

*sexual and reproductive health:  
overcoming poverty and social injustice*



**care**<sup>®</sup>

# An empowered woman...



**understands** her body  
**cares** for herself  
**plans** her family  
**exercises** her rights



## Family Planning

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, CARE's family planning project in a remote, war-torn province expanded access to comprehensive reproductive health services for millions of people. These are families recovering from war who lacked access to most basic health services. In just 20 months of program implementation, contraceptive prevalence among women had climbed from zero to 9 percent, and approximately 50 percent of women surveyed were aware of modern methods of family planning, compared to 20 percent at the start of the program. The clear, positive results underscore the real need that women, men and families have for reproductive health and family planning in the wake of a crisis.

*"Now that I can control my pregnancies, I can be sure that my children go to school. I never had the time to finish my studies, but they will. I will see a better life through my children."*

– Anifa, Contraceptive User, DRC

## Maternal Health

In Peru, CARE's FEMME (Foundations to Enhance Management of Maternal Emergencies) project addressed an acute need for emergency obstetric care services for poor, indigenous women and their families in the country's rural highlands. FEMME's rights-based approach not only included women, families and the community; it also involved health workers and policy-makers. As a result, the number of women who used emergency obstetric services more than doubled, and survival rates of women improved dramatically. By 2005, the maternal mortality ratio was approximately 120 for every 100,000 live births, compared to 240 in 1999. Thanks to the project's successful outcomes, Peru's Minister of Health introduced new standard guidelines and protocols for obstetric and neonatal emergencies based largely on CARE's experience.

*"When we save the life of a mother, we are actually saving a society."*

– Dr. Max Vega, Director of Obstetrics, Regional Hospital, Ayacucho, Peru

## Gender and Sexuality

In India, CARE's innovative Inner Spaces Outer Faces (ISOFI) initiative equipped CARE staff with helpful tools to promote honest discussions about sexual realities. The project prepared CARE staff to interact with populations who were very different from themselves – sex workers and truck drivers, for instance – as they worked to help men and women better protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies.

*"My feelings about sexuality and people living with HIV were more positive. I could sit and talk with them without feeling ashamed. That was a big change in me."*

– Devendra, CARE Staff Member, India

## How does CARE's work make a difference?

CARE focuses primarily on three areas of sexual and reproductive health for the most vulnerable people living in extreme poverty:

- Family Planning
- Maternal Health
- Gender and Sexuality

CARE also supports programs that address gender-based violence, prevent and manage sexually transmitted infections, including HIV & AIDS, and improve adolescents' sexual and reproductive health.



**As a leading humanitarian organization, CARE understands that good sexual and reproductive health is crucial to overcoming poverty and injustice**, especially for vulnerable women and girls. Equipped with knowledge and resources, women and girls can make informed decisions about whether, when and how they have children. Mothers who have access to the services and support they need are more likely to have safe pregnancies and births and raise healthier children. When women and girls learn how to confront inequities, they can transform the social and economic well-being of their families and communities. These are crucial steps on the path out of poverty.

### **Why does CARE focus on sexual and reproductive health?**

CARE places special emphasis on investing in women and girls around the world in the fight against global poverty **because their empowerment can be a turning point for impoverished communities.**

*Consider the facts:*

- **Poor sexual and reproductive health accounts for one-third of the illnesses globally** among women of reproductive age, according to the World Health Organization, and is both a cause and symptom of poverty. Countries with the highest fertility rates are also those with the highest levels of poverty. Women without knowledge or access to contraception can't plan if and when to have their children. Unplanned pregnancies, poor maternal health and exposure to sexually transmitted infections lead to a cycle of diminished education and economic opportunities, increased financial burdens on families and communities, as well as household and political instability.
- **A woman dies from complications of pregnancy and childbirth every minute of every day** – more

than 500,000 women die each year. It is unacceptable that so many women die needlessly when their lives can be saved with the most basic medical and public health services. A mother's death is extremely detrimental to the health of her infant, and her surviving children are also at great risk. Mothers usually safeguard their children's health, education and nutrition, and are often responsible for some or all of their family's income. Every year, up to 2 million children lose their mothers for lack of services that are readily available in wealthier nations.

- **When women and men space the births of their children three to five years apart, families are stronger.** Children are less likely to be born prematurely or underweight. In general, unplanned children are more vulnerable to illness and premature death.

