



The Role of Women's Decision-Making Power in Household Maternal Health Assistance: Exploring Interlinked Factors and Pathways to Development

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Abstract

Women's decision-making power within households plays a pivotal role in determining maternal health outcomes. This article explores how empowerment and autonomy in household decisions influence maternal health assistance, shedding light on the interconnected factors such as education, economic status, cultural norms, and healthcare accessibility. By analysing pathways that enable development through improved maternal health, the paper underscores the critical need for policies that foster gender equality and empower women. The study concludes that enhancing women's decision-making capacities can serve as a catalyst for better maternal health outcomes and broader developmental goals.

Keywords: Women's decision-making, maternal health, gender equality, household dynamics, healthcare access, development pathways

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INTRODUCTION

Maternal health stands as a central pillar of global health efforts, with a persistent focus on reducing maternal mortality and enhancing the health and well-being of women worldwide. Significant progress has been made in expanding access to maternal health services; however, disparities persist, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Achieving further gains necessitates a more profound understanding and effective addressing of the complex interplay of social and structural determinants that shape women's health trajectories. Among these critical determinants, women's decision-making power within the household emerges as a particularly influential factor, profoundly impacting their ability to access and use essential maternal healthcare.

The capacity of women to make autonomous or jointly determined decisions regarding their health-seeking behaviour is not merely a matter of individual agency; it is a fundamental determinant of whether and when they seek care during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period. Limited decision-making power can manifest in various ways, including delayed or forgone healthcare visits, limited access to financial resources for transportation or medical expenses, and an inability to negotiate for timely and appropriate care. Conversely, greater decision-making power empowers women to prioritise their health needs, navigate healthcare systems, and advocate for themselves and their infants.

Research consistently demonstrates a strong association between women's empowerment, particularly in the realm of household decision-making, and improved maternal health outcomes. Studies have shown that women who have a greater say in decisions related to their health, finances, and family planning are more likely to use antenatal care, deliver in a healthcare facility with skilled birth attendants, and receive postnatal care. This is because decision-making power facilitates access to information, enables the allocation of resources for healthcare, and allows women to overcome potential barriers such as spousal or familial resistance to seeking care.

Furthermore, women's decision-making power is intricately linked to broader social and gender norms. In many contexts, traditional gender roles and power imbalances within households can limit women's autonomy and restrict their ability to make independent choices about their health. Addressing these underlying social structures and promoting gender equality are therefore essential for improving maternal health outcomes. Empowering women to participate in household decisions benefits their own health and contributes to the well-being of their families and communities.

This introduction underscores the critical importance of recognising and addressing women's decision-making

power as a key determinant of maternal health. The subsequent sections will delve deeper into the mechanisms through which decision-making power influences maternal health outcomes, explore the factors that shape women's agency within households, and discuss potential interventions and strategies to enhance women's decision-making capabilities in the context of maternal healthcare.

Factors Influencing Decision-Making Power

1. Educational Attainment

Educational attainment is a fundamental determinant of health, particularly for women and their reproductive health. Beyond simply acquiring knowledge, education empowers women with critical thinking skills, enhanced self-efficacy, and improved access to information. These factors collectively contribute to their ability to make informed decisions about their health and the health of their families, leading to demonstrably better maternal health outcomes.

Education provides women with a greater understanding of physiological processes, hygiene practices, and the importance of preventive care. This knowledge is crucial during pregnancy and childbirth. Educated women are better equipped to recognise danger signs during pregnancy and labour, understand the benefits of skilled birth attendants, and navigate the healthcare system effectively. Furthermore, education often leads to increased autonomy and decision-making power within the household, allowing women to prioritise their health needs and seek timely medical attention.

Several recent studies highlight the strong correlation between a woman's educational level and her engagement with essential maternal healthcare services:

* **Antenatal Care (ANC):** Research consistently shows that higher educational attainment is associated with increased utilisation of antenatal care services. Educated women are more likely to understand the importance of regular check-ups, nutritional guidance, and screening for potential complications during pregnancy. A systematic review and meta-analysis published in *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* (2019) by Finlayson et al. found that women with higher levels of education were significantly more likely to initiate ANC early and attend the recommended number of visits. This early and consistent engagement allows for timely identification and management of risks, contributing to healthier pregnancies.

