

Media Update

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UNICEF

Press Release

Across South Asia, women lack the nutritional care they urgently need

Pregnant and breastfeeding women need better nutrition to protect children from stunting and disease

Kathmandu/Islamabad, 09 May 2018 – The progress on improving nutritional care of women in South Asia during and after pregnancy is slow, impacting on their children's survival, growth and development.

A three-day regional conference on actions to accelerate improvements in women's nutrition across South Asia is being held in Kathmandu this week. Organised jointly by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the conference is bringing together government representatives, UN partners and civil society organizations from all countries in South Asia, with regional and global experts.

Poor nutrition deprives women of their health and well-being. Over one-third of the world's anaemic women live in South Asia, and no country is on track to meet the global nutrition target to reduce anaemia by 50 per cent women by 2025. Furthermore, one in ten women are too short (height <145 cm), and in some countries as many as one-fifth are too thin.

Children who are born small due to poor maternal nutrition start life at a huge disadvantage. They are more likely to become wasted or stunted in early life, do less well at school, earn lower wages in adulthood and suffer diabetes and chronic heart diseases later in life. Evidence shows that maternal nutrition is strongly linked to child stunting, which effects 62 million children in the region.



Many adolescents and women also face serious obstacles in meeting their right to health and nutrition. *“Gaps in national policies, programmes and care services during pregnancy, combined with poverty and customary practices mean that women fail to receive the nutritional care they need for a healthy pregnancy,”* said Jean Gough, Regional Director for UNICEF in South Asia. Essential nutrition services, including dietary counselling and iron-folic acid supplements, are reaching too few women during pregnancy. Underlying causes include the under-investment in maternal health services, the low prioritization of nutrition services, and the low reach of care for pregnant women. Furthermore, there is poor understanding at all levels, from policy makers to families, of how maternal nutrition impacts on the health, survival and development of women and the future generation of children.

Yet, it is possible to achieve rapid progress in South Asia. In Nepal, for example, the percentage of women who take iron-folic acid supplements for at least 90 days during pregnancy increased from only 6 percent in 2001 to 71 percent in 2016, a 10-fold increase.

Delegates will agree upon a set of key recommendations at the end of the conference to transform maternal nutrition. *“Women's nutrition needs special attention. Governments need to look at how we can provide healthy diet and lifestyle options. We must strive towards a collective effort that involves health providers, community based workers, families, schools and mothers themselves,”* said Amjad Hussain Sial, Secretary General of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

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