

11 July 2007

World Population Day

In Timor Leste women are 80 times more likely to die in childbirth than Australian women*

Men can play a critical role in reducing high maternal death rates in the region by empowering women, according to the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance (ARHA).

ARHA's new CEO, Ms Jane Singleton, says that in Australia's near neighbour, Timor Leste (East Timor), women are dying in childbirth at over 80 times the rate they do in Australia and children under five die at 20 times the rate.

"The loss of a mother affects the whole family, not least the surviving children. For an infant whose mother dies in childbirth, the chances of survival are extremely poor," she said in a statement to mark World Population Day.

"Empowerment of women is an important step towards improving high infant and child mortality. It is in men's own interests, in their children's interests and in their wives' interests if women are empowered."

Ms Singleton says empowerment includes being educated, being able to decide when and whom to marry, being able to make decisions about the number and spacing of their children, having access to skilled attendants at birth including emergency obstetric care if needed, and being able to protect herself against disease including HIV.

Ms Singleton says that men are often community, political and religious leaders and in that role can shape public opinion.

"If men as community leaders support women's health and well-being then pregnant women are more likely to get the care they need. Men as husbands can determine whether or not funds are available for their wives to have a trained mid-wife at birth and for transport to clinics or hospitals for emergency care.

"Men as fathers often make the decisions now about whether their daughters get an education or are married early. Yet all the evidence indicates that if a girl is educated and marries later, her children will be healthier and she is more likely to provide economic support for her family," says Ms Singleton.

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