Improve our health, improve the world

Aleya El Bindari Hammad

A great deal of information is now available on women’s health throughout their lives. While this has been indispensable to the continual assessment of their situation in all parts of the world, unfortunately women often appear as “victims” or as a particularly “vulnerable group”.

It is true that women still suffer from unnecessary morbidity and mortality. However, we should not overlook the fact that it is women themselves with their strength and versatility who are responsible to a large extent for improving their own health. We have only to look at the different “health roles” women have played through generations to realize that, if we were to invest in their health and well-being, we would certainly accelerate positive health behaviours.

Women are the primary caregivers in the family. Their knowledge and experience in maintaining, protecting and promoting good health for their families and themselves have been passed down and built upon through generations. Women in all societies have developed proverbs and sayings which ensure that essential health messages are kept alive and passed on. They have demonstrated courage in facing situations of crisis where their very survival and that of their family were in jeopardy, and found solutions to such scarcities as food and water during natural disasters, civil unrest and war. Thus, behind their victimization and vulnerability lies their immense strength which must be built upon for the future. Positive examples can be found all over the world and cover the entire lifespan of women.

Women, with their desire to learn, earn and improve their health and quality of life, have linked economic activities with improved health status. Where formal services have failed to respond to their needs – such as the need for health, social and economic support systems in the AIDS pandemic – women have come together to form their own supportive networks. Similarly, they have formed organizations and networks to ensure that women age with dignity. Where their well-being and livelihood are concerned, women have demonstrated their collective force, for example by succeeding in saving entire forests from destruction despite major pressures. Women have asserted their fundamental right to health and integrity during situations of conflict and war and have denounced the suffering and death by forming human chains against the tanks and guns. Many of these actions are often undertaken at the risk of their lives.

While women often show great ingenuity and courage in defending their right to health and well-being, they also treat both health and disease with a touch of realism, pragmatism and practicality. This is invaluable in all societies and is another positive aspect of their approach to health which can be used to greater advantage in partnership and shared responsibility with men.

How much more could women contribute if they had more information on how their bodies function and on the origins of disease, and comprehensive, relevant education to equip them to recognize opportunities and use each and every one of these for better health? By learning from women’s positive experiences, developing partnerships, and complementing their actions with up-to-date information and essential support, women will certainly create an enabling environment that will improve their health, and that of the world. After all, are not women responsible for ensuring that the chain of life remains unbroken?