against women have no place in society brings the double dividend of gender equality a step closer for this and future generations of women and children.