CARE knows from experience that discrimination and unequal power relations are directly related to poor sexual and reproductive health, including vulnerability to HIV. By raising sensitive issues and challenging traditional attitudes related to gender and sexual inequality, CARE helps communities understand and address the social factors that perpetuate poverty.





## What differentiates CARE's work in sexual and reproductive health?

CARE's global reach, experience and extensive sexual and reproductive health portfolio have taught us that **there is a profound connection between social factors and poor health**, particularly among the most vulnerable – those who face the greatest disease burden. We believe that addressing these social issues – in conjunction with the availability of health information and services – is crucial to ensuring health for all.

- **Our programs enable women to plan their families** and experience safe, healthy pregnancies and births.
- **We confront fundamental issues of gender and sexuality** that stand in the way of improving sexual and reproductive health.
- **We leverage CARE's global strength to advocate for policy change** to improve health systems and access to care. We help marginalized groups such as young people, ethnic minorities, lower castes and sex workers speak out on issues.
- **We challenge traditions and practices that marginalize women and girls** such as gender-based violence, female genital cutting and forced marriage.  
We know there are many factors that impact a

woman's well-being. **Because of the holistic nature of CARE's work, we are uniquely able to address the interconnected causes of poverty and social injustice.** Our sexual and reproductive health programs are often integrated with other CARE programming, such as nutrition and food security, basic and girls' education, economic development, and emergency preparedness and response.

As long as women struggle against oppression and injustice, families, communities and societies will continue to fall short of their full potential. When women are empowered to realize their rights, they have the ability to transform families and communities. For example, adolescents who aren't forced into marriage are able to stay in school. Women who can delay childbirth, plan their families and space their children are more likely to work and to participate more fully in their communities. Improved maternal health means fewer orphans, and mothers who are better able to nurture their children. Fewer sexually transmitted infections means less stigma in society and better health among the poorest and most vulnerable. **CARE is dedicated to helping communities meet their most pressing health needs, fulfill their rights and goals, and challenge systems that stifle progress.**

*"Last year, CARE organized discussions with groups of men and women separately. In the men's groups, we talked about sharing decision making within the household. I realized that my violent actions toward my wife did not make her respect me or my position as a man. In that moment I decided I had to change."*

— Faustin Ntiranyibagira, Burundi

## What are some of the key social factors that affect health?

**Gender:** Women face systematic denial of their rights, particularly women who have been widowed, divorced or abandoned. Child marriage, lack of education and gender-based violence also jeopardize women's right to health.

**Age and agency:** Youth are often isolated or excluded from decision making or denied access to health, education or livelihood opportunities.

**Sexuality:** Social norms frequently restrict sex education, reinforce vulnerability to coerced sex, stigmatize sex work, link women's virginity with identity or power, discriminate against sexual minorities or promote use of sexual violence.

**Masculine identity:** Men and boys face social norms that promote aggression, violence and limited emotional expression, and limit opportunities for access to reproductive health programs.

**Power and race, caste, religion:** Stigma and discrimination based on group identity adversely affect sexual and reproductive health.



### Sexual and Reproductive Health: A wise investment

The case for investing in CARE's sexual and reproductive health programming goes far beyond the direct health benefits of better family planning, improving maternal health, and preventing and treating sexually transmitted diseases. While these goals are important, the economic and social benefits are no less real, even if they are more difficult to measure. Consider the following:

#### Health Benefits

- Prevent unintended and high-risk pregnancies
- Lower rates of maternal, infant and child mortality
- Increase healthy behaviors during pregnancy
- Decrease sexually transmitted infections, including HIV & AIDS

#### Economic and Social Benefits

- Increase educational and employment opportunities, especially for women and girls
- Improve decision-making power, social status and equality, especially for women
- Improve household income, savings and financial security
- Enhance attention and parental care for each child
- Reduce the number of orphaned and neglected children
- Increase women's involvement in social and civic organizations
- Fuel economic growth of communities and society

Empowering all people to plan their families, experience safe, healthy pregnancies and births, and overcome social injustice is essential to the fight against global poverty. CARE is part of a global movement to spread knowledge, secure resources and promote policies to fulfill everyone's right to health.



## Our Vision

We seek a world of hope, tolerance and social justice, where poverty has been overcome and people live in dignity and security. CARE International will be a global force and a partner of choice within a worldwide movement dedicated to ending poverty. We will be known everywhere for our unshakable commitment to the dignity of people.



**CARE's sexual and reproductive health programs are supported by generous public and private donors. For more information about contributing to CARE's efforts please contact:**

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