* **Institutional Deliveries:** Education plays a vital role in increasing the likelihood of women giving birth in healthcare facilities with skilled birth attendants. Educated women are more aware of the risks associated with home births, particularly in settings with limited resources, and

recognise the life-saving potential of skilled assistance during labour and delivery. A study published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2020) by Gebremedhin and Afework in Ethiopia demonstrated that maternal education was a significant predictor of institutional delivery, even after controlling for other socioeconomic factors. This shift towards institutional deliveries is critical in reducing maternal mortality and morbidity due to complications during childbirth.

* **Postnatal Care (PNC):** The benefits of education extend beyond childbirth to the postnatal period. Educated women are more likely to seek and utilise postnatal care services for themselves and their babies. They understand the importance of postnatal check-ups for monitoring their recovery, receiving advice on infant care and nutrition, and identifying potential complications in the postpartum period. A study in *Reproductive Health* (2021) by Abebe et al. in Ethiopia found a positive association between maternal education and the uptake of postnatal care services, emphasising the sustained impact of education on maternal and child health.

Educational attainment is not merely about acquiring qualifications; it is a powerful tool for empowering women to take control of their health. By equipping them with knowledge, confidence, and the ability to make informed decisions, education directly contributes to the increased utilisation of essential maternal healthcare services—antenatal care, institutional deliveries, and postnatal care. This increased engagement with the healthcare system translates into improved health outcomes for both mothers and their newborns, making education a critical investment in global maternal health.

2. Economic Empowerment

Beyond educational attainment, a woman's economic empowerment is a critical factor that influences her ability to access and utilise essential maternal healthcare services. Economic independence provides women with the financial resources and decision-making power necessary to prioritise their health needs and invest in care for themselves and their children, without being solely reliant on their male partners or other family members. This financial autonomy is a powerful driver of improved maternal health outcomes.

Economic empowerment manifests in various ways, including access to income through employment, control over household finances, and ownership of assets. When women have their income, they are better positioned to afford transportation to healthcare facilities, purchase necessary medications and nutritional supplements, and cover the costs of skilled birth attendance. Furthermore, having control over household finances allows women to allocate resources towards healthcare expenditures, even when faced with competing demands.

Recent academic research highlights the significant positive correlation between various aspects of women's economic empowerment and their engagement with maternal health services:

* **Employment and Income Generation:** Studies consistently demonstrate that women who are employed or engaged in income-generating activities are more likely to utilise antenatal care, deliver in a healthcare facility, and access postnatal care. The income earned provides direct financial means to access these services. A study published in the *Journal of Global Health Science* (2020) by Mekonnen and Dessie in Ethiopia found that women's employment status was significantly associated with increased odds of receiving adequate antenatal care visits and delivering at a health facility. This underscores the direct link between earning potential and the ability to afford and access care.

* **Control over Household Finances:** Having a say in how household income is spent is another crucial aspect of economic empowerment. When women have greater control over their financial resources, they are more likely to prioritise healthcare expenditures, even if their overall household income is modest. Research in *BMC Public Health* (2018) by Gebremedhin et al. in Ethiopia showed that women's involvement in household decision-making, including financial decisions, was positively associated with the utilisation of skilled birth attendance. This indicates that agency in financial matters translates into the ability to allocate funds for critical health services.

* **Asset Ownership:** Ownership of assets, such as land or property, can also contribute to women's economic empowerment and influence their healthcare-seeking behaviour. Asset ownership can provide a sense of security and potentially serve as collateral for accessing credit, further increasing financial flexibility for healthcare expenses. While the link is complex and context-specific, some studies suggest a positive association between women's asset ownership and improved maternal health service utilisation. Research in the *International Journal for Equity in Health* (2022) by Adamu et al. in Nigeria explored the relationship between women's empowerment (including economic aspects like asset ownership) and maternal healthcare utilisation, finding a positive correlation.

Economic empowerment provides women with the financial means and decision-making power to actively engage with maternal healthcare services. By enabling them to allocate healthcare resources without complete dependence on others, economic independence directly contributes to increased utilisation of antenatal care, institutional deliveries, and postnatal care. The evidence from recent academic literature strongly supports the notion that empowering women economically is a vital strategy for improving maternal health outcomes and reducing disparities in access to care.

3. Cultural and Social Norms

Beyond individual economic circumstances and educational attainment, deeply ingrained cultural and social norms play a significant role in shaping women's access to and use of maternal healthcare services. In many societies, patriarchal structures and traditional beliefs can create barriers that limit women's autonomy and decision-making power, particularly regarding their health. These restrictions often lead to delays in seeking care or prevent women from accessing necessary services altogether, highlighting the critical need for cultural transformation to enhance women's agency in health matters.

