

Where Women Have No Doctor:

A health guide for women

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Berkeley, California, USA



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This health guide can be improved with your help. We would like to hear about your experiences, traditions and practices. If you are a midwife, traditional birth attendant, village health worker, doctor, nurse, mother, or anyone with suggestions for ways to make this book better meet the needs of your community, please write to us. Thank you for your help.

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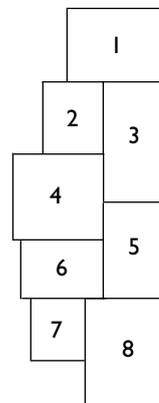
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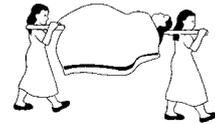
This book was written to help women care for their own health, and to help community health workers or others meet women's health needs. We have tried to include information that will be useful for those with no formal training in health care skills, and for those who do have some training.

Although this book covers a wide range of women's health problems, it does not cover many problems that commonly affect both women and men, such as malaria, parasites, intestinal problems, and other diseases. For information on these kinds of problems, see **Where There Is No Doctor** or another general medical book.

Sometimes the information in this book will not be enough to enable you to solve a health problem. When this happens, get more help. Depending on the problem, we may suggest that you:

- **see a health worker.** This means that a trained health worker should be able to help you solve the problem.
- **get medical help.** This means you need to go to a clinic that has trained medical people or a doctor, or a laboratory where basic tests are done.
- **go to a hospital.** This means you need to see a doctor at a hospital that is equipped for emergencies, for surgery, or for special tests.

If you need to get help immediately, this picture will also appear.



TRANSPORT!

How to Use this Book:

Finding information in the book

To find a topic you want to know about, you can use either the list of Contents or the Index.

The Contents, at the front of the book, lists the chapters in the order in which they appear. There is also a list of contents at the beginning of every chapter. Each topic on this list appears on the numbered page listed as a large heading (words in big, dark letters).

The Index, or Yellow Pages at the back of the book, lists all the important topics covered in the book, in the order of the alphabet (a, b, c, d...).

To find information about the medicines used in this book, look in the **Green Pages** toward the back of the book. Page 485 gives more information about using medicines and the Green Pages.

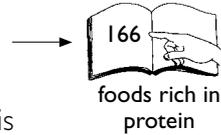
If you do not understand the meanings of some of the words used in this book, you may find them in the **List of Difficult Words** that starts on page 548. The first time these words appear in a chapter, they are *printed in slanted letters, like this*. You can also look up the word in the index to see if it is explained in another part of the book.

Many chapters end with a section called 'Working for Change'. These sections give suggestions for working to improve women's health in your community.

Finding information on a page

To find information on a page, first look over the whole page. You will see that the page is divided into 2 parts: a large, main column and a small column on the outside of the page. The main column gives most of the information about a topic. The small column has additional information that can help you better understand the topic.

Whenever you see a picture of a book in the small column, this means more information about a topic can be found in another part of the book. The words under the book say what the topic is. The page number on the book says where that topic can be found. If there are several topics, the book is shown once and the topics and their page numbers are listed below.



What the different things on a page mean:

Most pages have several **headings**. The headings in the small column give the general topic that is being discussed on that page. The headings in the main column give more specific topics.

chapter title

page number → **74** Pregnancy and Childbirth

general topic → **Danger Signs during Pregnancy**

See this page ... for more information about this topic → 

Get help right away! → 

SWELLING OF THE HANDS AND FACE OR SEVERE HEADACHE AND BLURRED VISION (TOXEMIA)

Some swelling in the legs and ankles is normal in pregnancy. But swelling of the hands and face can be a sign of toxemia, especially if you also have headaches, blurred vision, or pains in your abdomen. Toxemia can cause fits, and both you and the baby can die.



What to do:

- Find someone who can check your blood pressure. Go to a health center or hospital if necessary.
- Rest as often as possible, lying down on your left side.
- Try to eat more foods with a lot of *protein* every day.
- Plan to have the birth in a health center or hospital.

