

WOMEN'S HEALTH

MAKING CHOICE IN SEXUAL AND
REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH A REALITY

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A note on terminology

For brevity throughout our report, we speak of "women" and "women's health". Of course, it is not only people who identify as women for whom it is necessary to access women's health and reproductive services and who are affected by the issues raised here. We believe that progress in the space on these issues will also positively influence the lives of individuals whose gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth.

INTRODUCTION

For the 2 billion women of reproductive age around the world, the impacts of their sexual and reproductive health, such as periods, fertility and menopause, are all part of everyday life. All women have a right to good health care, that takes into account the different stages of women's lives, from adolescence to old age. Yet for decades, this area of health has been under-funded and under-prioritised.

This has led to disparities in outcomes for women and has substantial negative impacts on the economy and broader society. It also means that globally, sexual and reproductive health conditions remain one of the leading causes of mortality and morbidity for women and girls.

"GENDER EQUALITY IS BOTH A PRECONDITION AND A DRIVING FORCE FOR SECURING WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS - AS WELL AS THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TARGETS, WHICH ARE OUR BEST CHANCE FOR DELIVERING HEALTH AND WELL-BEING FOR ALL."

Dr Lale Say
Unit Head at World Health Organisation and HRP

Recent developments in technology, policy and society are shifting the innovation landscape when it comes to women's health, but do entrenched misconceptions or cultural taboos around sexual and reproductive health impede true freedom of choice? Are women being given all the tools to have autonomy over their own bodies, and who is in control when it comes to accessibility of medicines and services?

In this report we explore the reality of women's ability to choose preventative and therapeutic treatment and their ability to access innovations aimed at improving their sexual and reproductive wellbeing, as well as essential medicines and services. We also look at the role of communication and campaigning in supporting more open conversations, 'normalisation' of language around sexual and reproductive health, and the impact this has on driving progress in this space.



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HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVE THE CONTINUING UNMET NEED

Women make up more than 49 per cent of the world's population¹ and 40 per cent of the global workforce,² making a substantial contribution to the functioning of the global economy through both paid and unpaid work.³

Yet despite the notable contributions from women to society, women's health is not adequately prioritised in countries across the world. The subsequent impact on women, and on society, remains invisible and unaddressed, but the evidence is growing.

IMPACT OF ILL HEALTH ON WOMEN

20% of the overall global burden of ill-health for women is accounted for by reproductive and sexual ill-health

15-19 year old girls' leading cause of death are causes related to pregnancy and childbirth, globally

900K women had left their job due to menopause⁴ and it has been estimated that global menopause productivity losses could amount to \$150 billion a year⁵

13.8% of women reported absenteeism during their period, with 3.4 per cent reporting absenteeism every, or almost every menstrual cycle⁶

1 IN 10 women of reproductive age is estimated to have endometriosis, which can cause debilitating pelvic pain and infertility⁷

HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVE: THE CONTINUING UNMET NEED

Ultimately, too many girls and women are still unable to reach their full potential because of persistent health, social and gender inequalities and health system inadequacies.⁸

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), unmet needs for sexual and reproductive health deprive women of the right to make "crucial choices about their own bodies and futures".⁹

Many policy frameworks recognise this, including the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Goal 5 – all of which acknowledge the need to achieve gender equality and the impact this will have on women's health. Furthermore, given the critical role of women in the health of their family and society as a whole, improved equity and access to healthcare will benefit not only women themselves but their family and wider community.¹⁰

"THE EXPLICIT RECOGNITION AND REAFFIRMATION OF THE RIGHT OF ALL WOMEN TO CONTROL ALL ASPECTS OF THEIR HEALTH, IN PARTICULAR THEIR OWN FERTILITY, IS BASIC TO THEIR EMPOWERMENT."

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995¹¹



HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVE: THE CONTINUING UNMET NEED

The world is beginning to turn

In this final decade of action towards the 2030 global goals and commitments, the movement to improve women's health, including their sexual and reproductive health, is gaining momentum.

Governments and public sector bodies are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of supporting women to have greater information, support and access to improved treatments as part of their sexual and reproductive health. In 2004, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched its first global strategy on reproductive health. This was followed in 2010 with the launch of the Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health and the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health, in 2016. National governments are also starting to respond. Australia launched its National Women's Health

Policy in 2010 and the UK is preparing to launch its first ever Women's Health Strategy in Spring 2022, with a focus on the 'life course approach' to women's health – understanding the changing health and care needs of women and girls across their lives.

