

Women's and children's health

Recent decades have delivered major advances in global health, yet not all groups have experienced the benefits of this progress equally.

A historic one-size-fits-all approach, largely based on the needs and physiologies of men, has contributed to countless gaps in care – creating blind spots in medical research, inattention to the unique needs and conditions that primarily affect women or children, and growing disparities.

Though complications in pregnancy and childbirth can pose major threats to the lives of mothers and newborns, the neglect of their health reaches far beyond maternity and the first months of life. Entrenched gender inequalities and health system inadequacies can deprive women – particularly young women – of the opportunities and power to access care.

And children, who are unable to advocate for themselves, are left waiting as health responses overlook the need, or lack the resources, to ensure effective medicines and other health tools are safe and effective for the smallest and most vulnerable.

In low- and middle-income countries, where many people are already disadvantaged in their access to vital health products, women and children face even greater challenges.

How we work

At Unitaid, we save lives by making critical health products available and affordable for people in low- and middle-income countries. We identify innovative treatments and tools, help tackle the market barriers that are holding them back, and get them to the people who need them most – fast.

We take a holistic approach to women's and children's health. We address some of the starkest disparities in maternal health while looking beyond pregnancy to ensure women and children living in low- and middle-income countries can get the care they need at all stages of life.

Promoting safe pregnancy and childbirth:

Nearly 95% of deaths of women in pregnancy and childbirth occur in low- and middle-income countries from complications we have the tools to prevent and treat. Two common complications – post-partum hemorrhage and pre-eclampsia – contribute to close to half of these deaths. Both are exacerbated by anemia, a condition that affects 37% of pregnant women and can be brought on by poor nutrition, iron deficiency, malaria and other factors. Our work targets these main drivers of maternal death by accelerating access to high-quality, affordable screening tools, treatments and preventive medicines.

Meanwhile, we're building on nearly two decades of work to address the neglect of women, particularly pregnant women, in clinical research, while developing solutions to help women avoid dangerous infections like malaria during pregnancy.

Now, we're working to ensure women have access to care for diseases such as HIV, hepatitis B, syphilis, and Chagas disease so they can get the treatment they need and eliminate the risk of transmission to their newborn.

And our broader efforts to build sustainable supplies of medical oxygen – a critical treatment for pregnant women with serious complications and newborns in respiratory distress – are reinforcing capacity in resource-limited health settings to provide lifesaving care when and where it's needed most.

Each year, 14 million women hemorrhage during childbirth.

Approximately 70,000 women die as a result – 94% of whom live in low- and middle-income countries where access to lifesaving care is limited. With nearly US\$70 million invested, we are working to ensure promising but underutilized tools to prevent, detect and treat severe bleeding are available, affordable, and high-quality in resource-limited settings, to make childbirth safer.



Photo: Our work is advancing access to vital tools to help make childbirth safer in low- and middle-income countries. © Jhpiego / Karen Kasmauski

Nearly 5 million children die before their fifth birthday every year, mostly from preventable, treatable conditions.

Low oxygen in the blood is a main sign of severe illness, yet simple-to-use tools that identify dangerously low oxygen levels are often not available.

Expanding the availability of pulse oximeters in health facilities enables the identification of critically ill children, who can then be quickly referred for safe medical oxygen therapy. Oxygen blenders allow care providers to deliver the right concentration of oxygen to preterm newborns, avoiding potential organ damage associated with administering pure oxygen, and bubble continuous positive airway pressure (bCPAP) devices provide a simple and non-invasive way of ventilating newborns who are struggling to breathe. With our support, these technologies are reaching more newborns and children at lower levels of the health system where the critical care is needed.



Photo: A child is given medical oxygen, a critical treatment for children in respiratory distress. © ALIMA

Improving child survival: Our work tackles some of the leading threats to the lives of children in low-resource settings – from life-threatening infections such as malaria or pneumonia to gaps in global health responses that neglect children's needs.

We have invested millions of dollars to develop effective tests and medicines essential for identifying, preventing, or treating tuberculosis, HIV and malaria in the youngest and most

vulnerable to disease. We're backing research into new ways to deliver medicines to children, with the goal of making caring for a sick child the least disruptive possible. And we're working to ensure medical oxygen – an essential medicine that has shown to be as cost-effective as vaccination programs in reducing child mortality – is available in health systems and can be readily administered to children who need it.

Photo: Nearly 1.5 million women have accessed critical preventive services for cervical cancer. © Unitaid

Prioritizing women's access to health care:

We monitor global health responses with a particular focus on correcting for entrenched and emerging gender disparities. One example of this is the alarming rate of new HIV infections in young women in sub-Saharan Africa, who account for 77% of new HIV infections among people aged 15 to 24 years. Meanwhile, women living with HIV are six times more likely to develop cervical cancer and 9 in 10 women who die from it live in low- and middle-income countries.

A range of options for HIV prevention, from once-daily oral tablets or a long-acting injectable treatment, to a vaginal ring, could make prevention strategies possible for more people. Tailored interventions that ensure young women are informed of the risks and the preventive methods available to them can help to close the gap. Coupled with affordable and available cervical cancer screening and treatment services, we're helping ensure women can live healthy lives.

Every two minutes, a woman dies of cervical cancer.

But screening and early treatment are highly effective at preventing the progression to cancer. Together with our partners, we have screened nearly 1.5 million women for cervical cancer while working with 14 countries to develop cervical cancer prevention programs that are ready to be scaled up globally.

Looking ahead

Improvements to women's health deliver massive positive returns that ripple through societies – reducing poverty, advancing gender equality, and building more prosperous communities. Ensuring their children are born healthy and can access essential care throughout their lives strengthens the foundations upon which future societies will be built.

Close to half of our programs are already dedicated to addressing the diverse health needs of women, adolescents or children, with additional scoping underway to identify new impactful interventions. And with new analysis showing that an investment in women's health triples in economic returns¹, we are confident that our work will not only impact the health of women and children, but will have enormous benefits for development efforts more broadly.

¹ <https://www.mckinsey.com/mhi/our-insights/closing-the-womens-health-gap-a-1-trillion-dollar-opportunity-to-improve-lives-and-economies>

About Unitaid:

We save lives by making new health products available and affordable for people in low- and middle-income countries. We work with partners to identify innovative treatments, tests and tools, help tackle the market barriers that are holding them back, and get them to the people who need them most – fast. Since we were created in 2006, we have unlocked access to more than 100 groundbreaking health products to help address the world's biggest health challenges, including HIV, TB, and malaria; women's and children's health; and pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. Every year, more than 300 million people benefit from the products we've helped roll out.