Danger signs of toxemia

- swollen hands and face
- severe headache
- blurred vision
- dizziness
- sudden, severe pain high in the stomach
- blood pressure 160/100 or higher (see page 528)

IMPORTANT If a woman has *any* of the danger signs of toxemia, she needs medical help fast. If she is already having fits, see page 87.

specific topic ←

this word is explained in the List of difficult words →

Very important information →

Some pages also contain **medicine boxes**, which look like this:

These boxes tell you the amount of medicine to give, how often to give it, and for how long. Sometimes we recommend medicines without putting them in a box. In either case, **look up each medicine in the Green Pages before using it.**

Medicine for Breast Infection		
Medicine	How much to take	When and how to take
dicloxacillin	250 mg	4 times a day for 10 days.
If you cannot find this or are allergic to penicillin, take:		Take at least 30 minutes before eating food.
erythromycin	500 mg	4 times a day for 10 days.
<p><i>Important: If a breast infection is not treated early, it will get worse. The hot and painful swelling will feel as if it is filled with liquid (abscess). If this happens, follow the treatment described here, AND see a health worker who has been trained to drain an abscess using sterile equipment.</i></p>		

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Chapter 1

Women's Health Is a Community Issue



When a woman is healthy, she has the energy and strength to do her daily work, to fulfill the many roles she has in her family and community, and to build satisfying relationships with others. In other words, a woman's health affects every area of her life. Yet for many years, 'women's health care' has meant little more than maternal health services such as care during pregnancy and birth. These services are necessary, but they only address women's needs as mothers.

In this book we offer a different view of women's health. First, we believe that every woman has a right to complete health care, throughout her life. A woman's health care should help her in all areas of life—not just in her role as a wife and mother. Second, we believe that a woman's health is affected not just by the way her body is made, but by the social, cultural, and economic conditions in which she lives.

While men's health is also affected by these factors, women as a group are treated differently from men. They usually have less power and fewer resources, and lower status in the family and community. This basic inequality means that:

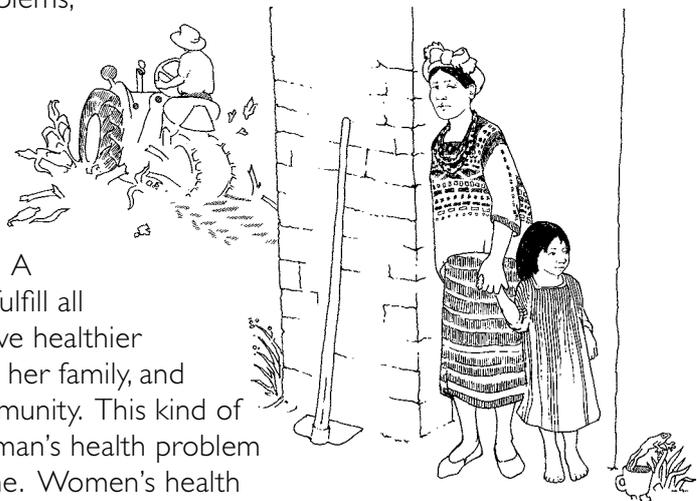
- more women than men suffer from poverty.
- more women than men are denied the education and skills to support themselves.
- more women than men lack access to important health information and services.
- more women than men lack control over their basic health care decisions.

This larger view helps us understand the underlying (root) causes of women's poor health. Improving women's health includes treating their health problems, but it also requires changing the conditions of their lives so they can gain more power over their own health.

When this happens, everyone—the woman, her family and community—benefits. A healthy woman has a chance to fulfill all of her potential. Plus, she will have healthier babies, be better able to care for her family, and can contribute more to her community. This kind of view also helps us see that a woman's health problem is almost never her problem alone. Women's health is a community issue.

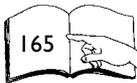
What Is 'Women's Health'?