The private sector is also playing an increasingly important role – driving investment in specific innovations to support women throughout their reproductive life cycle, updating policies to better reflect the needs of women in the workplace, and initiating conversations around women's health-related topics that have long been shrouded in cultural taboo and stigma.



HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVE: THE CONTINUING UNMET NEED

A key driver in progress has been the increase in high profile women speaking out, alongside a growing active grassroots network, both of which are leading the charge in opening up conversations about sexual and reproductive health. From Michelle Obama talking about IVF and the menopause, to the global campaign to 'End Period Poverty' – progress is being made in both tackling institutionalised inequalities and normalising discussion around previously stigmatised topics such as periods and the menopause.

Nevertheless, evidence shows there is more to be done. Results from the first ever Global Women's Health Index, launched by Hologic in 2020 as a multi-year, comprehensive global survey about women's health, reveals extreme inequality across the globe. The world's score of 54 out of 100 signals global leaders have significant work to do to improve women's health. In fact, leaders in all countries

and territories do, as no one country or territory scores higher than 69 out of 100 on the Index.¹²

In a post-COVID world that, more than ever, understands the significance of equitable access to healthcare for all, there is an urgent argument to be made for the prioritisation of access and innovation in women's health. The results of the Global Women's Health Index must act as a baseline for global progress in women's health and a further catalyst – to ensure half of the world's population are able to realise their full potential, and to reap the global benefits that the prioritisation of women will yield for the global population as a whole.



THE IMPACT OF THE BEIJING DECLARATION

The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is a key United Nations document setting out an agenda and a roadmap to realise gender equality and empower women and girls worldwide. The resolution was adopted by the UN at the end of the Fourth World Conference on Women on 15 September 1995 to promulgate a set of principles concerning the equality of men and women.



INNOVATION IN WOMEN'S HEALTH

JUST
2 PER CENT
of sales revenue from pharmaceutical companies is spent on research into contraceptive products

Until recently, as little as four per cent of all healthcare research has targeted specifically women's health, despite the fact that women represent nearly half of the global population.¹³ Women have continued to be under-represented in clinical trials, and the different impacts of the male and female body are not well understood. It was only in 2001 that sex (being male or female) was deemed to be an important variable in research and an area in which increased knowledge should be cultivated.¹⁴

Innovation in contraception is a case in point. Sixty years since its invention, increasing awareness of the side-effects of the oral contraceptive pill is leading to a growing call for innovation and alternatives. Yet many of the same pills prescribed today have been in circulation for decades - Microgynon, the combined hormonal pill most commonly prescribed to first-timers in the UK, dates back to 1966. A study of women in Europe and the US found that 20-30 per cent were dissatisfied with their contraception.¹⁵ Yet, pharmaceutical companies have typically spent just two per cent of their sales revenue on research into contraceptive products, as opposed to an average of 20 per cent into other development areas.¹⁶ Barriers have included a lack of investment in research for contraceptive development, due to the potentially life-altering implications of unplanned pregnancies and other health risks for trial participants.

INNOVATION IN WOMEN'S HEALTH

“THERE HAS ALSO BEEN A CLEAR SHIFT TO WORKING ON TREATMENTS AIMED AT FOSTERING EFFECTIVE PREVENTION THAT CONTRIBUTES TO THE WELLNESS OF WOMEN.”

However, we are increasingly seeing women's sexual and reproductive health viewed as a field ripe for innovation. Innovators in health research and technology are focused on addressing areas such as period health, fertility, pregnancy and menopause. There has also been a clear shift to working on treatments aimed at fostering effective prevention that contribute to the wellness of women.

Positive developments that could change women's lives for the better are on the horizon for menstrual and menopausal pharmaceutical products. In 2019, a non-hormonal therapy to balance oestrogen levels in women from early onset menopause through to post-menopause became available in the USA. The second half of 2022 will see this product ([Femarelle](#)) become available in multiple countries.





INNOVATION IN WOMEN'S HEALTH

Equally, the first orally available treatment for the pain associated with endometriosis was approved in 2018. The gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) antagonist prevents the need for daily, monthly, or every three-month injections. Two other oral GnRH antagonist candidates are expected to launch by 2023.

Investment in finding alternatives to traditional contraceptive options are also well underway. As women are increasingly aware of their sexual and reproductive health and are starting to ask for more from the healthcare they receive, there is a growing number who do not want to accept the mental and physical side effects of what exists today.

