

# Call to action: Investing in Women's Right to Health

Investing in women's health not only benefits employees and surrounding communities, but can also have a **positive social and economic effect** on the private sector

Principle 3 of the Women's Empowerment Principles encourages companies to ensure the health, including sexual and reproductive health, of all workers.

Good health of women and children has a universally acknowledged intrinsic value and is a basic human right. Healthy women and children also contribute to economic growth. For every dollar spent on key interventions for reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health, about US\$ 20 in benefits could be generated.<sup>1</sup>

Companies have the potential to improve the health of employees while benefiting both financially and socially. In ensuring that workers have safe working conditions and available health services, companies establish healthier

staff, better relationships, and in many cases higher Return-on-investment (ROI). Workers that utilize available health services are usually healthier and therefore able to be more productive. If workers lose less time on account of sickness, companies have the potential to gain more time in productivity.

By improving the health of employees, the private sector also has the ability to influence their reputation when it comes to the right to health. Investing in women's health not only shows a commitment to the women within an organization, but also to the women in communities affected by company operations who often serve as the consumer base. Additionally by working on providing appropriate and adequate healthcare, companies can potentially cut their current, ineffective healthcare costs.

In addition to ensuring that corporate policies and practices respect women's health, businesses can take action and contribute to the health of women workers and other stakeholders through core business operations, strategic social investments, innovative products and services, advocacy and public policy engagements or partnerships and collective action.

*"The challenges UNFPA seeks to address, and the opportunities we strive to realize, are too complex for any one sector to face alone. Indeed, the active engagement of the private sector in our work is exceedingly, and increasingly, important."*

*Babatunde Osotimehin, Executive Director,  
United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)*

## What are the Facts and Figures?

- An estimated 290,000 women die each year in developing countries from pregnancy-related causes, and 2.9 million newborns die in the first month of life. Nearly all of these deaths could be prevented with adequate medical care.<sup>2</sup>
- Every day, 6,301 people are newly infected with HIV/AIDS half are under the age of 25, and 60% of those are women or girls.<sup>3</sup>
- 225 million women who want to use safe and effective family planning methods are unable to do so because they lack access to information, services, or the support of their partners or communities.<sup>4</sup>
- Of the 125 million women who give birth each year, 43 million do not deliver their babies in a health facility; 21 million need but do not receive care for major obstetric complications.<sup>5</sup>
- In 2013, 35% of women worldwide had experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence.<sup>6</sup>
- In 2012, 1.7 million new cases of breast cancer and 528,000 new cases of cervical cancer were diagnosed worldwide.<sup>7</sup>
- 13 million children are born with low birth weight or prematurely due to maternal undernutrition among other factors.<sup>8</sup>
- At least 2 million women are living with obstetric fistula – a birth injury that usually afflicts the most marginalized women and girls in rural areas – while an estimated 50,000-100,000 new cases occur every year.<sup>9</sup>

*"33 maternal deaths per hour is 33 too many. We need to **document** every one of these tragic events, **determine** their cause, and **initiate** corrective actions urgently."*

*- Tim Evans, Director, Health,  
Nutrition and Population, World Bank Group*

<sup>1</sup> The Economic Benefits of Investing in Women's and Children's Health, Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (2013)

<sup>2</sup> Adding it Up, UNFPA and Guttmacher institute (2014)

<sup>3</sup> AIDS by the Numbers, UNAIDS (2013)

<sup>4</sup> www.unfpa.org/family-planning

<sup>5</sup> Adding it Up, UNFPA and Guttmacher institute (2014)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.wcrf.org/cancer\\_statistics/data\\_specific\\_cancers/cervical\\_cancer\\_statistics.php](http://www.wcrf.org/cancer_statistics/data_specific_cancers/cervical_cancer_statistics.php)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.who.int/nutrition/challenges/en/>

<sup>9</sup> www.endfistula.org

# Why should businesses care about women's health?



Photo: Via Meridian Group Ltd.

## 1. Investing in women's health is not only the right thing to do, it also makes good **business sense**

### Benefits to Business:

- **Lower Health Care Costs:** Providing accessible and affordable health care and helping to prevent foreseeable health risks can help lower a business's long term costs for health plans, as well as better utilize current healthcare services.

According to UNFPA, investments in contraceptive services save anywhere from US\$ 4 for every dollar invested in Zambia to US\$ 31 for every dollar invested in Egypt across other sectors, including education, food, health, housing, and sanitation.<sup>10</sup>

- **Increased Productivity through Reduction in Employee Turnover & Absentee Rates:** Company-sponsored/-supported health Programs can reduce the number of sick days taken by employees and can support women in having healthy pregnancies. Workers who are emotionally and physically healthy have increased morale and reduced absentee and turnover rates, which can increase overall productivity. In addition, supporting women before and after they give birth to ensure their health and the health of the child (including breast feeding breaks and rooms, on-site childcare facilities, parental leave, contraceptives, etc.) is equally important to productivity.

