RESOLUTION

WOMEN’S HEALTH IN THE WHO AFRICAN REGION: A CALL FOR ACTION
(document AFR/RC58/5)

The Regional Committee,

Considering that women must be in a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being to be able to carry out their numerous and important responsibilities in the society and contribute to national development;

Recalling the Universal Declaration on Human Rights; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, adopted by the UN General Assembly;

Bearing in mind the various WHO Regional Committee resolutions pertaining to women’s health and development, including Resolution AFR/RC53/4: Women’s health: a strategy for the African Region, 2003 and Resolution AFR/RC54/R9: Road Map for accelerating the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals relating to maternal and newborn health in Africa, 2004;

Concerned that despite the numerous efforts by Member States in the past to improve women’s health, the overall progress has not been satisfactory in the Region;

Deeply concerned that: 1 out of every 26 women is at risk of dying during childbirth in countries in sub-Saharan Africa compared to 1 woman out of every 7300 in developed countries; 13 out of the 14 countries where maternal mortality is above 1000 per 100 000 live births worldwide are in sub-Saharan Africa; over 57% of women in the African Region lack access to assistance by skilled birth attendants during childbirth; and female genital mutilation affects 100–140 million women and girls today;

Alarmed that although sub-Saharan Africa requires a 5.5% annual average reduction of maternal mortality in order to achieve Millennium Development Goal 5, the actual annual average reduction over 15 years between 1990 and 2005 was only 0.1%;

Noting that underdevelopment of health systems and their weaknesses are at the root of the high maternal mortality in sub-Saharan Africa;

Recalling the 2008 Ouagadougou Declaration on Primary Health Care and Health Systems in Africa that seeks to strengthen health systems using the primary health care approach;
Aware that women continue to suffer from sociocultural discrimination; low economic status; harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation; sexual and gender-based violence; taboos; forced marriages; early, unwanted pregnancies; HIV and other STIs;

Recognizing that women are adversely affected by political and social instability, food insecurity, poverty, and natural and man-made disasters;

Deeply concerned that resources allocated to women’s health in general and maternal health in particular are far below what is required to make significant impact towards achieving MDG3 and MDG5;

Mindful that women’s health issues are complex and require multisectoral and concerted actions involving the public and private sectors, nongovernmental organizations, communities, families, women themselves and active involvement of men;

Having reviewed the document “Women’s health in the WHO African Region: a call for action” as well as the report of the Programme Subcommittee relating thereto:

1. ENDORSES the report on women’s health in the WHO African Region;

2. URGES Member States:

   (a) to strengthen existing high-level multisectoral institutional bodies to advocate for and monitor issues related to women’s health and empowerment, education of the girl-child, and poverty reduction strategies, including women’s health-related actions of various sectors with the involvement of local government authorities;

   (b) to build institutional capacity for implementing women’s health interventions by establishing effective multisectoral coordination mechanism through nomination of a women’s health focal person in each government ministry and department who has an influence on women’s welfare and health and by setting up a women’s health multisectoral, multidisciplinary technical group with clear and uniformed terms of reference;

   (c) to affirmatively increase national resources to implement national policies and strategies for women’s health by allocating specific funds for women’s health; adopting and implementing policies to address financial barriers to women’s access to health care; and developing and implementing human resources for health policies that increase the availability of health workers providing maternal health services, especially in rural and underserved areas;

   (d) to consider, in women’s health policies, the prevention of early and forced marriages, gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination against women, and adopt and enforce relevant legislation;

   (e) to strengthen partnerships with women’s rights groups, including community-based organizations, nongovernmental organizations and women’s associations, and integrate women’s health issues into their agendas;

   (f) to develop and implement national Road Maps to accelerate the reduction of maternal and newborn mortality in line with Resolution AFR/RC54/R9 entitled “Road Map for Accelerating the Attainment of Millennium Development Goals Relating to Maternal and Newborn Health in Africa”;
(g) to use the primary health care approach to deliver women’s health-related interventions with strong community participation and ownership and active male involvement to improve utilization of services by pregnant women;

(h) to strengthen the integration of family planning, malaria control in pregnancy, nutrition and prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV into maternal and child health services and diversify entry points for women’s health interventions in existing services to improve effectiveness and efficient use of resources;

(i) to scale up essential interventions related to women’s health throughout their life cycle;

(j) to develop an integrated communication plan for better understanding of women’s roles in society, and for promoting change of behaviour and attitudes towards women’s health;

(k) to promote research on issues specific to women’s health to generate evidence for informed policy actions and programmes;

3. DECLARES 4 September as Women’s Health Day in the African Region;

4. REQUESTS the Regional Director:

(a) to strengthen advocacy for increased resources for women’s health in general and for reduction of maternal and neonatal mortality in particular;

(b) to continue providing technical guidance to Member States to address women’s health policies and priority interventions, and document and share best practices;

(c) to pursue partnerships with other relevant UN Agencies such as UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA and UNIFEM to advocate for girls’ and boys’ education and for the socioeconomic empowerment of women and improvement of women’s health throughout their life cycle;

(d) to establish a Commission on Women’s Health to generate evidence on the role of improved women’s health in socioeconomic development for improved advocacy and policy action;

(e) to establish a monitoring and evaluation mechanism in collaboration with the African Union and regional economic communities;

(f) to support countries to strengthen national information systems;

5. APPEALS to other international health partners:

(a) to recognize women’s health as a priority in the African Region and establish innovative mechanisms for increased investment in maternal and newborn health services;

(b) to align women’s health programmes and funding to national policies and priorities in line with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, Alignment and Harmonization.

*Third meeting, 2 September 2008*