LATEST ADVANCES IN BIRTH CONTROL AND CONTRACEPTION

- 2017** + Pfizer, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Children's Investment Fund Foundation extend a collaboration to broaden access to Pfizer's all-in-one injectable contraceptive for women in the world's poorest countries.
- 2018** + Researchers begin tests for a [male contraceptive gel](#)
- 2019** + Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation offer \$13 million funding for a [once-a-month oral contraceptive pill](#) developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- 2020** + Bayer announces a license agreement with Daré Bioscience, Inc. to commercialize Ovaprene - a hormone-free, intravaginal contraceptive ring. If approved, it could be the first monthly non-hormonal contraceptive product.
- 2021** + [Gedeon Richter](#) UK Ltd becomes marketing authorisation holder for Evra, a once-weekly contraception for women via a transdermal contraceptive patch.

INNOVATION IN WOMEN'S HEALTH

The rise of FemTech

Women's appetite for innovation to improve their lives is palpable. Studies show that women spend 29 per cent more on healthcare needs than men and are 75 per cent more likely to use digital tools for health-related information.

Reproductive health is reported to be on track to hold a leading market share of the women's health industry, with an estimated global worth of \$171 billion by 2027, and Femtech start-ups and tech innovators are driving the acceleration of new and improved solutions to support women. In fact, the Femtech sector alone is forecast to triple in value globally to £50 billion by 2027.

Entrepreneurs in Femtech are starting to cut through the stigma surrounding women's sexual health and are increasingly securing investment for new solutions to support every element of preventative care, sexual wellbeing, fertility and menopausal symptoms. Largely led by women, with 71 per cent of people working in Femtech being female (compared to the 29 per cent of those working in broader STEM), these companies are fully focused on delivering solutions with an understanding of women's needs at the core.

As well as the direct health benefits of FemTech, these businesses are proving extremely beneficial for the scientific understanding of women's bodies through pooling more data and insights from those who use them, in a field that has historically been grossly under-researched.¹⁷

REVOLUTIONISING WOMEN'S HEALTH

- + Elvie, whose products include the hands-free and cordless breast pump and pelvic floor trainer, is on track to hit \$100 million in annual revenue
- + Flo, an app to monitor menstrual cycles, recently received \$50 million in investment
- + British Olympian Dame Jessica Ennis-Hill raised £1 million in 2021 in a pre-seeding round for a period-tracking app for athletes

\$23BN

With 1.1 billion women expected to be postmenopausal by 2025 globally, some forecast the menopausal healthcare sector will reach \$23 billion by 2028

The emerging focus on menopausal health

A sub-section of the market earmarked for growth is innovative products and digital services that relate to the menopause. With 1.1 billion women expected to be postmenopausal by 2025 globally, some forecast the menopausal healthcare sector will reach \$23 billion by 2028.

The broader implications of better supporting women during the menopause is clear. Occurring at a time when many women will be at senior levels in their careers. A recent UK study found that nearly a quarter of all women who experienced ill health due to the menopause left their jobs.¹⁸

This drive to focus on women-centred solutions is a substantive step towards enabling women to take control of the choices relating to their bodies.

THE UK'S JOURNEY TO IMPROVED ACCESS

2021 was a landmark year for contraception in the UK as it made two brands of "progesterone only" pill - Hana and Lovima- accessible from pharmacists. This ruling from the UK's drug regulator saw the pill widely available over the counter for the first time since its introduction sixty years ago.¹⁹

The Government has now launched a consultation to reclassify a low-dose hormone replacement therapy (HRT) product for the treatment of menopausal symptoms in order to make it available in UK chemists.²⁰



Improvements in access will be watched closely by other countries, particularly if data can be collected and made available in relation to correlating areas, such as decreases in unwanted pregnancies, employee productivity and general wellbeing.

“CONTINUED PRESSURE FROM ADVOCATES IN SOCIETY TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF PRE-MENOPAUSAL AND MENOPAUSAL WOMEN, WILL HELP SECURE ONGOING INVESTMENT IN THIS SPACE, WHICH, UNTIL RECENTLY, HAS BEEN LARGELY OVERLOOKED.”



ACHIEVING ACCESS FOR ALL

Across the world, progress has been slow in moving towards a fairer, more equal society that empowers women to make their own choices about their bodies. If innovation is one side of the coin, access is the other.