► *Good health is more than the absence of disease. Good health means the well-being of a woman's body, mind, and spirit.*



Women Are More at Risk for Disease and Poor Health

► *Not getting enough good food can keep a girl from growing properly, and can lead to serious health problems.*



eating for good health

Because a woman's body is different from a man's, and because of the basic inequalities between men and women, women face a greater risk of disease and poor health. Here are some of the health problems that affect women most:

Poor nutrition

Poor *nutrition* is the most common and disabling health problem among women in poor countries. Starting in childhood, a girl is often given less food to eat than a boy. As a result, she may grow more slowly and her bones may not develop properly (which may later cause difficulty during childbirth). The problem worsens as she becomes a young woman, because her need for good food increases as her workload increases, and as she starts her *monthly bleeding*, becomes pregnant, and breastfeeds.

Without enough good food, she may begin to suffer from general poor health, including *exhaustion*, weakness, and *anemia*. If a woman who is already *malnourished* becomes pregnant, she is more likely to have serious complications with childbirth, such as heavy bleeding, *infection*, or a baby that is born too small.



The health worker told me I should drink more milk and eat green leafy vegetables. But I save all our milk for my husband and son, and we don't have the money to buy vegetables.

A woman's health cannot be isolated from her social status. In most of rural India, women drink less milk than their husbands and sons and they eat only after the men have been served. This usually leaves women with a limited diet, and it also tells about how she is valued.

—CHETNA, Ahmedabad, India

Reproductive health problems

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS. A woman is physically more at risk for getting STIs and AIDS than a man. This is because a man's *semen* stays inside her and the *germs* it carries can pass through the lining of the *vagina* into her blood. And, since a woman often has no signs of infection, she may not get treatment.

But the problem is really a social one. Women often have little control over decisions about sex and often cannot refuse *unsafe sex*. As a result, 165 million women get an STI every year, and more than 17 million are already infected with HIV. Without treatment, STIs can cause disabling pain, severe *pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)*, *infertility*, problems during pregnancy, and an increased risk of *cervical cancer*. HIV/AIDS causes death.

Frequent pregnancies. In many parts of the world, a third to half of young women become mothers before they are 20 years old. Without *family planning*, many of these women will not have time to get strong again between births. This puts a woman at risk for poor health and complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Frequent childbirth also means she is less able to control her own life, to get an education, and to learn skills to support herself.

Complications from pregnancy and birth. In the last 30 years, the number of infant deaths has been greatly reduced. Yet the number of women who die from pregnancy and birth has not. Every minute, one woman dies from a problem related to pregnancy. Every minute, 40 women develop a lasting health problem related to pregnancy. This means that over time, about a quarter of all women living in poor countries will be seriously affected by *complications* from pregnancy and birth.

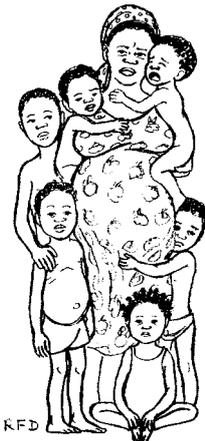
Unsafe abortion. When a woman tries to end a pregnancy by having an *unsafe abortion*, she risks her life. But every day about 50,000 women and girls try to end their pregnancies in unsafe ways because they have no way to get a safe abortion. Many are left unable to have children or with lasting pain, infection, and other health problems.

Female genital cutting. *Female genital cutting*, in which part or all of a girl's outer *genitals* are cut off, can cause serious health problems. These include *pelvic* and *urine* system infections, sexual and emotional problems, and difficulties during childbirth. Yet despite these problems, it continues to be widely practiced. Every year about 2 million girls are cut, mostly in Africa, but also in the Middle East and Asia.



STIs and other infections of the genitals

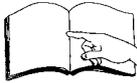
► Because women most often have unsafe sex against their will, STIs are a social issue.



► Every minute, one woman dies from a problem related to pregnancy.

► Every year 75,000 women die from unsafe abortions.

► *Men and women get many of the same diseases, but women can be affected differently.*



TB, 387

alcohol and other drugs, 435



393

work

► *A woman faces health risks from her work inside and outside of the home. Working long hours, the 'double work day', can make her body too tired to fight disease.*

► *Problems with mental health can be as serious as other health problems.*



413

mental health

General medical problems

Women are more likely than men to suffer from certain health problems because of the work they do, because of poor nutrition, or from being too tired. A disease can also cause a different kind of harm to a woman than a man. For example, a woman who suffers from a disease which weakens her or makes her look ugly may be rejected by her husband.

