



# Health problems of women



It is often thought that the major indicator of poor health in developing countries is the high number of deaths among babies and young children. But according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the greatest difference between rich and poor countries in the area of health lies in the number of women dying as a result of problems during pregnancy or childbirth.

In Namibia over 300 women die every year as a result of such problems. The maternal death rate is high even compared to other southern African countries. The numbers of women who suffer permanent disability as a result of problems during pregnancy or childbirth are not yet counted.

**As a result of the migrant labour system, Namibia is still to a large degree a fatherless society. Compared to urban areas, rural underdevelopment still causes men to leave women, old people and children behind in search of jobs in the city. Urban infrastructures are not equipped to cope with the influx.**

A public campaign for Safe Motherhood was launched in November last year and information is available in the major languages of Namibia on the 4 most direct causes of maternal deaths:

- \* Too young (under age 18 at the birth of the first child).
- \* Too old (older than 35 years).
- \* Having too many children (more than 4).
- \* Having too little spacing between children (under 2 years between children).

Women obviously need family planning services in order to gain control over their own fertility.

But the need for family planning must be understood by the communities as a whole in order for men to embrace the idea of responsible fatherhood.

Responsible fatherhood not only means sharing decisions on the number and spacing of children, but also means sharing the workload, that is, helping to raise the children.

Namibia is still to a large degree a 'fatherless' society. As a result of the migrant labour system and the lack of formal jobs in the former homelands, men are still leaving women, old people and children behind in the rural areas in large numbers.

A recent Unicef survey in the Uukwaludhi area in northern Namibia showed that 70% of households were 'fatherless'.

**Women are left carrying the double burden of child raising and food production, whilst living in greater poverty than men.**

Additional factors undermining the health of women in rural areas are the lack of access to water, specifically clean water, to sanitation, firewood, labour-saving crop processing facilities, and not having enough to eat.

The Government has pledged to reduce the maternal death rate by 50% by the year 2000, and the Primary Health Care programme presently being launched in the different regions have the improvement of women's health as a major aim.

In view of the complex nature of the problem, massive mobilisation of the communities towards creating a more healthy environment will be just as necessary as raising the socio-economic and cultural status of women.