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FT Health: The struggle for women's rights

World population report, Unicef's Henrietta Fore, astronaut twins



A nurse inspects a pregnant women at a maternity hospital in Port Harcourt, Nigeria © Reuters

Andrew Jack and Darren Dodd APRIL 12 2019

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Demographers and family-planning experts are preparing for a golden anniversary this year, as they mark progress since the creation in 1969 of UNFPA, the United Nations' population fund, and twenty-five years since the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo.

Birth rates around the world have slowed in the past 50 years, driven largely by economic and social development: as child mortality rates fall, education opportunities increase and women gain greater rights, the desire for fewer children normally follows.

But, to quote the title of [UNFPA's latest annual report](#), there remains significant "unfinished business". While forced sterilisation and other state-imposed methods of imposing birth control have faded, other practices which violate human rights and negate women's choices — from childhood marriage to female genital mutilation — remain too widespread.

Inequalities, traditions and parts of the world where development has been much slower mean that there are over 200m women each year who say they want but have no access to modern contraceptive methods — 37 per cent in least developed countries, according to the latest estimates, where the number of children per woman remains 3.9 compared to 2.5 globally.

While general fears about overpopulation are less pronounced than in the 1960s, specific concerns about environmental pressures and the growing burden of humanity on global warming are more pressing than ever.

As [Natalia Kanem](#), head of UNFPA, says: "Since Cairo we have got away from population being about numbers, to it being about people, development, women and girls. But we cannot shy away from saying that we still have to be vigilant to protect the progress women have made."

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Three questions

[Henrietta Fore](#) is executive editor at Unicef, the UN agency for children, which has just published a report on the poor state of [water supplies and sanitation](#) in healthcare centres.

How serious is the problem?

It's serious any time you can't trust a healthcare facility not to make you more unwell. Imagine giving birth or taking your ill child to a facility where the doctors can't even wash their hands or dispose of medical waste?

Healthcare facilities are also ground zero for drug-resistant pathogens. When health workers can't wash their hands, or when they use dirty medical equipment, they risk spreading these resistant germs to other patients. Likewise, when you have poor sanitation in healthcare facilities, you run the risk of exposing more of the population to these resistant germs and antibiotics through contaminated wastewater, both of which contribute to resistance.

Is this just about resources or a lack of political will?

It's both. Many countries are crippled by dated facilities, lack of trained staff and poor water and sanitation infrastructure. So obviously, resources are critical, but resources require political will. This is why efforts at the upcoming World Health Assembly to encourage governments to prioritise water and sanitation in health facilities around the world are crucial.

What has been Unicef's most important achievement in global health?

More [women are having healthier pregnancies](#) and delivering healthier babies. We are the world's largest procurer of vaccines for children and thanks largely to vaccines, smallpox has been eradicated, polio is on the verge of eradication, and tetanus has been eliminated in more than 45 countries. What we are most proud of is the big picture: we have been able to get under-five mortality from 12.6m deaths annually down to 5.4m in under three decades, even as the number of births worldwide has soared. Along with vaccines, interventions to treat diarrhoea and pneumonia and save newborn babies are paying off.

Chartwatch

Health spending Two reports illustrated individuals' global spending on health. [World Bank](#) data (graphic above) showed considerable variation in out-of-pocket expenditure while [World Health Organization](#) analysis showed the level of unmet need and financial hardship across Europe.