Once they are sick, women are less likely to seek and receive treatment until they are seriously ill. For example, *tuberculosis (TB)* is spreading among both men and women, but fewer women than men get treatment. Almost 3000 women die every day from TB—at least 1/3 of whom did not receive proper treatment or never even knew they had the disease. Other health problems that in the past affected mostly men are now risks for women, too. For example, more women are suffering from problems related to smoking cigarettes or drinking too much alcohol.

Work hazards

Women face health risks every day from the work they do. At home, lung diseases from smoke or burns from cooking fires are so common that they are considered the main work-related health problem for women. Diseases spread through water are also common, because of the amount of time women spend washing clothes, hauling water, or standing in water while farming.



Millions of women who work outside the home suffer health problems due to unsafe conditions in the workplace. And when they come home from their jobs, they usually continue to work at home, so they end up with twice as much work. This leads to exhaustion and an increased risk of illness.

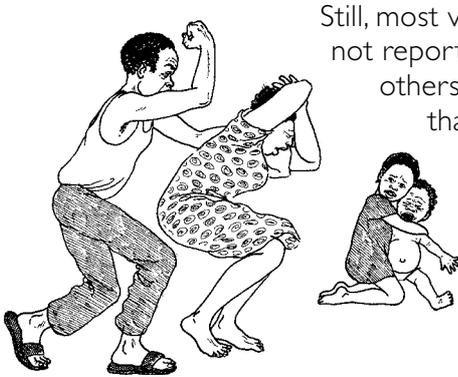
Mental health problems

Women and men have about the same risk of developing a mental health problem. Severe depression, however, affects many more women than men. It often affects women who are poor, who have experienced loss or violence, or whose communities have been destroyed or undergone great change. But women who suffer any kind of mental health problem are much less likely than men to get help.

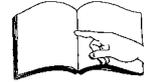
Violence

Violence is often overlooked as a health problem. But violence can lead to serious injuries, mental health problems, physical disabilities, and even death. Many girls are sexually abused by family members or friends. Many women are forced to have sex or are physically abused by their partners. Rape and sexual harassment are a constant threat to all women. These kinds of violence happen in almost all parts of the world, and under all social conditions.

► Women usually suffer violence from men they know. But most violence is not reported, and the men are not punished.



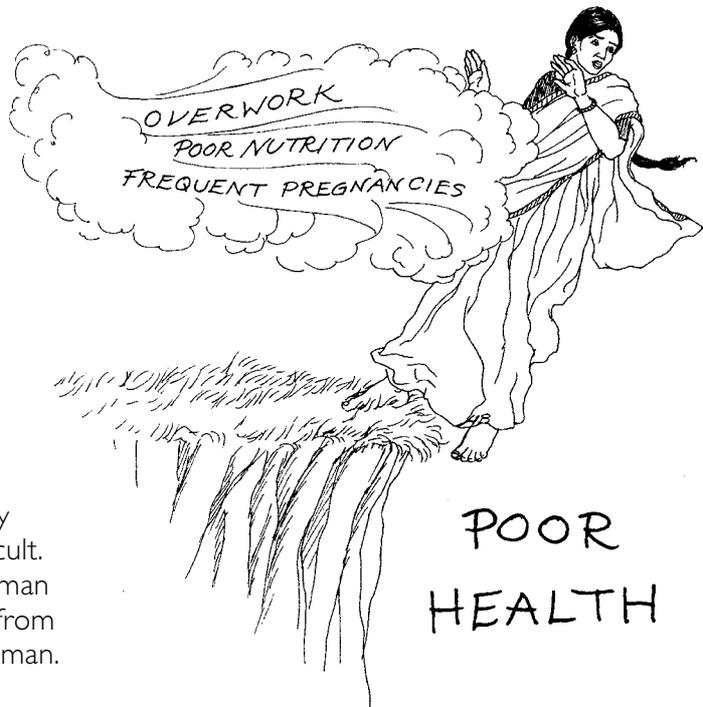
Still, most violence against women is not reported, because the police and others often blame women rather than men for the problem. The men causing the violence are rarely punished.



violence, 313
rape and sexual assault, 327

How women are forced into a life of poor health

Although not all women suffer from the health problems described above, most will suffer from 3 of them: poor nutrition, pregnancies that are too close together, and overwork. Each of these problems affects a woman's general health and wears her body out, making her more likely to get sick. Pregnancy also makes certain medical problems—like malaria, hepatitis, diabetes, and anemia—worse, just as they make pregnancy more difficult. All these things make a woman much more likely to suffer from general poor health than a man.



