



7 March 2014 - Ahead of International Women's Day this Saturday, the United Nations World Health Organization ( [WHO](#) ) has pushed for ensuring that women, girls and couples have access to the tools needed to avoid unwanted pregnancies.

“Ensuring availability and accessibility to the information and services they need is crucial, not only to protect their rights, but also their health,” [said](#) Dr. Flavia Bustreo, WHO's Assistant Director-General for Family, Women, and Children's Health.

“These unintended pregnancies can pose a major threat to their own and their children's health and lives,” she insisted.

An estimated 222 million girls and women who do not want to get pregnant or who want to delay their next pregnancy are not using any method of contraception. The WHO stresses in a news release that access to contraception information and services will allow better planning for families and improved health.

In low- and middle-income countries, complications of pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading cause of death in young women aged 15-19 years. Stillbirths and death in the first week of life are 50 per cent higher among babies born to mothers younger than 20 years than among

babies born to mothers 20–29 years old.

The populations most vulnerable to this lack of access to contraception services are young, poor, and live in rural areas and urban slums. Efforts have been made to address this need since the 2012 London Summit on Family Planning, where a commitment was made to allow family planning services to reach at least 120 million people more by the year 2020.

But though these global targets are stimulating much needed action, says Dr. Marleen Temmerman, Director of WHO's Department of Reproductive Health and Research, who adds: "It is not just about increasing numbers, it's also about increasing knowledge. It is vital for women – and men – to understand how contraception works, be offered a choice of methods, and be happy with the method they receive."

The WHO's guidance recommends that every individual seeking contraception should be able to obtain "detailed and accurate information," as well as "a variety of services such as counselling [and] contraceptive products," in a non-discriminatory, non-coercive and non-violent environment.

The guidance also notes the importance for countries to provide "scientifically accurate sex education programmes for young people, including information on how to use and acquire contraceptives."

Putting an emphasis on contraception as a human right, and the importance of privacy and confidentiality in medical matters, the guidance states that women and adolescents should be able to request contraceptive help without having to obtain authorization from their husbands, parents or guardians.