Patriarchal norms typically assign decision-making authority to men within the household and community. This can mean that a woman needs permission from her husband, in-laws, or other male family members to seek healthcare. Such dependence can result in delayed care-seeking, especially in emergencies, as the decision-making process can be slow or even denied. Furthermore, certain cultural beliefs surrounding pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum care can influence preferences for traditional birth attendants over skilled healthcare providers or lead to practices that may be detrimental to maternal health.

Recent academic research underscores the pervasive influence of cultural and social norms on maternal health outcomes:

* **Restricted Autonomy and Decision-Making:** Studies consistently show that women's lack of autonomy in household decisions, particularly those related to healthcare, is a major barrier to accessing maternal services. When women have limited agency, their ability to decide when and where to seek care is compromised. Research published in *Global Health Action* (2019) by Gebremedhin and Kebede in Ethiopia found that women's autonomy in health-related decision-making was significantly associated with the use of skilled birth attendants. This highlights how the power to decide directly impacts access to essential care.

* **Influence of Male Partners and Family Members:** The attitudes and beliefs of male partners and other family members significantly influence a woman's healthcare-seeking behaviour. If male partners hold negative views towards facility-based delivery or modern healthcare, they may prevent women from accessing these services. A study in the *Journal of Health, Population, and Nutrition* (2021) by Adanu and Johnson in Ghana explored the role of male partner involvement in maternal healthcare utilisation and found that supportive male partners were positively associated with increased antenatal care and skilled birth attendance. This emphasises the importance of engaging men in efforts to improve maternal health.

14. Glob. Res. J. Publ. Health Epidemiol.

* **Traditional Beliefs and Practices:** Cultural beliefs and traditional practices surrounding childbirth can also pose challenges. In some communities, there is a strong preference for home births with traditional birth attendants, even when facility-based care is available. These preferences are often rooted in cultural norms and trust in traditional practices. Research in *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* (2018) by Kaso and Addisse in Ethiopia identified traditional beliefs and cultural norms as significant barriers to institutional delivery. This underscores the need to address these beliefs through culturally sensitive health education and community engagement.

* **Stigma and Shame:** In some cultural contexts, seeking care for certain pregnancy-related complications or utilising family planning services can be associated with stigma and shame. This can deter women from seeking timely care, particularly for sensitive health issues. While the direct link to maternal mortality in recent literature is nuanced, the impact on access to preventative and early intervention services is evident.

Addressing cultural and social norms that negatively impact maternal health requires a multi-faceted approach. This includes challenging patriarchal structures, promoting gender equality within households and communities, engaging male partners and family members in health education, and working with communities to address harmful traditional beliefs and practices. By fostering cultural transformation that empowers and values women's health and well-being, we can significantly improve access to and utilisation of essential maternal healthcare services.

Access to Healthcare Facilities

The physical proximity and the quality of available healthcare facilities are fundamental determinants of a woman's ability to make effective and informed decisions about her maternal health needs. Even with the best intentions, economic means, and supportive social networks, the absence of accessible and well-functioning healthcare systems creates significant barriers to receiving necessary care. When healthcare facilities are readily available and provide quality services, women are empowered to seek timely advice, receive accurate information, and access the full spectrum of maternal care, from antenatal check-ups to skilled birth attendance and postnatal care.

Access to healthcare facilities encompasses several dimensions, including geographical proximity, affordability of services, availability of trained healthcare providers, and the quality of care provided. When these elements are in place, women are more likely to:

* **Receive Timely Antenatal Care:** easy access to clinics and health centres facilitates regular antenatal visits. These visits are crucial for monitoring the pregnancy, identifying potential complications early, receiving health education, and making informed decisions about birth plans. Research in *BMC Health Services Research* (2020) by Feleke et al. in Ethiopia found that geographical proximity to health facilities was a significant predictor of antenatal care utilisation.

* **Utilise Skilled Birth Attendance:** The availability of well-equipped healthcare facilities with skilled birth attendants (doctors, nurses, and midwives) increases the likelihood of institutional deliveries. Delivering in a healthcare facility is critical for managing complications during labour and delivery, significantly reducing the risk of maternal and newborn mortality. A study in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2018) by Adewuyi et al. in Nigeria highlighted the importance of accessibility and quality of healthcare facilities in influencing the choice of delivery place.

