Maternal and Child Health: The Essential Role of Safe Surgery

Summary
Access to safe, affordable and quality surgical care is a critical but often neglected component of meeting basic health needs worldwide. Around the world, an estimated 5 billion people are unable to access safe, affordable surgical and anaesthesia services when needed.\(^1\) The majority of this burden falls on low- and middle-income countries where 9 out of 10 people cannot access even the most basic surgical services. Even where service is available, the cost of accessing essential surgical care is estimated to contribute to impoverishment for 33 million patients each year.\(^2\)

It is a grave injustice that around the world, women and girls are disproportionately impacted by a lack of access to safe, essential surgical care, contributing to preventable death, disability, social exclusion and financial hardship. Of the 136 million women who give birth each year, it is estimated that 1 in 3 pregnant women will require a medical or surgical intervention during birth, and between 5% and 15% will require a caesarean section.\(^3\) Low-income countries are most heavily impacted by maternal mortality, with 99% of deaths occurring in developing countries. An additional 15 million women develop a disabling condition in the absence of appropriate care.\(^4\)

Every minute of the day a mother dies as a result of pregnancy- and childbirth related complications. For each woman who dies in childbirth, 20 more suffer injury, infection, or disease.\(^5\) 15% of pregnancies require emergency obstetric care, yet few have access to such care, contributing to nearly 300,000 maternal deaths annually.\(^6\) Untreated obstetric fistulas, a common cause of morbidity in low-resource settings, affect 2-3 million women and result in social stigma and ostracisation.\(^7\)

Access to safe surgical care not only represents an essential health need but also plays a critical role in contributing to women’s equality, wellbeing and economic productivity. Failing to invest in surgical care is estimated to cost low- and middle-income countries as much as $12.3 trillion dollars in lost gross domestic product (GDP) by 2030.\(^8\) Investing in surgical care represents a non-negotiable step for achieving gender equity, supporting universal health coverage and fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals.

Health Care and the Role of Essential Surgery
Surgical care is an essential health service that is necessary to treat and manage a broad range of conditions in emergency situations, including diseases pertaining to maternal and child health. Access to basic surgical and obstetric interventions can reduce the burden of disease in maternal and newborn populations by around 40% by preventing obstructed labor.\(^9\) With more than 25 million females of reproductive age in emergent need of these services, the demand for access to safe, affordable, and timely surgical and obstetric care is a public health issue of utmost importance.

2 Ibid.


