

Adolescent Girls and Safe Motherhood

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“Safe Motherhood initiative” was launched at the International Conference on Safe Motherhood held in Nairobi in the year 1987-eleven year ago. The target was to reduce maternal deaths by 50% by 2000 A.D. Besides reduction of maternal mortality “safe Motherhood” aims at having healthy mother & child after safe child birth.

Maternal mortality in India is around 340 to 400 per 100,000 live births-which is 100 times more than what occurs in many other countries both in the west & in the east. Four hundred per 100,000 live births is a modest estimate. The maternal mortality is reported to be even higher viz. 720 to 800 per 100,000 live births in certain parts of India. The seriousness of this frightening maternal mortality is described as “one maternal death per six minutes” Bhasker Rao, 1995. WHO reports that in the developing world almost one death occurs every minute of the day & night. (WHO, Geneva). The WHO estimates that for every maternal death, twenty women who survive the complication of pregnancy and childbirth remain permanently ill, morbid with inability for lactation & care of the infant.

Safe motherhood cannot be achieved by medical

knowledge & technology alone. The tragedy of maternal death occurs not only due to deficiencies in health care but is largely due to Social, Cultural & Economic reasons such as the following:

1. Poverty & lack of nutritious food
2. Absence of good drinking water
3. Lack of proper communication
4. Poor sanitation
5. Lack of education
6. Improper and inadequate nutrition to growing adolescent girls even if nutritious food is available.

All the above factors are closely related and one telescopes into the other, except the last factor. The last factor “Improper & inadequate nutrition to growing adolescent girls” exists because of our custom & belief of giving more importance to sons than to daughters. This idea will influence our people, even though all other social & economic conditions improve.

God created the female foetus stronger than the male foetus by HIS ingenious combination of chromosomes & genes, because he knows that the “female” is more essential for the building up of future healthy generations. We all know what happens, in the majority of Indian societies, to female infants & female children and to young girls especially in the villages. They receive step motherly care in nutrition, more so, if the family has also male children.

The best & more food goes to the father & the sons and what is left is shared by mother & daughters. Very few realise that the nutrition & health of the adolescent girl forms the most important step for the health and nutrition of the future pregnant woman. It may be appropriate to say that the “Nutrition & health care of the pregnant woman starts at the age of ten and not when she starts her pregnancy.

Adolescence is the period between 10 to 19 years as defined by WHO. Adolescence is also referred to as teen age. Adolescence is the period when growth of all the

systems, skeletal, muscular, endoerinal develop and marked acceleration in size & contour of the body occurs. This growth spurt occurs earlier in girls than in boys. The physical growth & maturation are accompanied by mental & psychosocial development. Lack of care of the adolescent girl will thus lead to a malnourished & unwanted & insecure girl who reaches pregnancy as a malnourished woman.

A recent review noted that nearly 50% of low birth weight (L.BW) infants are associated with poor maternal nutritional status in addition to over 40 other conditions which contribute to L.BW infant (Koblinsky, 1995).

Seventy five percent (74.2% as per Rural Health statistics in India, 1996) of India's population live in villages. Therefore any changes in the form of reforms in India should be directed to the villages to achieve some result. We have 600,000 villages!

Although our people in the 600,000 villages may differ in their costumes and languages spoken, there seems to be some uniformity in their religious customs and beliefs. We know how several of the festivals of India of all religions unify the country.

The way of life of the 75% of people in the villages is very simple and largely influenced by religious customs, influenced by temples, churches & mosques. The best group of people who can influence our people in the villages are the religious leaders who can, during their religious discourses, also point out how important an adolescent girl should be in a family and how her health & welfare is important for her to become a healthy mother later.

We have neonatologists to take care of newborns, paediatricians to look after children, obstetricians to look after pregnant women, but none to take care of the adolescent girls! It will be appropriate to start another speciality - call it what we may; call it "Teen Age girls care" "Adolescent Girls Care". Adolescent gynaecology deals only with the gynaecological problems seen in a small percentage of adolescents, most of whom may not reach motherhood. But the total care of the adolescent girl who would one day reach motherhood should be taken care of. Emphasis on the importance of the healthy adolescent girl, healthy both physically & mentally, for the development of a healthy mother has to be taken up.

If the adolescent girls are given the same importance as adolescent boys, the girls will develop confidence & courage & will desire to go to school and have the education that is most needed.

FOGSI can take up this project, amongst its many other useful projects. As per Rural Health Statistics in India (1996) there are about 22000(21854) Primary Health Centers (PHC) and 1.3 lakhs (1,32730) Sub centers and 2500 (2424) Community Health Centres. During the past 40 years, the services of the Rural Health Infrastructure have functioned to improve the health to a large extent. But the change in the unfavourable attitude of our people towards girl child & the adolescent girl is very important & very necessary to build up a healthy nation. To achieve this end, we may try some of these:

1. The religions leaders can be approached for help.
2. School teachers of villages can be educated on this point.
3. Posters such as these may help " Young healthy girl only will become a healthy mother". "Girls are as important as boys".
4. Mass media will be of immense use to propagate the idea of the importance of the health of adolescent girls.

FOGSI can take up this project also & help elevate the status of adolescent girls through its several branches. The task is not an easy one because it involves changing the customs and attitude of people. But have we not succeeded in changing the attitude of people over the past 40 years from the idea of large family to opting for small family norm through our efforts in Family Welfare Planning?

Therefore we should succeed in changing the attitude of our people towards adolescent girls.

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