

Innovative programmes needed to address women's healthcare in Africa

Worldwide, women's life expectancy is on average 75.6 years while in the sub-Saharan region, it is significantly lower. Covid-19 has also impacted access to family planning services due to lockdowns and fear of visiting healthcare facilities.



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Unequal burden of care

Covid-19 has increased the unequal burden of care carried by women, causing more women than men to leave the labour market during the pandemic.

PwC's Women in Work Index 2021 states, "During Covid-19, women have taken on an even greater share and now spend 7.7 more hours per week on unpaid childcare than men – this 'second shift' now equates to 31.5 hours per week; almost as much an extra full-time job."

"Under these circumstances, we need innovative programmes to address the specific healthcare needs of women in Africa, and to reduce inequity in access to healthcare," says Dr Abofele Khoele, Organon sub-Saharan Africa managing director.

"South African law guarantees access to sexual and reproductive health services, but there is a need for access to effective contraceptive services in a private, non-judgemental and gender sensitive setting," Khoele adds.

Unintended pregnancies

During the seven-year period before the South Africa Demographic Health Survey (SADHS) 2016, the pregnancy-related mortality ratio was 536 deaths per 100,000 live births.

While South Africa has made significant progress with regard to the improvement of maternal health and the reduction of maternal mortality in the last two decades, most maternal deaths are preventable.

New in South Africa, Organon, aims to address the pressing healthcare issues facing women in the Sub-Saharan region, and to significantly improve their health.

“The burden of unintended pregnancies has an enormous impact on women’s lives, and education plays a critical role in empowering them to make decisions about family planning,” says Khoele.

Organon works with funders globally to support countries that are part of Family Planning 2020 (FP2020) on a medium- to long-term financing agreement.

“We support an access programme to family planning products as well as initiatives that aim to empower women and make it easier for them to access family planning services, while always remaining sensitive to cultural and gender issues,” says Mokgadi Mashishi, business unit director, Institutional Business Africa (IBA).

Programmes for women’s health

Successful support programmes include training on contraceptive implant insertion and removal for 20,000 health extension workers in Ethiopia, representing 50% of the total number of health extension workers in that country.

The project is implemented through the Midwife Association, Ethiopian Public Health Associations and Family Guidance Association of Ethiopia with the recommendation of the Ministry of Health.

Mashishi says the programmes which Organon partners on are crucial for women’s health and empowerment.

“They give women the opportunity to exercise their right to choose.

“In some instances, the identified need is to address teenage pregnancy or child spacing for families.

“By allowing access to family planning solutions and information, we are not only contributing to reducing unintended pregnancies and maternal mortality, but we are also affording women the opportunity to pursue their dreams, resulting in positive outcomes for women, their families and communities.”

Making the right choices

The United Nations Population Fund says Africa will be the biggest contributor to population growth by 2050.

“We cannot afford not to be involved,” Mashishi says.

“We need to ask ourselves: how do we empower young girls and young boys to make the right choices when it comes to sexual and reproductive health, and how do we engage couples on family planning education.

“Sexual health and contraception should not be taboo subjects, Mashishi adds.

Mashishi says this requires collaboration between parents, communities, schools, policy makers, private and public sectors, government authorities and other key decision-makers.

“It’s a multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder issue that requires a holistic approach.”

Organon has more than 60 established medicines and solutions across a range of areas including reproductive health, heart disease, breast cancer, allergies and asthma, and serves women in more than 140 markets around the world.

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