



Extreme left: Women attending post natal clinic. Right: an expectant mother



FILE PHOTOS

Maternal health goal still a far fetched dream

Despite the attainment of new law that provides for quality healthcare, the country is still recording a high maternal mortality ratio, write **GEORGE KEBASO** and **GODFREY OMBOGO**

According to the 2009 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS), maternal mortality ratio in Kenya is 488:100, 000 resulting to high maternal disabilities and deaths. Available data show over 2,600 women die annually in Kenya from complications arising from unsafe abortion. Approximately 21,000 women are admitted each year to public hospitals for treatment of complications from incomplete and unsafe abortion, spontaneous or induced.

Experts attribute this situation to lack of adequate knowledge; inadequate supply of family planning services; poor quality of reproductive health services; restrictive abortion laws, especially the penal code and lack of adequate policies that address women's reproductive health comprehensively. This is despite the attainment of

a new constitution - that provides for quality healthcare including reproductive health for all Kenyans. A diverse expertise meeting in Nairobi pointed out the worrying trend which revealed that more than 8000 women are reportedly dying from preventable health conditions annually.

EXPERTS
Led by the Kenya Medical Association (KMA), the experts including government representatives; health-care providers; lawyers, religious organisations, political leaders, university scholars and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) among others now want the government to be consistent in implementing the constitution.

During the opening of the 2nd State of Maternal Mortality in Kenya recently, they said that; if the government and stakeholders hope to reverse ma-

ternal health deaths before the 2015 UN-led Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) deadline, focus should radically be on the implementation of the new law.

"Focus must now shift to the implementation of the new law without which; provisions such as those captured in Article 43 (1), (a) and Article 26 (4), remain mere paper rights," said KMA Chairman, Dr. Boaz Otieno-Nyunya. He said that there was need for the government to intervene in order to prevent maternal health related deaths.

Article 43 (1) (a) of the Kenya Constitution states that; "Every person has the right to the highest attainable standard of health, which includes the right to health care services, including reproductive health care." While, Article 26 (4) of the Constitution also permits abortion, "in the opinion of a trained health professional, there is

need for emergency treatment, or the life or health of the mother is in danger, or if permitted by any other written law."

But regardless of that, the participants are saddened that even the 5th MDG to reduce maternal mortality by 75 per cent during the period 1990-2015, is by far the least MDG on track to be fulfilled with only four years left to the UN deadline.

"This has been called the 'Scandal of our time; Women continue to die and suffer unnecessary disabilities because of pregnancy complications," said a lecturer at the University of Nairobi and representative of the Kenya Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society (KOGS) Council Prof. Joseph Karanja.

IMPLEMENTING LAW

Speaking at the same venue the participants expressed apprehension that Kenya's Vision 2030 and the MDGs, especially 4 and 5 risk sabotage unless the government keeps its word by consistently implementing the new law and ensuring that other enabling policies are respectively in place to prevent more deaths.

The MDG goal 4 targets to reduce mortality rate of children less than five years by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015; while goal number 5 seeks to improve maternal health by reducing maternal mortality ratio by three quarters in the same period.

A study conducted in two informal settlements in Nairobi found out that more than 50 per cent of abortion fatality cases do not seek care even in the event of a complication after the abortion.

However, it is indicated that the statistics are likely to be underestimated as the World Health Organisation notes that; more than any other aspect of sexual and reproductive ill-health, abortion suffers from gross under-reporting.

While lauding the government on the achievement of the new law, visiting former UK legislator, Lord David Steel said a careful implementation of the country's new law would end the scandalous loss of life and ill-health.

Speaking at the two-day conference he said it would be good to have fewer abortions by having fewer unintended pregnancies. "That involves a dual-track approach with sex education for the young and better family planning provisions for all women," he added.

Unsafe abortion

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