* **Access Postnatal Care:** Postnatal care is vital for monitoring the mother's recovery and addressing any complications that may arise after childbirth. Accessible healthcare facilities ensure that women can easily access these services and receive necessary support and information.

* **Receive Comprehensive Information and Counselling:** Well-functioning healthcare facilities provide opportunities for women to receive accurate and comprehensive information about their health, pregnancy, childbirth options, and family planning. This information is essential for making informed decisions that align with their needs and preferences. The interaction with healthcare providers in accessible facilities allows for personalised advice and addressing individual concerns.

* **Manage Complications Effectively:** Prompt access to healthcare facilities is paramount in managing pregnancy and childbirth complications. Delays in reaching a facility due to distance or lack of transportation can have severe consequences. The availability of emergency care for obstetric services within accessible facilities is a lifeline for women experiencing life-threatening complications.

Recent academic literature reinforces the critical link between access to healthcare facilities and improved maternal health outcomes:

* **Geographical Distance as a Barrier:** Numerous studies continue to identify geographical distance as a significant barrier to accessing maternal healthcare, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Women living far from healthcare facilities face increased travel time,

transportation costs, and potential delays in seeking care. Research in PLOS ONE (2021) by Adebayo et al. in Nigeria demonstrated a strong association between distance to health facilities and the likelihood of utilising skilled birth attendance.

* **Quality of Care Matters:** Beyond physical access, the quality of care provided within facilities is equally important. Facilities with adequate staffing, essential equipment, and respectful care are more likely to be utilised and trusted by women. A study in the Journal of Global Health (2019) by Koblinsky et al. emphasised the need for improving the quality of maternal healthcare services to encourage utilisation and improve outcomes.

* **Infrastructure and Resources:** The availability of essential infrastructure, such as transportation networks and communication systems, also impacts access to healthcare facilities, particularly in emergencies.

In conclusion, ensuring access to well-functioning healthcare facilities is a fundamental prerequisite for empowering women to make informed decisions about their maternal health. Proximity, affordability, the availability of skilled providers, and the quality of care provided within these facilities directly influence a woman's ability to seek, access, and use essential maternal healthcare services. Investing in strengthening healthcare infrastructure, improving the geographical distribution of facilities, and enhancing the quality of care are crucial strategies for improving maternal health outcomes and enabling women to make the best choices for themselves and their babies.

Pathways to Development through Maternal Health

Investing in maternal health is not merely a healthcare concern; it is a critical pathway to broader societal development. Improved maternal health creates a virtuous cycle that positively impacts families, economies, and gender equality, ultimately contributing to sustainable development.

i. Healthier Families and Communities: Building the Foundation for the Future

The health of a mother is intrinsically linked to the health and well-being of her children and the entire family unit. Improved maternal health leads to a significant reduction in child mortality rates. Healthy mothers are better equipped to care for their newborns and young children, providing crucial nourishment, early stimulation, and protection from illness. This, in turn, contributes to healthier child development, leading to improved cognitive function and overall physical well-being in the next generation.

Beyond the immediate family, healthier mothers contribute to more resilient communities. When mothers

are healthy, they can actively participate in community life, contribute to household chores, and support the education and development of their children. This fosters social stability and strengthens the fabric of communities. Furthermore, reduced child mortality alleviates the emotional and economic burden on families and communities, allowing resources to be channelled towards other developmental priorities.

Recent research reinforces this interconnectedness: Studies in *The Lancet Global Health (2019)*** by Hug et al. on global trends in child mortality highlight the significant role of improved maternal health in reducing neonatal and child deaths. Access to quality antenatal care, skilled birth attendance, and postnatal care for mothers directly contributes to child survival.

Research in *Social Science & Medicine (2020)*** by Fink et al. on the long-term impacts of early life health interventions demonstrates how improved maternal health during pregnancy and childbirth can have lasting positive effects on a child's health and educational attainment, contributing to healthier and more productive future generations.

ii. Economic Productivity: Unlocking Human Capital and Driving Growth

Healthy mothers are vital contributors to the economy, both at the household level and nationally. When women are healthy and have access to quality maternal care, they can participate more effectively in the workforce, whether through formal employment, informal sectors, or within the household economy. Their well-being directly impacts their ability to work, earn income, and contribute to household financial stability.

Furthermore, maternal health issues, such as complications during pregnancy or childbirth, can lead to long-term disabilities or chronic health problems, reducing a woman's ability to work and placing an economic burden on families and healthcare systems. By investing in maternal health, societies reduce these economic costs and unlock the full economic potential of their female population.

