CITIZENS’ HEARINGS: INDIA

Each year as many as 44,000 Indian women die needlessly during pregnancy and childbirth. Official estimates place India’s Maternal Maternity Ratio (MMR) at 167 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. White Ribbon Alliance India (WRAI) along with Centre for Catalyzing Change, the International Planned Parenthood Foundation, the Family Planning Association of India (FPA India), Plan India, Save the Children, and World Vision India, organised a National Citizens’ Hearing in order to call on citizens and government to develop an action plan to address women’s and children’s health in India.

The National Citizens’ Hearing in India took place in New Delhi on 10 April 2015, and was attended by more than 150 representatives, including civil society, journalists, government officials and citizens. Participants stressed that citizens must be empowered to demand their entitlements, and be engaged in matters that are important to their health and well-being. Accountability mechanisms must be set up to enable citizens to track commitments.

Aparajita Gogoi, National Coordinator for White Ribbon Alliance India and Executive Director of Centre for Catalyzing Change, said at the hearing, “Engaging citizens is what will take us from setting goals to actually meeting them.”

The Citizens’ Hearing highlighted the gaps in RMNCAH services, the importance of quality of care to ensure access for hard-to-reach populations, and the importance of citizens’ voices in holding health services to account as well as in planning and budgeting processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made by citizens and civil society:

- Decentralisation of powers to local levels is essential, especially in planning and monitoring, to ensure that all plans are drawn up and implemented, meeting the needs of the community.
- Community awareness and empowerment programmes can be used to enable the community to claim their entitlements to health care and expect a better standard of quality from health services. User-friendly, low cost and simple tools should be developed for the community to track service delivery.
- It is important that marginalised and minority sections of society, including youth, are empowered and encouraged to contribute fully to development plans and schemes.
- There is a shortage of comprehensive emergency obstetric care and referrals remain inadequate at public health care facilities in India, despite positive policies in this area. This needs to be urgently addressed by the government.
- The public health system must ensure an effective citizen engagement process, for example through client feedback, to address grievances related to entitlements and public health services.
- Greater effort is needed to make gender an integral component of the national political agenda, including the adoption of gender budgeting.
- Linkages to other sectors is important: the high prevalence of anaemia amongst Indian adolescent girls and women is indicative of the poor status of the girl child. It is important that the issue of good nutrition for girls and women is highlighted.
- The role of midwives, auxiliary nurse midwives and nurses is critical in preventing maternal deaths and therefore it is vital to improve their competence and skill sets.
- The public health care system should be strengthened at the grassroots level, by increasing the number of trained health workers (including men where there are shortages in female health workers), providing quality antenatal care and postnatal care mechanisms and promoting preventive health care services such as immunisations.
- Comprehensive implementation of the commitment to ‘Birth-Preparedness, Complication Readiness’ mechanisms is necessary to ensure guidelines are used on the ground.
- Greater support is needed from elected representatives for women’s and children’s health, including for the facilities and funds needed to make services available.
- The media have an important role to play to influence public health policies and to act as a platform for civil society to make their voices heard.

“People need to be more responsive and demanding so that no mothers die in India. We need to empower citizens to demand fulfillment of entitlements and quality health services.”

Dr Rakesh Kumar, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, at the National Citizens’ Hearing, India