The right to access essential medicines, such as contraceptives and pharmaceuticals for reproductive and sexual health and services is a fundamental aspect of the human right to health and imperative to achieving good health. But it is also a means by which individuals and women can build their health capabilities and exercise freedom of choice over their bodies. However, millions of women and girls still do not have this option available to them.

THE IMPACT OF POOR ACCESS

OVER
35%
of pregnancies in Europe are considered unplanned²¹

270M
women in need of family planning around the world still do not have access to modern contraceptive methods²²

£240M
is lost by the NHS each year because more than a third of women are unable to access contraception services and half of all UK pregnancies are unplanned²³

68K
women are killed every year from unsafe abortions, representing 13 per cent of all pregnancy-related deaths.²⁴

25M
estimated unsafe abortions take place worldwide each year, majorly in developing countries²⁵

ACHIEVING ACCESS FOR ALL

“WOMEN WHO HAVE ACCESS TO LEGAL CONTRACEPTION BETWEEN 18 AND 21 MAKE 5 PER CENT MORE PER HOUR AND 11 PER CENT MORE PER YEAR BY THE TIME THEY ARE 40, COMPARED TO THOSE WHO DON’T”

Studies indicate that poor reproductive health and sexual health problems, including complications arising from early childbearing, HIV infection and STIs are significant disease burdens in developing countries. In addition, essential medicines and contraceptives for reproductive health are often not available to the majority of women who need them.²⁶

A woman’s age at her first pregnancy sharply differentiates her health outcomes - in almost every part of the world women who report first becoming pregnant before the age of 19 score worse in every area of their health than those who were older when they first became pregnant.²⁷

But the beneficial outcomes of being able to access contraceptives go beyond health – delaying parenthood means you can invest more time in education and, subsequently, have improved employment opportunities. A recent report stated that women who have access to legal contraception between 18 and 21 make 5 per cent more per hour and 11 per cent more per year by the time they are 40, compared to those who don’t.²⁸ The inequity of the impact of parenthood is well evidenced, with a 2018 study conducted in Denmark finding that having children decreases women’s earnings over time. However, men’s incomes stayed on par with their peers who had no children.²⁹



ACHIEVING ACCESS FOR ALL

A growing focus on access needs to sit firmly alongside establishing better education on women's sexual health. Each extra year in schooling is linked to a 4.7 per cent increase in the use of modern contraceptive methods.

As the [Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists](#) states, "Too often, women are struggling to get the right information they need about their health, to book routine appointments and to get their basic health needs met."³⁰

Education and access to treatment and preventative care is also critical for STD/STI Testing and Treatment - a priority for WHO.³⁰ The organisation identified limited resources, stigmatisation, poor quality of services and lack of accessible screening and treatment as ongoing challenges here. Other areas of reproductive health suffer from a similar lack of information and support. In the UK, for instance, it was recently found only 8 per cent of women felt that they had access to enough information on gynaecological conditions, such as endometriosis and fibroids.³¹



ACHIEVING ACCESS FOR ALL

Role of industry

While the journey is far from easy, it is safe to say the topics of access and education are firmly on the global agenda for many countries' governments and global NGOs. The truth is they will not be able to tackle this alone and the support of private organisations in funding and raising awareness of critical issues is likely to be welcomed.

Industry is making important contributions to improve access. Big pharma and biotech have invested in the development of new contraceptives designed for low-income countries. Companies like Maxwellia are also helping to evolve the way in which women are able to choose treatment options that are right for their needs. Organisations such as Medicines360 have demonstrated what a mission-driven, nonprofit pharmaceutical model can deliver, supplying its hormonal IUD to over 300,000 low-income women in over 2,500 public health clinics in the U.S. and poised to supply women across the globe with the hormonal IUD at an affordable price.



OVER THE COUNTER INNOVATION

Founded in 2013, Maxwellia is a female founded, British pharma company and the world's only company completely dedicated to "switching" prescription-only medicines into versions that can be bought over the counter in a pharmacy.

It aims to provide people with new ways to conveniently look after themselves by making widely used and effective medicines available over the counter at the pharmacy.



