

Moving towards universal coverage
**Issues in maternal–newborn health
and poverty**

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The effect of
maternal–newborn ill-health
on households: economic
vulnerability and
social implications

■ Guy Hutton

Moving towards universal coverage—about the series

This series is a joint product of three Geneva-based WHO Departments: Making Pregnancy Safer; Reproductive Health and Research; and Health Policy, Development and Services. It aims to provide, through peer-reviewed papers, the latest evidence and thinking on key issues that are important for making progress towards the goal of universal coverage for essential health-care interventions. Issues related to the health and coverage of the poor are a special focus of the series, as are the implication of universal coverage for health-care programmes and systems.

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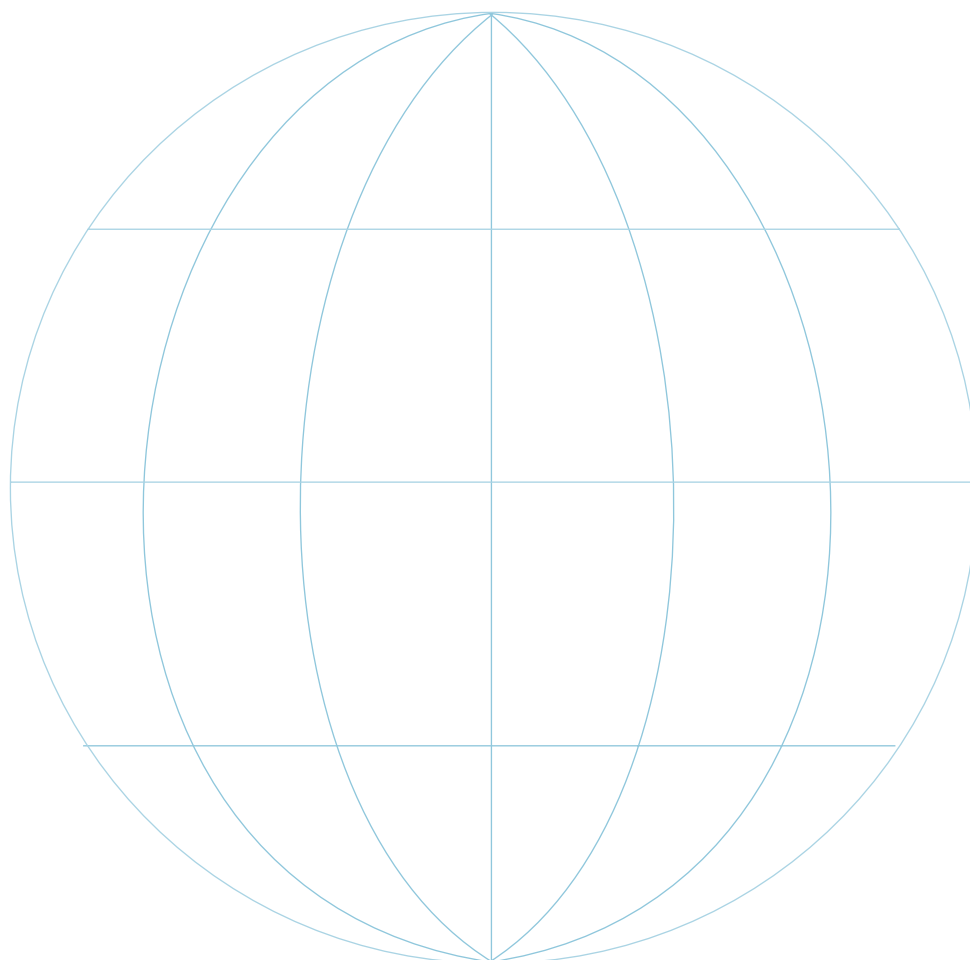
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The effect of maternal–newborn ill-health on households: economic vulnerability and social implications

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Abstract

Pregnancy and childbirth are wonderful and life-changing events. They can also bring potential for illness and suffering. Women from economically developing societies are especially vulnerable during these periods. The overall objective of this paper is to undertake a review of the evidence base on economic vulnerability and social implications in relation to maternal and newborn ill-health, and to highlight the major gaps in this evidence base.

The social implications of ill-health have received little attention in publications; the searches undertaken have not brought to light empirical literature from developing countries explicitly linking maternal and newborn health status with decision-making at household level. Some studies deal with the impact of health-related expenditures (e.g. catastrophic expenditures) on family budgets, and on ways of dealing with this problem, but none appears to relate to episodes of maternal or newborn illness, and no studies detail the impact of maternal or newborn ill-health on participation in social life. A few studies describe social and family networks that help the mother get through this difficult period, especially in the presence of illness. In more traditional societies, family and relatives tend to provide emotional and material support, including rituals, whereas the wider social networks are more important for information and comparison support. Both have implications concerning how women deal with illness, including the search for health care.

Further research should focus on a better understanding of the relationship between health and household economy specifically related to maternal and newborn health, making use inter alia of the increasing number of comprehensive household surveys on the same households over time. What is needed is a deeper understanding of the implications of maternal complications and newborn conditions on the social standing of the family, on the woman herself, and on her ability and that of her family to participate in the social life of the community. In view of the psychological disorders associated with the perinatal period, and implications (knock-on effect) for the general well-being of the family, this topic deserves to be examined further through a more detailed literature review.



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