

Haiti: Identifying Problems of Maternal Health

The earthquake in Haiti followed by a hurricane has left an already impoverished country in ruins. A resource-poor country in the Caribbean with poor healthcare, almost non-existent public infrastructure for transportation, few preventative measures in the form of education or adequate sanitization in any avenue as well as fierce gender dynamics that surround social and political life. After Haiti was ravaged by two consecutive natural disasters it received, and continues to receive an abundance of foreign aid support. However even with this aid being received from all sides of the world there are basic maternal health issues that continue to affect the lives of Haitian women.

Adequate Sanitation and Hygiene

One of the most fundamental aspects of maternal health is adequate sanitation and hygiene. In the developed world, public outreach begins at an early age and surrounds us throughout our lives. In the lives of most Haitian women, these innovations are absent. Public health education and education for existing health care professionals needs to be integrated into policy structures in Haiti. The government needs to assess the best way of empowering women so that they may exercise their right of autonomy and make healthy decisions on an individual basis and also for their families.

Sexual education as well as sanitization is a common shortfall in the Haitian health care system for women. Inadequate drinking and bathing water can lead to a number of health related issues, including fungal infections in women and chronic diarrhea. These injustices will need to be dealt with at a structural level; however, the consequences can be transformed in the meantime. For example: public health education initiatives to sanitize water by boiling it, or to seek medical attention for chronic diarrhea.

Education for mid-level health care workers, public out-reach and prevention education for women of Haiti (through radio broadcasts, church services, shaman/traditional healer cooperation etc.) would be a very effective and positive investment in the future of Haiti's women and their health.

Traditional Healers

As development professionals are aware, there is a strong need for cultural sensitivity towards women and their families. Not only to better the women's understanding, but also to gain respect and trust between educators and women. Sanitization efforts may seem very trivial and rudimentary to a citizen of the global north, however many healers preach different practices to their patients, which may contain ritualistic ceremonies with animal blood, feces or dirt and mud from the ground. To work with the traditional healers to help negotiate and compromise a healthier and more sanitary way of performing these rituals is

providing an outlet for education for these Haitian women.

A lack of access to family planning, prenatal and obstetric care, and a need to engage in "survival sex" (in order to buy food) on top of sexual violence have led to high pregnancy rates in refugee camps. Some women have had to give birth under dire conditions, for example, on muddy floors of tents, with no prior knowledge or ability to avoid the dangerous practices associated with these conditions.