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**ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE OF WOMEN’S HEALTH IN AFRICA: REPORT OF
THE COMMISSION ON WOMEN’S HEALTH IN THE AFRICAN REGION**

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INTRODUCTION

1. In September 2008, concerned by the very high level of maternal mortality and the complexity of women's health issues and needs in the African Region, the Fifty-eighth session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa adopted Resolution AFR/RC58/R1 on Women's Health in the WHO African Region: A call for Action. The resolution requested the Regional Director "*to establish a Commission on Women's Health to generate evidence on the role of improved women's health in socioeconomic development for improved advocacy and policy action*".¹

2. In 2009, the Regional Director established the Commission on Women's Health in the African Region, composed of a multidisciplinary team of 16 experts. With the support of the WHO Secretariat, the Commission produced a report entitled "*Addressing the Challenge of Women's Health in Africa*". The report was launched in Monrovia in December 2012 by H.E Mrs Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia, who is also the honorary President of the Commission. The report is aimed at all health and development stakeholders, including women themselves.

3. The Commission took a life-course approach and highlighted the interplay between biological and social determinants of women's health. The report which shows that women's health needs go beyond sexual and reproductive health concerns, identifies interventions that will improve the social status of women, promote gender equity and enable women to contribute fully to social and economic development at all levels.

4. The purpose of this paper is to introduce and highlight some key elements of the Commission's report.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE COMMISSION'S REPORT

5. Although women in Africa are already making an enormous contribution to the socioeconomic activities of the continent, the Commission's report contends that they can achieve even much more. Women in the Region still face very high rates of maternal mortality, a huge burden of HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence and other harmful practices, unsafe abortion and its consequences, cervical cancer and noncommunicable diseases. In addition, women's limited access to education and decision-making positions, coupled with their low income, limit their ability to protect their own health and the health of their families and therefore increase their social, physical and financial vulnerability.

6. The Commission's report emphasizes the need for a paradigm shift in addressing women's health challenges in the African Region. It highlights the need to take a life-course approach in order to have a better and deeper understanding of how interventions in childhood, through adolescence, during the reproductive years and beyond, affect women's health across generations. The report also emphasizes the adoption of a holistic, human rights-based and multidisciplinary approach to the analysis of women's health, covering not only public health issues but also economic and cultural factors.

¹ Resolution AFR/RC58/R1, Women's health in the WHO African Region: a call for action. In: *Fifty-eighth session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa, Yaounde, Cameroon, 1–5 September 2008, Final report*, Brazzaville, World Health Organization, Regional Office for Africa, 2008 (AFR/RC58/20), pp.7–11.

7. The need to ensure that actions on women's health issues are taken at the highest political level is stressed. For example, parliaments can pass legislation against early or forced marriage and ensure that legal action is taken against perpetrators of gender-based violence, and that all girls are enabled to enrol and stay in school. All these measures will largely contribute to the fulfilment of women's basic human rights and give women greater decision-making control over their health.

8. The report underscores the need to increase domestic resources allocated to improving women's health, including taking advantage of existing Global Health Initiatives. In addition, countries should focus on the poorest and the most vulnerable population subgroups such as elderly and disabled women, establishing for them social protection schemes including specific measures to reduce economic inequities. Addressing women's legal status, gender norms and gender inequality are among the most important structural approaches to addressing maternal health.

9. It is important to design health systems that are more responsive, gender-sensitive and more culturally appropriate to women's needs including addressing the shortage of human resources for maternal health. Ensuring that routine monitoring systems' data is disaggregated by age and gender is essential.

10. The relevance of empowering women by educating the girl child, ensuring women's fair representation in decision-making positions and addressing gender-based cultural, religious and social barriers that contribute to women's disempowerment is highlighted. Countries should conduct social, cultural and behavioural studies on various dimensions of women's health status and needs throughout the life course in order to better define evidence-based interventions aimed at improving women's health.

11. The Commission made recommendations on:

- (a) Good governance and leadership to improve, promote, support and invest in women's health.
- (b) Policy and legislative initiatives to translate good governance and leadership into concrete action.
- (c) Multisectoral interventions needed to improve women's health.
- (d) Empowering girls and women to be effective agents in pursuing their own interest.
- (e) Improving the responsiveness of health care systems in addressing the health needs of women.
- (f) Data collection for monitoring the progress made towards achieving the targets for girls' and women's health.

12. Member States are urged to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the foregoing recommendations in line with the proposed indicators in the report.

13. The Regional Committee is invited to take note of these highlights of the Commission's report and adopt a resolution for implementation of the key recommendations of the report.