Causes of Poor Health in Women

It is easy to name the direct causes of most of women's health problems. For example, we can say that STIs are caused by different germs, poor nutrition comes from not eating enough good food, and problems during pregnancy are often caused by a lack of prenatal (before birth) care. But beneath these direct causes are 2 root causes—poverty and the low status of women—that contribute to many of women's health problems.

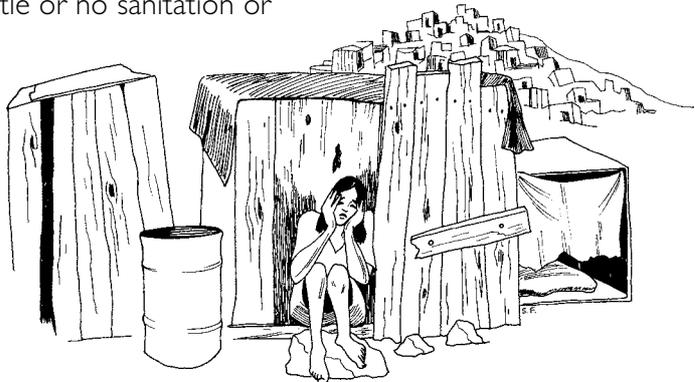
POVERTY

Two out of three women around the world are poor. Women are not only much more likely than men to be poor, but are most often among the poorest of the poor.

Millions of women are caught in a cycle of poverty that begins even before they are born. Babies born to women who did not get enough to eat during pregnancy are likely to be small at birth and to develop slowly. In poor families, girls are less likely than their brothers to get enough to eat, causing their growth to be further stunted. Girls are often given little or no education, so as women they must work at unskilled jobs and receive less wages than men (even if they do the same kind of work). At home, their daily work is unpaid. Exhaustion, poor nutrition, and lack of good care during pregnancy place the woman and her children at risk for poor health.

Poverty forces her to live under conditions that can cause many physical and mental health problems. For example, poor women often:

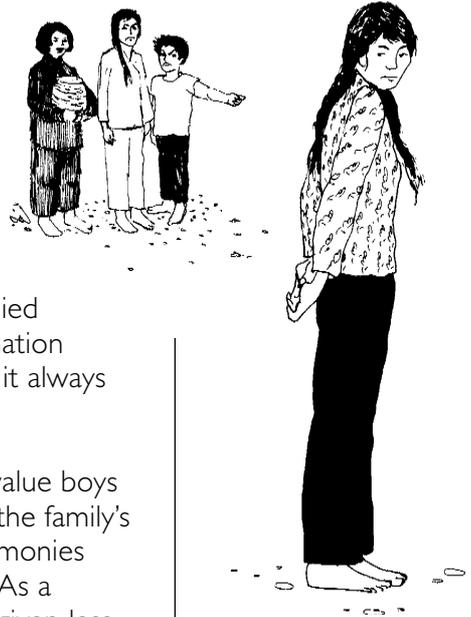
- live in bad housing, with little or no sanitation or clean water.
- do not have enough good food, and must spend precious time and energy looking for food they can afford.
- are forced to accept dangerous work, or to work very long hours.
- cannot use medical care, even if it is free, because they cannot afford time off work or away from their families.
- are so busy struggling to survive that they have little time or energy to take care of their own needs, to plan for a better future, or to learn new skills.
- are blamed for their poverty and made to feel less important than those with more money.



Poverty often forces women into relationships in which they must depend on men for survival. If a woman depends on a man for her—or her children's—support, she may have to do things to keep him happy that are dangerous to her health. For example, she may allow him to be violent or to have unsafe sex because she fears losing his economic support.

