For every woman who dies from a pregnancy-related cause, another 20 more incur injuries, infections and disabilities – around 10 million women each year.

Underlying and basic causes of maternal and neonatal mortality and morbidity

In addition to the direct causes of maternal and newborn mortality and morbidity, there are a number of underlying factors at the household, community and district levels that also serve to undermine the health and survival of mothers and newborns. They include lack of education and knowledge, inadequate maternal and newborn health practices and care seeking, insufficient access to nutritious food and essential micronutrients, poor environmental health facilities and inadequate basic health-care services and limited access to maternity services – including emergency obstetric and newborn care. There are also basic factors, such as poverty, social exclusion and gender discrimination that underpin both the direct and underlying causes of maternal and newborn mortality and morbidity. (For a fuller outline of how these factors interact, see Figure 1.7 on page 17.)

Of particular importance is the restricted access to quality health care services that many women face. Maternal health and access to quality contraception and reproductive health services save women’s lives and are also important factors underlying newborn health and survival. Studies show that women’s health throughout the life cycle, from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood, is critical in determining maternal and neonatal health outcomes. Access to institutional facilities and skilled health personnel at birth are also important factors; it should come as no surprise that the countries with the highest rates of neonatal mortality have among the lowest rates of skilled attendants at birth and institutional deliveries.

Poverty undermines maternal and neonatal health in several ways. It can heighten the incidence of direct causes of mortality, such as maternal infections and undernutrition, and discourage care seeking or reduce access to health-care services. It can also undermine the quality of the

Figure 1.6

Direct causes of neonatal deaths, 2000*

* Percentages may not total 100% because of rounding.