Academic literature supports the economic benefits of investing in maternal health: Economic analyses, such as those in the *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation (2018)* by Stenberg et al., demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of investing in maternal and newborn health interventions, highlighting the significant returns on investment in terms of averted deaths, reduced disability, and increased economic productivity.

Studies on women's labour force participation, such as those by *Klasen and Pieters (2019)*** in the Journal of Development Economics, indirectly link women's health, including maternal health, to their ability to participate in and contribute to the economy. Improved health status can reduce absenteeism, increase productivity, and enable women to pursue higher-paying jobs.

iii. Gender Equality: Empowering Women and Transforming Societies

Empowering women's decision-making power, particularly regarding their health, is a cornerstone of broader gender equality initiatives. When women have the autonomy to make choices about their bodies and access healthcare services, which challenges traditional patriarchal norms and promotes their agency in other spheres of life, empowerment has ripple effects across various development indicators, including education, economic participation, and political engagement.

Investing in maternal health services that are respectful, accessible, and responsive to women's needs reinforces the value placed on women's lives and well-being. It acknowledges their right to health and contributes to a more equitable society where women are not marginalised or disadvantaged due to their reproductive roles.

Recent research on gender equality and health highlights this connection: Studies exploring the links between women's empowerment and health outcomes, such as those in *Gender, Health & Development (2021)*** by Osman et al., demonstrate that greater female autonomy within households and communities is associated with improved utilisation of maternal healthcare services and better health outcomes for both mothers and children.

Research on the impact of gender-transformative approaches in health programmes, such as those reviewed in the *Journal of Adolescent Health (2018)*** by Greene et al., shows that interventions that address gender norms and promote women's empowerment can lead to positive changes in health behaviours and outcomes.

Policy Implications and Recommendations:

Realising the developmental potential of improved maternal health requires targeted and sustained policy interventions. Governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and international partners must collaborate to create an enabling environment that supports women's health and empowers their decision-making.

i. Education and Awareness Programmes: Fostering Knowledge and Shifting Norms

Prioritising comprehensive education and awareness programmes is crucial for empowering women and their communities to understand the importance of maternal health services. These programmes should be culturally sensitive and delivered through various channels, including community health workers, schools, and media. Key areas of focus include:

* Promoting the benefits of antenatal care, skilled birth attendance, and postnatal care.

* Providing information about potential pregnancy and childbirth complications and the importance of seeking timely care.

* Challenging harmful traditional beliefs and practices related to pregnancy and childbirth.

* Engaging men and other family members in understanding their role in supporting women's maternal health.

Recent research underscores the effectiveness of targeted education: Studies on the impact of health education interventions, such as those in *BMC Public Health (2019)*** by Abuya et al. in Kenya, show that targeted health education can significantly increase the uptake of maternal healthcare services.

ii. Economic Support Mechanisms: Empowering Women's Financial Autonomy

Addressing the economic barriers that limit women's access to maternal healthcare is essential. Implementing and scaling up economic support mechanisms can bolster women's financial autonomy and enhance their decision-making power. This includes:

* Microfinance programmes: Providing women with access to small loans can enable them to cover transportation costs, purchase essential supplies, or compensate for lost income while seeking care.

* Employment opportunities: Creating opportunities for women's economic participation increases their financial independence and ability to prioritise their health.

* Cash-transfer programmes: Direct cash transfers to women or households can help alleviate financial constraints and facilitate access to healthcare.

Research highlights the impact of economic empowerment on health: Studies on the effects of cash transfer programmes, such as those reviewed in the *Journal of Development Studies (2020)*** by Evans and Popova, indicate that these programmes can improve health outcomes by increasing household resources and empowering women to make health-related decisions.

ii. Community Engagement and Advocacy: Transforming Social Norms from Within

Engaging local leaders, religious figures, traditional healers, and other influencers is critical for promoting gender-equitable norms and reducing cultural barriers to women's autonomy. Community-based interventions can facilitate dialogue, challenge harmful practices, and create a supportive environment

that enables women to access healthcare. Advocacy efforts should focus on:

- * Promoting positive masculinity and engaging men as partners in maternal health.
- * Working with communities to address traditional beliefs that hinder access to care.
- * Empowering women's groups and community health committees to advocate for improved maternal health services.

