



Alliance for
Reproductive
Health Rights

PRIORITISING PRIMARY HEALTH TO REACH ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS



When a young woman or girl in Ghana needs medical help or advice on family planning she faces a number of obstacles. She needs a clinic that's nearby, because work and household duties leave her strapped for time. She needs a health worker that can provide a number of services, not just for her but also for her family. And she needs quality care that doesn't cause financial hardship, because the household budget also has to cover food, clothes and school costs. Far too often, these basic preconditions aren't met. Despite significant progress since the turn of the Millennium, too many women and girls continue to miss out on the health services they need.

Today, on Universal Health Coverage Day, advocates around the world are calling on governments to prioritize women and girls in the fight for health for all. Strong primary health care, the foundation of health systems, can help us finally achieve the vision put forward in the Alma Ata Declaration of 1978 – a vision of health for everyone, everywhere.

It is for good reason that primary health care has always been seen as a critical aspect of the health for all movement. Strong primary health care can manage 90% of people's health needs and provide a range of services including vaccinations, cancer screening and treatment for childhood diarrhea, pneumonia and malaria. Primary care providers serve as early warning systems, catching communicable diseases and epidemics, like meningitis, before they turn into crises. And by delivering diverse services side-by-side, primary health care systems provide a safe place for women and their families to receive a range of essential services from birth to old age. When these systems work, women can acquire cancer screening and antenatal treatments in the same visit – a game changer not just for mothers, but for their children as well.

Strong primary health care systems build trust between patients and providers. As a lifelong advocate for women's reproductive rights, I've seen how often women and girls forego health care because of social stigma and pressure. Having a trusted and well-trained health care worker can make all the difference to a woman who's in need of health care. Unlike traditional hospitals or other formal health facilities, primary health care can reach vulnerable women and girls who live in even the most remote communities. Ghana's Community-based Health Planning Services (CHPS) initiative was first created 20 years ago with the aim of reducing geographic barriers to health care. Since then,

community health workers have delivered essential health services to millions of Ghanaians in distant pockets of the country – a testament to the power of primary health care.

Even though our government has worked hard to scale CHPS and increase access to health care throughout Ghana, there's still a lot of work to be done before all Ghanaians can access essential services. This means that every day, countless women and girls don't get the care they need.

Ghana is doing better on health system financing than most other low- and middle-income countries. Let's harness our fortunate position and our government's commitment and resources to do even more. To turn this around, Ghana should prioritize investment in primary health care so that everyone has the potential to live a healthy life. Out-of-pocket costs are a key barrier to women and girls accessing quality health services. With limited budgets, women are put in the impossible position of deciding whether to choose health services or to pay for food, clothing and school costs. Reducing out-of-pocket costs is critical to improving health outcomes for women and girls.

While global efforts to improve primary health care have been slow due to a lack of data on primary health care systems, Ghana is one of the few countries that already collects good data. Because of this data, we know that too many moms continue to die during childbirth and millions of Ghanaian women and girls still don't give birth in health facilities. This needs to change.

Women and girls are neglected every day our country goes without comprehensive primary health care. By investing in a strong system to deliver essential health services, we can improve health outcomes, reduce stigma and empower women to make decisions about their own lives. Whether it's family planning services, antenatal care or nutrition guidance, women in Ghana – and women everywhere – should be able to get the health care they need.

By improving our primary health care systems, we can ensure Ghana's women and girls have the choices and control over their bodies and destinies that too many still lack. Investing in quality primary health care is the most cost-effective way to improve the health of women and girls. Together we must ensure that women and girls are no longer left behind.