

How Universal is Access to Reproductive Health?

A review of the evidence



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Preface

Ensuring universal access to reproductive health, empowering women, men and young people to exercise their right to reproductive health, and reducing related inequities are central to development and to ending poverty. This was recognized more than 15 years ago at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo and was reaffirmed in 2007, when universal access to reproductive health became a target of the Millennium Development Goals.

Much progress has been made since the Cairo conference. The concept of reproductive health is now accepted around the world, and in most countries policies and laws have been adopted to protect individuals and to guide programmes to improve access to maternal and child health, to make family planning more widely accessible, to prevent and treat HIV and to provide support to those living with the virus. Through these interventions, many lives have been saved and countless others have been made better. Yet much remains to be done.

UNFPA is proud to present three publications on sexual and reproductive health that assess the situation at this critical time and look at universal access from many different angles.

This report, ***How Universal is Access to Reproductive Health? A review of the evidence***, looks at current data, trends and disparities in universal access to reproductive health, the second target of Millennium Development Goal 5. While recognizing the continuing challenge of measuring key indicators for this target (adolescent fertility, contraceptive prevalence and the unmet need for family planning), the report finds that earlier progress has slowed. Moreover, disparities in access based on wealth, education and rural or urban residence have widened. The report demonstrates clearly that intensified efforts are needed to extend reproductive health to all, and that quality data is essential to monitor progress and identify priorities for action.

The two other publications are:

Sexual and Reproductive Health for All: Reducing poverty, advancing development and protecting human rights is the ultimate response to a few key questions: What does universal access to reproductive health mean? Why is it important? What have we achieved so far? And where do we go from here?

Eight Lives: Stories of reproductive health gives a human face to our work. This publication tells the story of eight women who have endured—and overcome—the plight of poor sexual and reproductive health.

My hope is that these publications will contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexity and the centrality of reproductive health, and that they will lead to accelerated progress, along with heightened commitment and an all-too-real sense of urgency.

Thoraya Ahmed Obaid
UNFPA Executive Director
September 2010

Executive summary

Ten years ago, in 2000, representatives from 189 United Nations Member States adopted the Millennium Declaration, affirming their shared commitment to reducing poverty and improving the quality of life for all. These commitments were translated into eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including MDG5: Improve maternal health. Under this goal are two targets: MDG5.A—to reduce maternal mortality, and MDG5.B—to achieve universal access to reproductive health.

The emphasis of this report is on identifying areas where progress has been made and where it has lagged for three indicators of access to reproductive health: adolescent birth rate, contraceptive prevalence rate and unmet need for family planning.

Empirical evidence for these three indicators is drawn from data compiled by the United Nations Population Division and from an analysis performed by UNFPA using Demographic and Health Survey data. The report reviews global, regional and country estimates to assess current levels and trends between 1990 and 2008. It also examines disparities in access in sub-Saharan Africa linked to key social and

far-reaching, with substantial declines in adolescent birth rates and increased access to and use of family planning services. However, global averages remain largely unchanged since 2000.

Diversity among regions has grown since 2000. All regions, with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa, showed major declines in adolescent birth rates during the 1990s. Those declines have continued since 2000 in two regions—Latin America and the Caribbean and Southern Asia. Levels of access to reproductive health are diverse among developing regions, particularly since 2000.

The poorest, least educated women in sub-Saharan Africa have lost ground, with adolescents lagging farthest behind. The data for 24 sub-Saharan African countries show that, while the region falls far behind the others on all three indicators, many women, including the wealthiest and those with secondary or higher levels of education, have seen notable progress in recent years. However, in many settings, the poorest, least educated women have lost significant ground, and adolescent girls retain the lowest level of contraceptive use and the highest level of unmet need for family planning.

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