THE POWER OF COMMUNICATION

In many cultures, the natural aspects of the female reproductive life cycle, such as periods and the menopause remain taboo subjects, with women lacking confidence to seek help. It has been the norm for debilitating symptoms of endometriosis, postnatal depression, menstrual pain and the menopause, for example, to be seen as something to endure rather than address.³²

THE POWER OF COMMUNICATION

The ongoing stigma also means that girls and women can be unaware of symptoms, treatments and when to seek support. In 2018, the United Nations (UN) declared that shame, stigma, and misinformation surrounding menstruation contribute to serious human rights concerns and lead to detrimental health outcomes for women.³¹ They found that menstruation taboos can keep women and girls from touching water or cooking, attending religious ceremonies, or engaging in community activities. These taboos reinforce gender-based discrimination, perpetuating the idea that menstruating women and girls are unclean.

While stigma around discussing reproductive health and wellbeing remains, there are signs in some countries that we are heading for a more progressive, supportive future. Initiatives such as the Girls Reproductive Health, Rights and Empowerment Accelerated in Tanzania (GRREAT) initiative, enables girls and young women to learn from fellow girls without fear or embarrassment, not only increasing direct sexual and reproductive health knowledge, but building the confidence to discuss sensitive issues such as contraceptives among themselves and with their community members.



84 PER CENT

of women in England have been in situations with healthcare professionals when reporting symptoms of their healthcare in which they had not been listened to, according to a recent study

Meanwhile, in the UK at the other end of the reproductive life cycle, February 2022 saw the first meeting of the Menopause Taskforce to co-ordinate improved menopause support and care.³⁰ This will feed into the Women's Health Strategy, which is expected to present measures to help women feel comfortable talking about their health, knowing when to seek help and ensure that they are heard by healthcare professionals.³³

Private companies also have a vital role here in listening and understanding women's needs in society. According to a recent UK study, 33 per cent of employers are considering menopause policies, even though this life change is not currently recognised in UK employment law.³⁴ And so is the pharmaceutical industry – with companies like Organon, a spin-off from Merck – focusing on a portfolio of treatments specifically designed to help address a woman's evolving health needs throughout her lifetime. The company's aim is to empower women to make the right health choices for them, underpinned by a commitment that the organisation “will listen to her needs to drive our product development decisions”.³⁵



One factor that may have influenced this rallying of government ministers and senior clinicians on these subjects is the growing call from influential public figures speaking out about their own experiences. Powerful individuals such as Michele Obama, Oprah Winfrey and Gwyneth Paltrow have all shared their personal stories and views on the menopause, for instance.

Grassroots campaigns have also grown the sexual and reproductive health space, successfully leading to the abolition of the ‘tampon tax’ in the UK. Increasing noise from grassroots activists, and support from high profile media figures, has also led to the ‘normalisation’ of conversations around periods and the menopause in some countries.

Social platforms, which give women the chance to share knowledge and experiences about their reproductive health such as The Lowdown – a review

site for contraceptive pills - are bringing much-needed data to support open communication. The company has already provided information from its database to NHS England to answer some common queries about getting the vaccine in the UK while pregnant.³⁶

“GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNS HAVE ALSO GROWN THE SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SPACE, SUCCESSFULLY LEADING TO THE ABOLITION OF THE ‘TAMPON TAX’.”

A BRIGHTER FUTURE

As a fuller picture is painted of the impact of sexual and reproductive health on women's lives, there is the beginning of a movement away from treating symptoms of life-altering issues, towards a life-course approach. We are seeing progress in terms of pre-empting and supporting women through the different stages of their lives and providing women with the tools they need to gain more control over their sexual and reproductive health. This could play a significant part in empowering women's choices across every aspect of sexual and reproductive health.

There is clearly a growing chorus of voices from forward-thinking, responsible and empathetic companies, national and international political leaders, public sector bodies, public figures and activated women and girls across society. The momentum in their activity, pressure and actions, will undoubtedly influence the support and care offered to women at the different stages of their lives.

In the long-term, we can only imagine what changes greater access and education, advanced technologies and a stronger dialogue can lead to for humankind. It is certain that it will impact our ability to create communities where everyone is heard and empowered to live life fully, without feeling restricted by the reproductive functions of their bodies.

We will all play a part in getting to this point as a holistic, supportive and caring environment is the only way to build communities and countries that treat women fairly and respect their health needs.

“REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS, AND GENDER EQUALITY, WHICH DEPENDS ON WOMEN'S ABILITY TO FULLY EXERCISE THEM, IS KEY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.”

Dr. Natalia Kanem
Executive Director of the
United Nations Population Fund

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