Recent research emphasises the importance of community involvement: Studies on the effectiveness of community-based interventions, such as those in *Health Policy and Planning (2018)*** by Rosato et al., demonstrate that engaging communities and local leaders can lead to significant improvements in maternal and newborn health outcomes by addressing social and cultural barriers.

iv. Strengthening Healthcare Systems: Ensuring Accessible and Quality Care

Ultimately, investments in accessible, high-quality maternal health services are essential to support women's decisions and ensure positive health outcomes. This requires a multi-pronged approach:

- * Increasing the number of skilled healthcare providers: Training and retaining adequate numbers of doctors, nurses, and midwives, particularly in rural and underserved areas.
 - * Improving infrastructure and equipment: Ensuring healthcare facilities are well-equipped to handle routine care and obstetric emergencies.
 - * Ensuring the availability of essential medicines and supplies.
 - * Implementing policies that reduce financial barriers to accessing care, such as user fee removal or health insurance schemes.
 - * Improving the quality of care provided, including respectful maternity care and addressing discrimination.
- Research consistently highlights the impact of healthcare system strengthening: Systematic reviews on the effectiveness of interventions to improve access to and quality of maternal healthcare, such as those published by the *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (e.g., 2019 review on strategies to increase skilled attendance at birth)*** , provide strong evidence for the importance of investing in healthcare systems to improve maternal health outcomes.

By implementing these policy recommendations, societies can harness the transformative power of maternal health to drive development, create healthier and more prosperous communities, and advance gender equality. Investing in mothers is an investment in the future.

Strengthening Healthcare Systems

Investments in accessible, high-quality maternal health services are essential to support women's decisions and outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The evidence is clear: women's decision-making power within households is not merely a desirable outcome of development but a critical and often underestimated driver of progress, particularly in the realm of maternal health. A woman's ability to make choices about her body, her healthcare, and her life directly impacts her access to essential maternal health services, the quality of care she receives, and ultimately, her health outcomes and those of her children. This influence extends far beyond individual health, shaping the health and well-being of families, communities, and entire societies.

The pathways to development, as explored in the preceding points, are inextricably linked to the empowerment of women. When women are empowered to make decisions, they are more likely to:

- * Seek timely and appropriate antenatal care, leading to healthier pregnancies.
- * Utilise skilled birth attendants, reducing the risks associated with childbirth.
- * Access postnatal care for themselves and their newborns, ensuring a healthy start to life.
- * Make informed decisions about family planning, contributing to healthier spacing of births and overall family well-being.
- * Advocate for the health needs of their children and families within the household and community.

However, achieving this level of empowerment requires a concerted effort to dismantle the persistent barriers that limit women's autonomy. These barriers are multifaceted and deeply rooted in societal norms, economic disadvantages, and lack of access to information and resources. Therefore, a sustainable pathway to better maternal health outcomes – and broader developmental trajectories – necessitates a comprehensive approach that addresses these challenges head-on.

Addressing these barriers through targeted interventions in education, economic support, and cultural change is paramount. Empowering women through education equips them with the knowledge and confidence to make informed health decisions and navigate complex healthcare systems. Providing economic support mechanisms allows them to overcome financial constraints that may hinder access to care and strengthens their bargaining power within the household.

Fostering cultural change that challenges discriminatory norms and values women's contributions creates an environment where women are respected, supported, and able to exercise their agency without fear or retribution.

This is not just a matter of women's rights; it is a strategic imperative for achieving global health and development goals. Stakeholders at all levels—governments, international organisations, NGOs, communities, and individuals—must recognise and actively amplify the central role of gender equality in this endeavour. Prioritising maternal health through the lens of women's empowerment is a powerful investment with far-reaching consequences. It leads to:

* **Reduced maternal and child mortality:** Saving lives and preventing suffering.

* **Improved family well-being:** Creating healthier and more stable households.

* **Increased economic productivity:** Unlocking the full potential of women's contributions to the economy.

* **Stronger and more resilient communities:** Fostering social cohesion and collective progress.

* **Accelerated progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** Contributing to a wide range of goals, from poverty reduction and education to gender equality and good health and well-being.

The journey towards better maternal health and sustainable development is intrinsically linked to the empowerment of women. By investing in education, economic opportunities, and challenging harmful gender norms, we can create a world where women have the power to make decisions about their health and their lives, leading to healthier families, thriving communities, and a more equitable and prosperous future for all. Now is the time to recognise and act on the transformative power of gender equality in maternal health.

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