

The Honorable George W. Bush
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500
January 3, 2007

Dear President Bush,

As the nations of the earth become more globalized and connected, the health and well being of other countries has become increasingly important to the rest of civilization, including the US. We are all interdependent, and it is therefore our duty to seek health and protection for countries in poverty and pain. Like worldwide citizens today, the UN Millennium Development Goals are interconnected; they hinge on Goal 5, the goal dedicated to improving maternal health. It is a commonly overlooked fact, but maternal health is incredibly important.

Maternal mortality is a difficult statistic to locate. Oftentimes, deaths are under-reported because few citizens have access to a hospital, thereby dying outside the health system. Deaths and their causes then go unreported and maternal health is overlooked and understated.ⁱ Childbirth, by nature, is a dangerous time for women, and thorough health care is necessary during every step of pregnancy. In Afghanistan, for example, only 11% of women receive prenatal care, and only .9% benefit from a trained health care provider during birth.ⁱⁱ To decrease rates of maternal mortality, it is imperative to increase health care and education.

Maternal health is an indicator of a country's strength, and careful monitoring can allow countries to either improve their standards of living and health or regress. Countries where women are respected and birth mortality rates are low tend to be healthy on a socioeconomic level. The maternal mortality rate in the United States is 12 deaths per

100,000 live births, or roughly .012%. Countries where women have little or no support are often destitute economically. In Afghanistan, for example, 593 mothers per 100,000 will die, the highest rate of maternal mortality outside of the African continent. Ninety-two percent of deaths occur in rural areas.ⁱⁱⁱ This suggests that women who have access to health care are less likely to die during childbirth. Women need more health clinics to remain healthy. As in Tibet, there is sometimes only one clinic to serve 2,000 citizens.^{iv} A healthy mother will ensure the stability of her children, and the next generation will grow up prepared to take on the challenges of adulthood. However, if a mother's health is not stable, there will often be no one to care for the children and the strings upon which society is built will begin to unravel. It is this connection between maternal health and the vitality of the future that makes maternal health such an important matter.

“Too often, the health of mothers and children does not count. In too many parts of the world, they are forgotten. Their health is the very foundation of the well being of our societies as a whole. When a mother gets sick, that foundation is damaged. When children die, whole generations are weakened — the very generations whose strength we count on to overcome poverty and build a better future for all of us,” Liya Kebede, the Ethiopian WHO ambassador of Maternal, Newborn and Child health, said in acceptance of the 2005 UN Day Award.^v The growth, health and stability of the global population today depend on the health and safety of mothers.

Research has shown that when women benefit from a financial gain, they are likely to use that money for the education and health of their children^{vi}. While men may use loans for irresponsible purchases, women will usually use any extra money to help their children or even start their own business. Small loans to impoverished women have

bettered children's lives by improving their education, health care and status, which ultimately improves the future of the global population.

According to Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, "Study after study has shown that there is no effective development strategy in which women do not play a central role. When women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier; they are better fed; their income, savings and reinvestment go up. And what is true of families is true of communities and, eventually, of whole countries." Small loans give impoverished women, their children and community an opportunity that has the power to change lives.

Educating women is of the utmost importance. For example, a recent study reported that in Africa and South Asia, women do not breastfeed newborns, but give them a low-nutrient formula, the cultural norm in many societies. Simply breastfeeding would increase the child's health exponentially, but many women are too poorly educated to understand.^{vii} Education is the most important factor in determining the future of the world, and small loans to poor or rural women will often improve the education of her children and future generations.

Prenatal care is an important factor in decreasing maternal mortality. A vital component of prenatal care includes sex education, which is relatively accessible in the United States because it is an integrated part of the public school curricula from elementary through high school. However, many countries lack the organization of the American public school system, and women are not aware of how their bodies work and what they can do to control or prevent pregnancy.

Programs such as President Reagan's recently reinstated Mexico City Policy do not help the plight of women in developing or male-dominated societies.^{viii} The Mexico City Policy promotes education abroad and in the US but prohibits the mention of abortion as a type of birth control, as well as prohibiting the teaching of alternative birth control methods. Although abortion is a poor method of birth control, providing safe abortions is imperative. Making abortion illegal or unattainable will not prevent a woman from having an abortion, but it will ensure that the woman will suffer from a more dangerous and unsanitary abortion, which can result in death, thus increasing maternal mortality. If the option of abortion is provided, fewer women will be forced into illegal abortions and maternal mortality rates will drop. What is required now is the implementation of education-promoting programs, as well as access to proper health care and birth control.