- **Improved Relationships:** Companies focusing on women's health in their workplace will foster healthier relationships between workers and supervisors, increasing communication and rapport.

Studies conducted by the HERproject found that a sustained investment in women's health programs increase on time delivery and productivity due to reduced error rates as well as reduced health-related absenteeism. BSR estimates that reducing turnover by 1% in a Shenzhen factory of 1,000 workers with a monthly turnover rate of 9% would save the factory over US\$ 78,000 per year. (See Company Examples Table)

## 2. Supporting women's health contributes to **sustainable development**

- **Lower Death Rates:** Evidence shows that education and empowerment programs for all members of a community, especially for women and girls on gender equality and reproductive health can lead to lower ma-

*"Annually, it would cost only US\$ 25 per woman of reproductive age, or US\$ 7 per person in the developing world, to provide all women with the total package of sexual and reproductive health care."<sup>11</sup>*

ternal and infant mortality rates, a reduction in unwanted adolescent pregnancies and a decrease of sexually transmitted infections.<sup>12</sup>

- **Decrease in Poverty:** Respecting and supporting a women's right to health and women's reproductive rights can help reduce poverty within families and communities, decrease chances of violence against women, create healthier and more productive men, women and children and lead to sustainable growth.

- **Higher National Growth Rates:** Maternal and newborn deaths result in slower national growth rates and global productivity losses of up to US\$ 15 billion each year. Between 30% and 50% of Asia's economic growth from 1965 to 1990 has been attributed to improvements in reproductive health and reductions in infant and child mortality and fertility rates.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, good health has a positive and statistically significant effect on output and economic growth of a country.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Empowering People to Ensure a Sustainable Future for All, UNFPA (2014)

<sup>11</sup> Adding it Up, UNFPA and Guttmacher institute (2014)

<sup>12</sup> [http://data.unicef.org/corecode/uploads/document6/uploaded\\_pdfs/corecode/APR-2014-170ct14-web\\_194.pdf](http://data.unicef.org/corecode/uploads/document6/uploaded_pdfs/corecode/APR-2014-170ct14-web_194.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Investing in Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, WHO (2009)

<sup>14</sup> The Effect of Health on Economic Growth: A Production Function Approach, Bloom, Canning & Sevilla (2004)

- **Demographic Dividend:** If the currently unmet need for contraception were met, countries could grow the proportion of working adults in proportion to dependent children, creating a “demographic dividend”. A demographic dividend is when a country’s economy benefits due to rapid change in the age composition of a population. This change is due to improvements in a population’s health and fertility decline.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Health, including sexual and reproductive health, is a **basic human right**

*“Reproductive rights embrace certain human rights that are already recognized in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus documents... It also includes the right of all to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence as expressed in human rights documents.”*

-UNFPA, ICPD Programme of Action, para 7.3

- **Higher Respect for Human Rights:** While governments have the primary obligation to protect human rights, businesses also have a responsibility to respect human rights. This includes the right to health of women workers and other stakeholders.<sup>16</sup>
- **Corporate Responsibility to Respect Human Rights:** The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is generally agreed to be the foundation of international human rights law. It represents the universal recognition that basic rights and fundamental freedoms are inherent to all human beings, inalienable and equally applicable to everyone, and that every one of us is born free and equal in dignity and rights. Women’s rights are human rights. Article 16 and 25 express this further “Men and women ... are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution... Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being... Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance...”

## How can businesses advance women’s health?

**Strategies may differ depending on a company’s sector, region, size, number of employees etc. However, some starting points include:**