LOW STATUS OF WOMEN

Status is the importance that a person has in the family and community. Status affects how a woman is treated, how she values herself, the kinds of activities she is allowed to do, and the kinds of decisions she is allowed to make. In most communities in the world, women have lower status than men. Women's lower status leads to discrimination—that is, being treated poorly or denied something simply because they are women. Discrimination may take different forms in different communities, but it always affects a woman's health.



Wanting sons rather than daughters. Many families value boys more than girls because boys can contribute more to the family's wealth, support their parents in old age, perform ceremonies after their parents die, and carry on the family name. As a result, girls are often breastfed for a shorter time, are given less food and medical care, and receive little or no education.

Lack of legal rights or power to make decisions. In many communities, a woman cannot own or inherit property, earn money, or get credit. If she gets divorced, she may not be allowed to keep her children or her belongings. Even if a woman has legal rights, her community's traditions may allow her little control over her life. Often a woman cannot decide how the family's money is spent or when to get health care. She cannot travel or participate in community decisions without her husband's permission.

When women are denied power in these ways, they must depend on men to survive. As a result, they cannot easily demand things that contribute to good health, like family planning, safer sex, enough food, health care, and freedom from violence.

Having too many children, or having children too close together. Discrimination against women can also lead them to get pregnant more often, because bearing children may be the only way that women can gain status for themselves or their partners.

Under all these conditions, women live less healthy lives and get less health care. They also often accept their low status, because they have been raised to value themselves less than men. They may accept poor health as their lot in life and seek help only when health problems are severe or life-threatening.

► *Because so much of the work that women do is not recognized, they often lack legal protection in the workplace.*

► *Women make up half of the world's population, but work 2 out of every 3 hours worked in the world, receive only a tenth of the world's income, and own only a hundredth of the world's property.*

The medical system does not meet women's needs

Poverty and discrimination in the family and community not only lead to more health problems for women, they also make the medical system less likely to provide the services women need. Government policies and the global economy may add to this problem.

In poor countries, many people do not have access to health services of any kind. (The box below explains one reason why this problem has become worse in recent years.) And because of discrimination against women, the little money that does exist will probably not be spent on women's health needs. So a woman may not be able to get good care even if she can afford to pay for it. Some reproductive health services may be provided, but to meet all of her health needs, she would have to travel to the capital city or perhaps even leave her country.

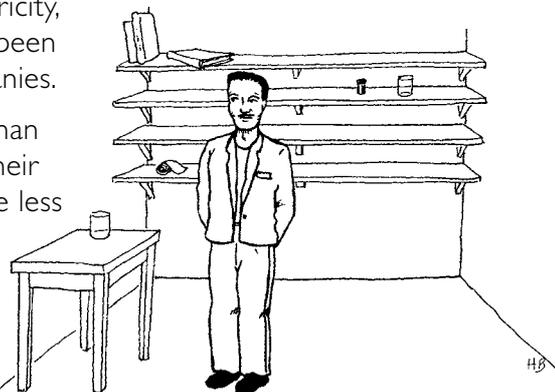
In many countries, the skills needed to care for women are considered 'special' and are provided only by doctors. Yet many of these services could be provided at lower cost by trained community health workers.

Debt and structural adjustment: keeping the poor poor

During the 1970s, many poor countries were pressured to borrow money from banks in rich countries. Although there was a lot of corruption, some countries used this money to try to improve the lives of their people and develop their economies. Many new schools, hospitals, clinics, and other projects were started.

But as the banks demand that their money be paid back, the poor countries have been forced to change or "adjust" their economies in ways that make life harder for poor people. These countries are forced to use much of the wealth the people produce to pay the banks, and to change their laws to make it easier for foreign companies to make money by using the poor countries' resources and labor. Basic services like water, electricity, communications and pensions have been sold to profit-seeking, foreign companies.

As a result, people work harder than ever but still have trouble meeting their basic needs. Governments now have less money for schools, health centers, hospitals, and programs that help people get food and fuel at a fair price. The health of all poor people suffers from these changes, but the health of poor women and children suffers most of all.



Many public health centers lack even the most basic medicines, supplies and equipment.