



**58th Session of the Commission for Population
Development (CPopD58)
Ensuring healthy lives and promoting
wellbeing for all at all ages
*Written statement***

Mothers' wellbeing: a cornerstone for healthier societies and sustainable development

Maternal health is a cornerstone of family and community wellbeing, serving as a foundation for population-wide health and development. Investments in both physical and mental maternal health create ripple effects, positively influencing children and other family members, and ultimately communities, and society as a whole. This aligns with SDG Goal 3 and reinforces the idea that healthier mothers lead to healthier societies, and that mothers' wellbeing matters.

The scourge of maternal mortality and morbidity

According to the World Health Organisation, in 2020 270 000 mothers died from complications linked to pregnancy or childbirth globally - a dire and unacceptable figure, which translates into about 800 mothers dying every day, or one mother dying every two minutes¹. Also disturbing is the fact that progress in eradicating maternal mortality has stagnated since 2015².

Furthermore, for every maternal death there are approximately 30 times as many cases of pregnancy-related illness or disability. A typical example of such maternal morbidity is obstetric fistula, a preventable ailment that has tragic consequences for mothers, who, in addition to their physical suffering, are often stigmatized by their communities and left abandoned and isolated. This fact is not always evident in statistics. Another significant yet often overlooked condition is pelvic organ prolapse, which affects millions of women globally and causes chronic pain, incontinence, and reduced mobility. Such disabilities, whether resulting from childbirth or pre-existing conditions, severely limit mothers' ability to care for their families, to contribute to household finances, or participate actively in their communities.

Beyond mortality statistics, it is essential to address the quality of life of mothers who survive childbirth. Many endure chronic conditions, which remain underreported and poorly addressed. Focusing on maternal health metrics beyond survival would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges mothers face.

The lack of progress in maternal health clearly points to a dramatic shortage of funding and political will. It is unconscionable that maternal mortality, which in most cases is preventable, still affects 19 times more women in low and lower middle-income countries compared to women in other countries. This points to the exorbitant price of motherhood in the poorest areas of the world.

¹ Source: WHO 2020 - <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/maternal-mortality>

² Source: WHO report 'Improving maternal and newborn health and survival and reducing stillbirth', 2023 - <https://www.who.int/news/item/09-05-2023-global-progress-in-tackling-maternal-and-newborn-deaths-stalls-since-2015--un>

It is a price that not only women pay with their lives; their motherless children and their families particularly, as well as their communities, also pay a high price, bearing the risks, inter alia, of further morbidity and mortality, increased poverty, unsettled households and academic failure, which put the social development of entire societies at risk.

Maternal mental health: a hidden pandemic with societal consequences

Not enough attention is given to maternal mental health, which remains overlooked in global mental health frameworks. Maternal mental health issues, such as postpartum depression, not only affect mothers but also have long-term consequences on children's physical, cognitive and emotional development.

Postpartum depression and anxiety, in particular, are leading causes of disability in women worldwide, with an estimated prevalence of 13% in high-income countries and 19.8% in low- and middle-income countries. However, less than 20% of women affected by these conditions report their symptoms, often due to stigma and the lack of appropriate services. These mental health challenges undermine the mother-infant bond, which is crucial for the child's emotional and social development.³

Maternal mental health problems do not stop after the peripartum period. Although mothers' participation in the labour force has been increasing, they continue to assume the majority of the unpaid domestic, care and educational work in the home – the so-called 'second shift'. As the main caregivers and educators, mothers also shoulder the unpaid and invisible cognitive and emotional work that goes hand in hand with the practical tasks they usually do, a 'mental load' that remains mostly un-acknowledged⁴. In addition, demographic and societal shifts, including urbanization, migration, and increasing individualism, are weakening traditional maternal support systems, further increasing the pressure on mothers and placing their wellbeing at risk. The result is an increasing number of mothers suffering from burn-out – often silently.

Why maternal health and mothers' wellbeing matters for society

Supporting and investing in maternal health generates long-term ripple effects across generations, benefiting all age groups within families and communities.

As the primary caregivers and as the main informal carers for household members, mothers are unpaid health workers and are on the front-line of healthcare systems, taking the first decisions. Their unpaid healthcare work and responsibilities include in particular breastfeeding, as well as taking charge in case of illness or disability of a child or a family member – in particular an older relative. They are also the ones usually fostering wellbeing and resilience within families.

However, without good physical or mental health, their caregiving abilities suffer. Poor mental health limits a mother's capacity to nurture, while physical disability makes daily caregiving tasks more challenging. This underscores the importance of supporting mothers' health — especially for those with disabilities — to ensure they can effectively perform their roles as caregivers and educators.

In particular, mothers play a vital role for Early Childhood Development, which already begins during pregnancy. Healthy mothers are essential to reducing child mortality and fostering long-term societal

³ World Health Organization. (2024). *Maternal mental health and child health and development in low and middle-income countries: An evidence*

review. <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/352658/9789240045989-eng.pdf>

⁴ See MMM 2022 Report 'Mothers' Mental Load: The Unpaid (and Unrecognized) Cognitive and Emotional Labour' by Emma Levrau – available on <https://makemothersmatter.org/mothers-mental-load-the-unpaid-and-unrecognized-cognitive-and-emotional-labour/>

well-being. In particular ensuring maternal access to proper nutrition and care reduces neonatal risks and improves developmental outcomes.