- **Implement** the ideas of **shared value**, a principle in which businesses can mutually benefit from investing in a social issue, in this case women’s health. This principle involves looking at the benefits of addressing social problems as core business objectives.<sup>17</sup>
- **Align** human resources policies with principles of women’s human rights. Companies should at all times respect and promote human rights, including reproductive rights.<sup>18</sup>
- **Secure** support and a public commitment from the organization’s leadership as well as encourage other businesses to do the same. Businesses can also support public policy dialogues while lending their brand and voice to advocacy efforts addressing women’s health.
- **Track** the effectiveness of existing health and safety policies and programs by incorporating sex-disaggregated data. **Expand** the reach of workplace programs (e.g., trainings, seminars, emails, counseling, etc.) beyond female and male employees to surrounding communities, to raise awareness about health issues and available services (including reproductive health, family planning, nutrition, hygiene, etc.).
- **Provide** on-site vaccinations, STI testing, and health screening programs.
- **Develop** appropriate, family-friendly accommodations for workers before, during, and after maternity leave that allow women to remain in the workplace after having children e.g. providing maternity leave, on-site lactation and nap rooms, on-site fitness centers, on-site or subsidized child-care, flexible working arrangements, telecommuting, etc. **Include** family planning in medical coverage offered to employees.
- **Provide** employees with a list of local trusted healthcare professionals that provide quality reproductive, sexual, maternal, newborn, and child health services. Providing such information can help ensure access to quality medicines and protect workers from contaminated and counterfeit medications or sub-standard health services, major concerns in the global market.<sup>19</sup>
- **Partner** with health care NGOs and public clinics to raise awareness and increase access to targeted health services to women workers. A healthy partnership might have multiple industries and sectors involved with a variety of activities, still using shared metrics, working towards a common agenda with continued communication.<sup>20</sup>
- In addition to implementing the above, companies can **make** investment in women’s health a priority in their business operations and corporate philanthropy.



Photo: World Bank Photo Collection/Flickr

<sup>15</sup> The Challenge Ahead: Initiating a Demographic Dividend, Population Reference Bureau (2013)

<sup>16</sup> The corporate responsibility to respect human rights is embedded in the Human Rights Principles of the UN Global Compact and the second pillar of the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which were endorsed by the Human Rights Council in 2011. The Guiding Principles include the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, which is an expression of commitments including those by employers’ and workers’ organizations to uphold basic human value.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.fsg.org/OurApproach/SharedValue.aspx>

<sup>18,20</sup> Private Enterprise for Public Health, PMNCH, WHO (2012)

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.who.int/medicines/services/counterfeit/overview/en/>

## Supporting Organizations:



The UN Global Compact is a strategic policy initiative for businesses that are committed to aligning their operations and strategies with ten universally accepted principles in the areas of human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption. In 2010, the UN Global Compact, in partnership with UN Women, launched the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs)— seven Principles for business on how to empower women in the workplace, marketplace, and community.

Learn more: [www.wepinciples.org](http://www.wepinciples.org)

## DFPA

The Danish Family Planning Association

The Danish Family Planning Association is a private, non-governmental organization without religious/political affiliations that works with organizations within the sphere of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Its mission is to fight for sexual and reproductive rights, strengthen each person's chances of making free and informed choices, and advocate for the right to information and health services.

Learn more: [www.dfpa.dk](http://www.dfpa.dk)

## BSR | her+project

HERproject is a BSR (Business for Social Responsibility) initiative that catalyzes partnerships among international companies, suppliers, and NGOs to implement women's empowerment programs in global supply chains currently focused on two programs, HERhealth and HERfinance. These workplace-based programs, taught using a peer education methodology, are centered on the provision of critical health and financial literacy information/services to increase female health and build financial capability.

Learn more: [www.herproject.org](http://www.herproject.org)



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UNFPA is the lead UN agency for delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, and every young person's potential is fulfilled. UNFPA works in more than 150 countries and territories that are home to the vast majority of the world's people. UNFPA expands the possibilities for women and young people to lead healthy and productive lives.

Learn more: [www.unfpa.org](http://www.unfpa.org)



The United Nations Foundation (UNF) links the UN's work with others around the world, mobilizing the energy and expertise of business and non-governmental organizations to help the UN tackle issues including climate change, global health, peace and security, women's empowerment, poverty eradication, energy access, and U.S.-UN relations.

Learn more: [www.unfoundation.org](http://www.unfoundation.org)



GBCHealth  
Helping Business for a Healthier World

GBCHealth serves as a hub for business engagement on the world's most pressing global health issues. Beginning in 2013 they have sharpened their focus on engaging the private sector specifically in attaining the health Millennium Development Goals. Their topmost priority is to maximize corporate sector participation in this final push to meet worldwide targets for cutting maternal, newborn, and child deaths and advancing HIV, TB, and malaria efforts. Another facet of their work centers around engaging the private sector in developing priorities and formulating new goals for the post 2015-agenda. Through convenings, partnership creation, advocacy and leadership and spearheading carefully selected initiatives, GBCHealth is the advisor of choice for companies interested in bringing their assets, skills and passion to help meet our shared goals for health.

Learn more: [www.gbchealth.org](http://www.gbchealth.org)

## Meridian Group International, Inc.

Meridian Group International, Inc. is a women-owned business that manages the RAISE Health Initiative for Workers, Companies and Communities under the USAID-funded Evidence Project. Its mission is to develop and promote cost-effective policies and practices that expand women's and workers' health services at workplaces in the developing world.

Learn more: [www.meridian-group.com](http://www.meridian-group.com)