HIV and AIDS are closely linked to maternal health and the health of a nation. The introduction of PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), addresses issues important to maternal health; however, three amendments attached to PEPFAR have a negative affect on maternal health. The Pitts Amendment reserves money for "abstinence-until-marriage" education programs. This fails to recognize the real issue: AIDS is spreading, regardless of whether a couple is married. In addition, maternal health affects all women and all mothers, married or not. The Smith Amendment allots money to religious groups, which can refuse reference to clinics and birth control methods, which, like condoms, have been proven effective against pregnancy as well as the spread of AIDS. If couples can prevent unwanted pregnancies, it is more likely that mothers will be of an appropriate age to have and care for children, which benefits the mother and

child. Finally, the Litmus Test Amendment forces clinics and groups that use US anti-AIDS funding to take a stance against the legalization of prostitution. Not recognizing the plight of sex workers is completely counterproductive, as prostitutes are key in the fast spread of AIDS. This legislation alienates the women who are forced to prostitute for a living, which encourages the AIDS pandemic; not giving help to prostitutes allows them to have children with AIDS, which perpetuates the system and allows it to continually worsen.^{ix} Not giving aid to prostitutes is counterproductive. Prostitutes are more likely to have children and diseases. If refused help, these women may die, leaving behind more orphans to join the growing number, as well as increasing maternal mortality.

These types of policies perpetuate the subservience and weakness of women in developing countries, reinforcing the vicious cycle that keeps women vulnerable and powerless, ensuring that no expansion or progress is made. The improvement of maternal health and the improvement of the socioeconomic standing of women worldwide are directly related; when one factor improves, the other improves as well.

“A woman whose husband respects her and understands her health needs is more likely to access emergency care in the case of obstetric complications, to be able to use family planning, and to be protected from STDs. An infant whose mother has had proper nutrition and care in all phases of her pregnancy is more likely to survive. And couples who can space and limit births according to their desires will be better able to assure their children's survival, nurture them, and benefit from development opportunities,” United States UN Ambassador Betty King said.^x A woman with more opportunities and a more equitable connection with her partner is more likely to survive childbirth and be able to rear her child to adulthood.

Although the Bush Administration's 34 million dollar contribution to maternal and children's health in 2002 was an excellent start on the road to improvement, a greater good would be achieved if the United States was willing to contribute a larger percentage of GDP to the UN. While this would not immediately contribute to maternal health in the United States, the long-term positive effects would be immeasurable.

The most complete way to decrease maternal mortality is to empower women all over the globe, providing improved healthcare, education and monetary loans. One way to achieve this end is to charter Non-Government Organizations, such as Doctors Without Borders, or Heifer, International to go into countries with high rates of maternal mortality. While the best, longest-lasting solution would preferably come from fixing the root of the issue—cultural expectations, corrupt governments and governments that cannot provide thorough health care—the most probable solution is to infiltrate the troubled countries with charity organizations that can help to start empowering women and providing birth control and education.

Sincerely,

Louisa Meury

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- ⁱ United Nations Population Fund, Using Indicators to Measure Progress <http://www.unfpa.org/mothers/indicators.htm>, October 2006
- ⁱⁱ Ayotte, Barbara and John Hefferman, Physicians for Human Rights Finds High Maternal Mortality Ratio in Heart Province, Afghanistan <http://www.phrusa.org/research/afghanistan/mm.html> September 10, 2002
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ayotte, Barbara and John Hefferman, Physicians for Human Rights Finds High Maternal Mortality Ratio in Heart Province, Afghanistan <http://www.phrusa.org/research/afghanistan/mm.html> September 10, 2002
- ^{iv} Bhatia, Juhie Tibet's Maternal Death Rate <http://iris.lib.virginia.edu/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=136&sid=9101e4177869af69fcbe20935f3869a1> September 21, 2004
- ^v United Nations, Acceptance of the 2005 UN Day Award http://www.who.int/goodwill_ambassadors/liya_kebede/un/en/index.html October 21 2005
- ^{vi} http://www.worldvision.org/worldvision/appeals.nsf/stable/wilfund_about
- ^{vii} Laycock, Jennifer The Lactivist <http://thelactivist.blogspot.com/2006/03/proper-breastfeeding-education-needed.html> March 17, 2006
- ^{viii} Office of the Press Secretary, Memorandum for the Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/20010123-5.html> January 22, 2001
- ^{ix} Cami Hilsendager, Gblal HIV/AIDS: Ideology over Prevention the Global HIV/AIDS Pandemic and the Bush Administration <http://www.iwhc.org/global/uspolicy/hiv aids/index.cfm> September, 2006
- ^x United Nations USUN Press Release # 34 http://www.usunewyork.usmission.gov/98_34.htm February 23, 1998

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