

## **CARE International: Increasing Access to Health Care Amongst Women and Girls**

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Currently, women and girls make up the greatest share of the world's poor. However, research has shown that female empowerment and greater health access can lead to increased health for the entire family (Cooperation for Assistance and Relief Everywhere International, 2011). CARE International is a non-governmental organization that works in over 86 countries to decrease poverty, with a particular focus on aiding women and girls (Cooperation for Assistance and Relief Everywhere International, 2011). CARE *engages in a two-pronged approach to promoting access to health care within this vulnerable population*: increasing the availability of emergency reproductive care as well as addressing underlying societal norms of gender equality (Cooperation for Assistance and Relief Everywhere International, 2012).

One of the major barriers to health care for women and children involves the lack of health resources in low-income communities (Montreal World Health Organization, 2014). Female health is particularly compromised during times of disaster and conflict; in fact, women make up the majority of deaths occurring from natural disasters (Cooperation for Assistance and Relief Everywhere International, 2012). Humanitarian assistance programs offered by CARE International has greatly increased access to reproductive and obstetric care during times of crisis. For example, during the flood that affected Pakistan in 2011, CARE's mobile clinics provided health care professionals and equipment, as well as established a referral system to address the obstetric needs of the two hundred thousand pregnant women affected by the flood (Cooperation for Assistance and Relief Everywhere International, 2011).

However, increasing the availability of physical resources is not enough to ensure long-term health care access for women and girls. CARE International employs strategies at multiple levels to address underlying issues of gender

inequality at both the community and institutional levels (Cooperation for Assistance and Relief Everywhere International, 2012).

Women in many countries often are stripped of their individual power to make reproductive choices by suppressive social norms. For example, CARE's survey data show that most women in the region of Uttar Pradesh, India, feel that they have a right to be physically abused by their husbands upon refusal to have sex (Cooperation for Assistance and Relief Everywhere International, 2012). In addition to contributing to the continual decline of female health, the adoption of these social norms by local health care workers results in poor health care quality; women who seek reproductive care are often treated with disrespect or are subject to culturally insensitive practices. The low quality of health care discourages women from using local health services and has been found to be a significant factor in limiting access to health care amongst women of the community (Cooperation for Assistance and Relief Everywhere International, 2012).

CARE addresses this problem through a two-pronged strategy involving both families within the community and health institutions. For example, CARE's Social Analysis and Action Approach (SAA) integrated into its family planning and reproductive services in Ethiopia, Kenya and Rwanda uses stimulated open dialogue amongst male and female members of family units to question engrained beliefs about gender roles. CARE's Participatory Voices Program in the Huancavelica, Piura and Puno regions of Peru changes the nature of health care institutions by increasing the ability of local organizations to encourage and regulate the quality of healthcare in the community. Regular visits to health facilities and interviews with female patients about their health care experience enables the production of status reports that are analyzed by the Ombudsman Office to produce lasting change in the quality of the health care system (Cooperation for Assistance and Relief Everywhere International, 2012). This program has increased health care utilization amongst women of the community; the number of births occurring within hospitals in Puno rose by 33% one year after the program was implemented (Cooperation for Assistance and Relief Everywhere International, 2012). Together, targeted programs at both the community and institutional levels addresses underlying

gender inequalities that results in sustained access to health care amongst women in vulnerable communities.

The health of women and girls play a significant role in determining the health of the rest of the family (Cooperation for Assistance and Relief Everywhere International, 2011). CARE International ensures long-term access to health care amongst this vulnerable population by expanding the availability of health care resources as well as addressing underlying societal values in gender equality amongst its partner countries.

### References

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