

Central Asian First Ladies Help Shape Health Care for Women and Children

By Mairam D. Akaeva, First Lady of Kyrgyzstan

What are the most important health issues facing women in your nation?

First I would like to quote some data from the Research Institute of Obstetrics and Pediatrics (Republic of Kyrgyzstan), referring to the most urgent issues of children's and women's health care. Kyrgyzstan is a mountainous country; 93 percent of its territory is situated between 500 and 7,000 meters above sea level. One-third of all women living in these mountain regions have a complicated pregnancy, and 11 percent of these have premature deliveries. Most of the neonates have a low body weight, and that is why they are predisposed to diseases and death.

Among the general population, 22 percent are women of child-bearing age, but only about 9 percent are in good health. We also have a high birthrate: 19 percent of women give birth to a child at least every year, and 29 percent give birth every two years.

Unfortunately, we have a high maternal death rate (70-80 per 100,000 live births) in comparison to developed countries. One-third of maternal deaths occur in women who have had more than five deliveries. The death rate among babies is also quite high--27-29 per 1,000 live births--although beginning in 1995 there has been some stabilization.

The principal causes of high death rates among infants and mothers include many deliveries that exhaust the mother, a low level of knowledge about family planning, irregular health screening, and improper and unbalanced nutrition of women and children.

The state program "Health of the Nation " contains policy and strategy in the field of reproductive health. It includes informing women about the dangers of frequent deliveries and abortion, especially during the late period of gestation. It also stresses the importance of family planning for the protection of the mother's reproductive health and training personnel in family planning.

How are you using your role as First Lady to advocate women's health issues?

1996 was proclaimed "women's year " in our country, and solutions to women's and family social and economic issues will be directed toward the improvement of welfare, living and work conditions, and nutrition. Women's position in society reflects, like a mirror, the state's condition as a whole. Only by improving women's economic, health, social and legal conditions can the country be successful and develop stability.

I have a great desire to help in finding solutions to problems concerning children's and women's health care. In February 1993, on my initiative, the International Charity Foundation for the Support of Childhood and Motherhood in Kyrgyzstan (MEERIM) was established to focus on the health and social problems of childhood and motherhood.

Taking into consideration the importance of improving women's and children's health, the Ministry of Public Health and the Research Institute of Obstetrics and Pediatrics, one of the founders of the Foundation, has developed a program to reduce maternal and infant mortality, improve mothers' and children's health in the remote regions of the Republic, and provide information to the public about healthy lifestyles through the press.

If you could alleviate one health challenge confronting women in your country, what would you choose?

The reduction of infant and maternal mortality is a priority issue. I dream of such a world where the birth of each child will be a great joy and conceived children will see the light, will be wealthy, well brought-up, beloved, educated, and well provided for, and where the women will not die from causes connected with gestation and delivery.

Tatiana Karimova, First Lady of Uzbekistan

What are the most important health issues facing women in your nation?

In Uzbekistan, as well as in all of Central Asia, there is a high birth rate. This is why, at the present time, the following issues in women's health care are of great importance:

developing a system of family planning that takes into account people's values and national and family traditions;
encouraging families to have a smaller number of children, especially in the rural regions;
promoting the family's responsibility for giving birth and bringing up healthy children; and
increasing the interval between deliveries to 4-5 years.

Using different methods of contraception will play an increasingly important role in solving these issues. Already there is progress. For example, between 1990 and 1995, the birth rate in Uzbekistan declined from 34.5 to 29.7 per 1,000, and the quantity of abortions among women of childbearing age fell during the same period from 40 to 18.8 per 1,000.

Assessing all kinds of non-reproductive diseases among women of childbearing age is also important. Keeping in mind the resurgence of marriage around the world, as well as in Uzbekistan, it is of utmost importance to prepare young girls for a secure motherhood; the health index among our young girls is low. In addition to physical health improvement, it is necessary to improve the sexual education of young girls.

Another very important issue is the prevention of congenital birth defects. Congenital diseases play an important role in the child death rate, and they are a real problem for the family and society as a whole.

How are you using your role as First Lady to advocate women's health issues?

First of all, I would like to do everything I can toward increasing the role and influence of our women in the development of our society.

During the five years following Uzbekistan's declaration of independence, the government has developed and financed the "Healthy Mother-Healthy Child " program, which is an integral part of the population's health improvement program. Many international organizations and foundations are taking part in this program, including the international non-governmental charity foundation "For a Healthy Generation. " As president of this foundation, I am trying to do all I can, including:
implementing all of the foundation's humanitarian programs;
inviting local and foreign investors to support the most important social projects; and
providing humanitarian and other aid to improve the material base of medical and other institutions.

If you could alleviate one health challenge confronting women in your country, what would you choose?

I believe that it is of utmost importance to establish in our country a medico-social service system that will help solve women's and children's health care problems. The "For a Healthy

Generation " foundation is doing some work in this direction, and the Uzbek government is supporting this initiative.

At the present time, this service is provided by 15 ambulances with teams of medico-social workers. Each team consists of a pediatrician, a gynecologist, an internist, a nurse and a social worker. The ambulances contain a complete set of modern medical equipment, which is necessary for diagnosing women and children. Ultrasound and laparoscopic equipment, an EKG, and a biolaboratory are included.

The main goals of the service are:

- providing medical examinations to women and their children at the same time;
- helping women and children improve their health;
- explaining the principles and practice of family planning;
- explaining the importance of vaccination and disease prevention; and
- delivery of humanitarian, social and legal aid to the family.

It is important to emphasize that the quantity of the above-mentioned teams is utterly insufficient, and the foundation is only taking its first steps to establish a medico-social service system in our country. But their role is important because the ambulances are working in the remote regions and settlements of the country, where the population is living in very difficult social conditions, and where mothers and children cannot receive qualified health care. We believe that the necessary health care for women and children will be established with the development of this system and the strengthening and expansion of logistics.