

Maternal Mortality in Nigeria: The Real Issues

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When the Safe Motherhood Initiative was launched in 1987, like the rest of Africa, Nigeria got deeply involved. Nobody expected miracles overnight, nor did anyone expect disasters of such immensity. Sadly, there is hard evidence to demonstrate that much of the good ideas, the good intentions, and the good work done then have failed to come to fruition. Not least is the fact that maternal mortality in sub-Saharan Africa is rising rather than falling, as it has done in all other regions of the Third World. In urban areas in Nigeria, instances abound where women are dying in the hands of good doctors just because they do not have the money to pay. In rural areas, the disaster is expanding more quickly for want of basic necessities of modern life: piped water, electric power supply, road communication, and schools for children.

High maternal mortality in Nigeria, estimated to be 1,000 per 100,000 births, will not go away as long as three fundamental issues prevail: mass poverty with gross inequalities, unbooked emergencies, and illiteracy, which bestrides and underlies both. Here, the focus is on the first two factors, as well as on structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) which, together with rampant corruption, constitute a major aggravator of poverty.

Poverty

The contribution poverty makes to the worsening maternal health situation is best considered in a global context. Otherwise it is easy to fall into the trap of managing poverty instead of seeking to eradicate it, and of trying to cope with disasters instead of preventing them. In terms of gross national product per capita, the world's countries fall into four economic classes — rich, middle income, poor, and poorest — shown in Figure 1. Between 1950 and now, GNP has increased nearly three times for the rich, 1.5 times for the middle per capita income, marginally for the poor, and none for the poorest. The gulf between the rich and the poorest has risen from eight-fold to 30-fold. There were 24 countries in the poorest group compared with 47 today, of which 29 (including Nigeria) are in sub-Saharan Africa. Africa's deepening poverty is evident in other respects, one of which is the region's increasing marginalisation. With a quarter of the world's land mass and 12 percent of the world's population, Africa is rich in natural resources, yet it is only able to secure one percent of the world's trade and 0.4 percent of the world's manufacturing exports because it is technology-poor. Sixty-two percent of its population earns less than six US dollars per week; the region is therefore in a nonsustainable position.

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