Nurturing care, which includes emotional support, adequate nutrition, and access to health services, is critical for a child's cognitive, physical, and emotional development, laying the foundation for long-term health and societal contributions. According to the World Health Organisation, malnutrition contributes to nearly 50% of child deaths under five years, and the proper nurturing care during the perinatal period significantly lowers these risks.⁵ In contexts like Cameroon, where breastfeeding is essential due to malnutrition and limited access to formula, grassroots organizations like Viallaite, a part of the MMM network, supports mothers by providing education on the benefits of breastfeeding and overcoming cultural and hygiene barriers. By expanding such community-based initiatives, we can enhance nurturing care globally and improve maternal and child health.

Mothers are also health promoters and key actors in preventing health problems. They are the primary health educators, and therefore play a pivotal role in promoting healthier lifestyles and nutrition, ensuring necessary vaccinations, preventing intergenerational traumas and instilling health-conscious habits in families.

In turn, healthy children are more likely to thrive in education and social environments, contributing to a well-educated, resilient and socially adjusted population.

Lastly, supporting maternal wellbeing and mothers can reinforce intergenerational solidarity and mitigate challenges posed by aging populations and declining fertility rates.

Mothers also often navigate the dual responsibility of raising children while caring for aging parents, a responsibility that amplifies societal pressures. By prioritizing their health and wellbeing – i.e. caring for the carer, we ensure a stronger caregiving foundation for all generations, fostering resilience in families and communities.

Call to action and recommendations

1. Invest in maternal health:

- Make universal access to maternal healthcare a reality as part of SDG 3.8⁶; ensure that every mother-to-be receives antenatal care and that every birth is attended by a skilled health worker; address the 'three delays' that are often behind maternal mortality and morbidity (Delay in decision to seek care - Delay in reaching care - Delay in receiving adequate health care)⁷
- Promote universal maternity protection, disconnected from employment
- Prioritize early diagnosis and prevention of maternal health conditions to reduce long-term treatment costs and the economic burden on healthcare systems. A preventative approach is a cost-effective investment in societal wellbeing
- Provide adequate recognition and support to grassroots organisations of all sizes that contribute to ensuring the wellbeing of mothers, especially around childbirth. Among Make Mothers Matter's Network of members, organisations like Mothers and Midwives Support⁸ in the Democratic

⁵ World Health Organization. (2018). *Nurturing care for early childhood development: A framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential*. World Health Organization. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9789241514064>

⁶ SDG 3.8: 'Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all.'

⁷ See for example: <https://www.maternityworldwide.org/what-we-do/three-delays-model/>

⁸ <https://www.mothersandmidwives.org/>

Republic of Congo, Memisa⁹, active in different African countries, as well as the Irish Maternity Support Network¹⁰, are all good examples of such organisations whose work could be scaled-up, replicated

- Integrate maternal mental health services into primary healthcare systems and provide mental health care and support for mothers, with a particular attention to the peripartum period and vulnerable mothers such as lone, indigenous, disabled or marginalised mothers.
 - Implement policy to prevent maternal mental health problems, in particular to mitigate the impacts of isolation, social pressure, financial constraints, work-related stress, etc.
 - Legislate on work life balance policies for everyone and support companies in the implementation
2. Recognise the value of the unpaid care work which is done in the homes, and address the challenges that mothers face as a result of its inequitable distribution
 - Invest in data collection, in particular time-use surveys, to measure the value of unpaid care work and make it visible to both society and decision makers
 - Invest in social services to ensure access to affordable childcare and other essential public services to support unpaid caregivers
 3. Redistribute this unpaid work more equitably within families and across society:
 - Invest in basic public infrastructure and services (including water, sanitation, energy, transportation and ICT) with a care lens to reduce the time spent on domestic work
 - Raise awareness on the imperative of a more equitable redistribution of this work, and encourage boys and men to take their share of domestic and caregiving responsibilities
 - Improve current paternity leave policies to give the means to fathers or coparents to fully engage in caring responsibilities
 - Introduce legislation to ensure that companies assume their share of responsibility and costs;
 4. Take a step back and consider the broader picture to work across sectors:
 - integrate health systems, labour and social policies, ensuring the recognition, valuation, and support of unpaid care work
 - Recognize the need to change our economic and social system, so that investments in maternal empowerment and well-being for both people and the planet are prioritised – i.e. a wellbeing economy that extends beyond GDP as a metric

At MMM, we believe it is time for decision-makers to prioritise policies that recognise and support the invaluable work of caregivers, beginning with mothers. By valuing wellbeing in economic and social policies, in particular maternal wellbeing and the unpaid work of caring which is behind it, we can ensure that investments in maternal health translate into long-lasting societal benefits.

⁹ <https://memisa.be/en/>

¹⁰ <https://www.maternitysupport.ie/>