

PRESS RELEASE

African Member States and Partners Call for Strengthened Accountability for Women's, Children's, and Adolescents' Health in Regional Mechanisms at the WHO Regional Committee Meeting

Lusaka, 27 August – The Seventy-fifth Session of the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Committee for Africa (RC75) witnessed robust engagement on accelerating progress in the health and well-being of women, children, and adolescents (WCAH). A total of 43 statements were delivered – 30 from Member States and 13 from partners – making it one of the most engaging sessions of the meeting and reflecting the urgency of investing in WCAH on the continent.

Every day, roughly 800 women and newborns die due to preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. Africa, which accounts for 70% of global maternal deaths and around 55% of child deaths, bears the burden of most of these deaths. While the continent has made important progress between 2000 and 2023 – the maternal mortality ratio declined by 40%, from 727 to 442 per 100,000 live births, neonatal mortality fell from 39 to 26 per 1,000 live births and under-five mortality dropped from 149 to 67 per 1,000 live births – progress remains uneven and insufficient to meet the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2030 targets. African women and children face a much higher risk of dying than women and children in other regions, a tragic reality. These preventable deaths are compounded by persistent gaps in access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services, which are essential to safeguarding the lives and dignity of women, children, and adolescents.

WHO AFRO, through its working paper ["Accelerating progress in the health and well-being of women, children and adolescents by transforming health systems in the African Region"\(AFR/RC75/5\)](#), which provided the basis for discussion, highlighted three flagship approaches for accelerating WCAH through stronger health systems:

- Stimulating investments in health as a development priority – elevating governance, accountability, and financing;
- Capacitating health systems for service delivery – expanding the health workforce, improving access to essential products, strengthening infrastructure, and investing in data systems; and
- Delivering essential health services for all across the life course – embedding quality, equity, and resilience into service delivery, including during emergencies.

Member States in their interventions highlighted national and regional efforts to advance WCAH, while also acknowledging persistent challenges. Persistent gaps in the health workforce and lack of access to commodities were raised by many, including the representative from Kenya, who noted *"key challenges include commodity gaps and skilled health workforce attrition"*.

Calls were also made for investments in data systems. For instance, the representative from Seychelles noted *“we also echo the reports for strengthening...robust data systems to guide evidence-based decision making”*. This statement is built on examples of the centrality of strong data systems to help address pervasive inequities. The representative from Zambia, a country where PMNCH supports a [collaborative advocacy action plan](#), noted that they *“are using data to drive health programmes and address challenges such as health systems inequalities”*.

Several Member States also underscored the urgency of addressing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). The representative from Malawi noted that they are *“still experiencing high rates of teenage pregnancies.... [and are as a result] trying to highlight simple interventions like in-service training capacity and pre-service training capacity and improve availability of life-saving commodities”*.

Finally, in the current geopolitical context, calls for increased financing, including through domestic resource mobilization, were echoed by many. As the representative from the Seychelles noted, *“we particularly call for investment in health as a driver of socio development...”*. A [Lancet study](#) projects suggest that ongoing deep funding cuts from the U.S., combined with the dismantling of USAID, could result in more than 14 million additional deaths by 2030, including 4.5 million deaths among children younger than 5 years.

Calls for Accountability and Support

While commitment exists, the problem persists. Despite broad agreement that WCAH has been a priority for over two decades, the political will and financial commitment to turn these commitments into action that can accelerate the pace of progress.

Senegal, a member of the Global Leaders Network (GLN), stressed the importance of accountability as key to ensuring that progress is made, calling on African Union bodies to institutionalize WCAH accountability mechanisms. The representative from Senegal noted, “Senegal calls for joining the Global Leaders Network to institutionalize accountability for the health of women, children, and adolescents within the organs of the African Union (AU).”

Kenya, another GLN member, echoed this statement as the representative *“call[ed] for...stronger regional mechanisms for accountability and data use”*

The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (PMNCH) emphasized this message, noting that

“We know what works; the challenge is ensuring commitments are implemented, tracked, and reviewed transparently, with communities, youth, and civil society meaningfully engaged. This requires clear milestones, regional peer review, and systematic reporting of measurable action.”

Partners emphasized that accountability must also extend to ensuring universal access to SRHR services, recognizing them as a cornerstone of progress in reducing maternal and child mortality.

These statements reinforce the importance of the work led by PMNCH and the GLN to institutionalize reporting on WCAH in regional mechanisms

A personal testimony of the importance of investing in WCAH: Presidential Opening Intervention

In his opening address, **President Hakainde Hichilema of Zambia** set the tone for RC75 with a deeply personal reflection: *“I was born in a health center with no water, no electricity. My grandmother was the birth attendant.”* This memory, he emphasized, remains a reality for too many African women and children today, where access to skilled attendants and essential services is too often left to chance.

The President outlined Zambia’s ongoing reforms: expanding health facilities closer to communities, recruiting not just baseline staff but also specialists, linking health and education so that over 2 million children could return to school, and ensuring a minimum package of services even in fragile contexts.

Looking beyond Zambia, he called on all African leaders to act decisively on four priorities: investing in resilient health systems, accelerating local manufacturing, strengthening regional solidarity, and aligning with global health frameworks.

He reflected on the recent cuts in development funding, noting that *“these challenges are only beginning, therefore we need to respond positively and aggressively. We must see the opportunity in challenges,”* he concluded, committing Zambia to lead in vaccine manufacturing and urging peers to transform dependency into agency.

The high level of engagement during RC75 reflects the continued priority Member States and partners place on advancing WCAH. With WHO’s support, and in alignment with President Hichilema’s call to reposition health as sovereignty, security, and growth, the African Region aims to strengthen health systems as the foundation for accelerated progress – ensuring that every woman, child, and adolescent in Africa can survive, thrive, and reach their full potential.

About the Global Leaders Network (GLN)

The Global Leaders Network is the first and only global South-led initiative working to mobilize high-level political leadership to advance women’s, children’s, and adolescents’ health (WCAH). Chaired by President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, the GLN drives action on sustainable domestic financing, progressive lawmaking, and regional accountability to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.