



HUNGER NOTES

a newsletter of World Hunger Education Service

Vol. XII, Nos. 11-12

April-May 1987

Safe Motherhood

The importance of women's productive role in third world food systems as well as in many aspects of the economy is slowly but surely entering the awareness of even the most conventional development planners. But until now hardly anyone has been aware of the shocking toll their reproductive role has been taking on the lives and health of third world women. Recent research by the World Health Organization reveals almost half a million deaths from pregnancy related causes each year, with many millions more women permanently disabled. Mothers in low income countries are 50 to 100 times more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth than mothers in affluent countries. Most of this "silent carnage", as conferees at the Safe Motherhood Conference in Nairobi last February called it, could be prevented with better targeting of available national health resources. The World Bank's Adviser on Women in Development, economist Barbara Herz, estimates an annual cost of \$2.00 per capita or even less to provide the essential health services in most developing countries.

The February 10 - 13 meeting was co-sponsored by the World Health Organization, the World Bank and the UN Fund for Population Activities as one step in the "Safe Motherhood Initiative" launched last fall by the World Bank and WHO. Halfdan Mahler, Director-General of WHO, said, "Sound estimates based on new data are...the foundation of our current understanding and concern....It has been a neglected tragedy...because those who suffer it are neglected people..." Barber Conable, new president of the World Bank, reminded the conference, "We who work in development cannot advance far if we leave women significantly behind....Women's health is basic to women's advancement in all fields of endeavor. And as a mother's health is the bulwark of her family, it is the foundation of community and social progress. Working for safe motherhood, we will be working for steady development on all fronts."

"Perhaps the most important contribution to [the safe motherhood] initiative," concluded the Nairobi conferees (from 37 countries, 7 bilateral aid agencies and 14 non-governmental organizations along with the UN agencies), "will be to call attention to the problems related to it, and to create an awareness that something can and must be done, starting with the commitment of heads of states and governments." HUNGER NOTES is pleased to join that effort by presenting information here which has been prepared by WHO, UNFPA, and the World Bank.