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Maternal mortality - a perspective for a nation

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As an obstetrician of Indian origin, the devastation of a nation by this single most tragic event bothered me and will continue to bother me like many.

Firstly, it is imperative to understand what Maternal Mortality is. According to WHO “ the death of a woman while pregnant, or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy, irrespective of the duration and site of pregnancy from any cause, related or aggravated by the pregnancy or its management but not from the accidental or incidental.” A nation the size and dimensions such as India that is trying to establish as a modern nation, trying to reach the moon but has not done well enough on this cause with dismal numbers in this area.

As per WHO, every day approximately 830 women die of preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth and 99% of all maternal deaths occur in developing countries. Thirty thousand and three hundred (30,300) women died of maternal cause in 2015. According to GNFWA about one woman dies every two minutes.

However, maternal deaths decreased by a staggering 43% between 1990 and 2015 and maternal mortality ratio (maternal deaths per 100,000 live births) fell by nearly 40% over the past 25 years.

In analyzing the Global Maternal Mortality Ratio which is at 248, Africa has the highest at 542 but is declining, South East Asia and Mediterranean at 196, Americas at 52, and Europe at 18 has the lowest rate. In a nationwide analysis India, Bangladesh and Pakistan have almost same rate at 176 compared to

developed nations such as, Australia, 5.5. Canada, 7.3, France, 7.6, Japan, 6.4, and USA 26.4.

These women die due to poor quality of maternal care, no care, illiteracy and malnutrition. In a recent maternal mortality symposium, it was expressed that “for every woman dying in child birth, about 20 suffer from long lasting and debilitating illnesses. For many of the women, life is a living death.”

Unsafe abortions have played a major role in maternal mortality and morbidity. Globally the rate of abortion fell between 1990-94, 2010-2014, from 46 to 27 per 1000 women of reproductive age compared with 36 in Asia, 34 in Africa and 17 in North America. In the 14 developing countries where unsafe abortion is prevalent, 40% of women seeking termination develop complications. United States spends more on healthcare than any other developed nation but has surprisingly high ratio due to migrant population. Women with poor access to health care and overuse of medical interventions enter pregnancy with chronic conditions. Limited education, financial, racial, cultural and systemic barriers leave woman of colour, with low income with lesser quality care or no care at all.

In recent CNN town hall meeting in US, a speaker expressed that maternal mortality is the shame of US health care.

Of course there is no way India can find solace at this, when one considers the maternal mortality ratio of US is 26 compared to India's 176.

For a country the size of India with a billion plus population, there has to be a comprehensive national initiative and policy, which they do have but has not made any inroads to overcome catastrophe for a nation which has a tremendous healthcare resources that are misused or underutilized.

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Shivangi S: Maternal mortality - a perspective for a nation

As a nation with a cause, a political leadership and a moral leadership that wants to involve healthcare with social change, it is possible to change the map of India for the cause of maternal mortality. If India can reach the moon, and make remarkable improvements in health care, education and eradication of poverty, why not we make this the cause of this century and if not eradicate it at least raise a social conscience to overcome this curse on humanity.

This cause has been very close to my heart and I want to share my unique experience of an encounter with our dear Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, last year in Bangalore where I was being honoured by the President of India with a National award for an NRI, Pravasi Bharatiya Sanman award. Hon. Prime Minister Modi was also present at the ceremony. I have met him several times before in India and the USA. As PM Modi walked towards me and greeted, I did not want to lose this opportunity that was god sent, to open my heart on this issue.

I had heard about his national initiative on the girl child issue which is near to his heart as I had heard

several times his famous slogan “Beti Ko Pado aur Beti ko Bachao” (educate the girl child & save the girl child). Sir, I admire your initiative on saving the girl child, but we have forgotten the mother who is the focal point of the family and there is no daughter without the mother. Our country has one of the highest and worst records in maternal morbidity and mortality causing devastating effect on family and the nation. We need to come out of our third world nation status on the issue of maternal mortality. Please make this also your cause and add “Beti ko Pado, Beti ko Bachao and Ma ko bi Bachao” (save the mother also). Please make this as a national cause. I could see he was literally moved as he held my hands with assurance.

I thought as any politician, he would forget my meeting and move on. But not our prime minister. I learnt that a few months later he brought up this issue on maternal mortality in his radio talk Man ki Baat that has devastated the nation and his comprehensive plan on this. If anyone can help on this issue, then it is Modi. But only if we as health care providers would support and make it as our cause, there is hope. A small step in this direction is leap forward for the nation.