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In Yemen and around the world, obstetric fistula strikes the most vulnerable women

UNFPA (22.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2zmMqTh> - Five years ago, Marwa* was a child bride living in the port city of Al Hudaydah. "I was almost 17 years old, and happy with my new life. I was a new bride and I got pregnant fast. I thought life was smiling at me," she told UNFPA. She had no idea how quickly life would turn upside down.

Like many other women and girls in Yemen, she gave birth at home. But her labour was obstructed – a potentially fatal complication. Eventually, she delivered a healthy baby boy, but suffered a traumatic injury in the process – an obstetric fistula.

"I had sudden diarrhoea and faeces coming out of my birth canal," she said. "I started to ask myself, why was this happening? I could not comprehend it."

An obstetric fistula is a hole between the birth canal and bladder and/or rectum. It occurs during prolonged, obstructed labour without access to timely, high-quality medical treatment. The injury can cause chronic pain and infections, social rejection and deepening poverty.

This was Marwa's fate: A month after her baby was born, her husband divorced her. "I had become what he described as 'ruined'," she said.

The most vulnerable women

This traumatic birth injury affects the world's most vulnerable women – those living in extreme poverty, without access to timely emergency care. Child brides are particularly vulnerable; childbearing in adolescence can increase vulnerability to obstetric fistula. Those with malnutrition and poor health also face heightened risks.

Hundreds of thousands of women are living with obstetric fistula today. The persistence of this condition is a sign of global social injustice and inequity.

And it could be worsening.

Today, as the world battles the COVID-19 pandemic, health systems risk being overstretched. Transportation barriers, movement restrictions, rising costs and other effects of the pandemic are making it harder for labouring women to reach safe delivery services. "The absence of timely medical treatment will likely spur a dramatic increase in obstetric fistula," said Dr. Natalia Kanem, UNFPA's Executive Director.

On 23 May, as the world observes the International Day to End Obstetric Fistula, UNFPA is sounding the alarm that the sexual and reproductive health needs of women and girls

could be undermined. These services – including access to maternity care and safe delivery care – must be recognized as essential and life-saving.

Under the shadow of war

Marwa's fistula was only the start of her troubles. Conflict had erupted in Yemen, throwing communities into poverty and hobbling the country's health system.

"They told me to be patient and accept my fate... I was told that my life is over," Marwa said, crying over the memory of that time. "I felt so sorry for myself, my youth and my newborn baby who would grow up without a father. I felt my whole life had been taken away from me. What did I do to deserve such fate? I asked that myself repeatedly."

Marwa spent as much time and money as she could searching for a cure. "It was useless. I knocked on many doors," she said.

Finally, she visited a midwife named Na'ama, who had received training from a UNFPA-funded programme. "She was my last resort and my only hope."

By chance, Na'ama had taken a course on preventing and identifying obstetric fistula, and she knew just where Marwa could get care.

Na'ama contacted the National Midwives Association, which runs a UNFPA-supported fistula treatment programme. Marwa was put on a waiting list.

"One day they called me and asked me to travel to Sana'a within a week."

The fistula programme covered all her travel expenses. She was even able to bring her sister to look after the baby, and a male cousin; women often require a male guardian to travel within the country.

Marwa underwent a successful treatment surgery at Al Thawra Hospital.

Now, she says her life has been transformed. "I forgot all the pain I had gone through. I just felt joy and happiness," she said.

Support needed

UNFPA has supported the establishment of three fistula units across the country. Between 2018 and 2019, more than 100 fistula surgeries were successfully treated free of charge.

But today, Yemen's health system is on the verge of collapse. Humanitarian funding for programmes in Yemen has dried up, even as the country grapples with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hundreds of reproductive health facilities have closed or are set to close in the coming weeks.

A pledging conference is scheduled to take place, virtually, on 2 June.

**Name changed to protect privacy*

Yemeni crisis forces families to take desperate measures to survive

Family marries off three-year-old child to buy food and shelter

ReliefWeb (26.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2XnSOAK> - Conflict, rising food prices and plummeting incomes in Yemen are forcing people to resort to desperate measures to stave off hunger, Oxfam said today. The warning comes as rich countries meet in Geneva to pledge aid for the humanitarian crisis in Yemen which has left almost ten million people one step away from famine. Since the escalation in conflict in 2015, food prices in Yemen have soared while household incomes have plummeted, pushing the costs of basic foods beyond the reach of many.

Oxfam spoke to families in Amran governorate in the North who, hungry and isolated after fleeing their homes, have been forced to marry off their daughters – in one case as young as three years old – to buy food and shelter to save the rest of the family. Although early marriage has long been a practice in Yemen, marrying off girls at such an early age in desperation to buy food is shocking.

Younger girls are usually spared consummating the marriage until they have reached 11 years old but before that are made to do household work in their husband's home. Nine-year-old Hanan used to go to school but since she was married, she has had to stop.

Hanan said: "My mother in law keeps beating me, and when I run away back to my father's house, my father beats me again for running away. I don't want to be married. I just want to go back to school." Hanan's parents, who also married off her three-year-old sister, said they knew marrying off their daughters at such a young age was wrong, but felt they had no choice because the dowry paid in return was the only way of keeping the rest of the family alive.

Oxfam's Yemen Country Director Muhsin Siddiquey said: "As this war has gone on, people's means of coping with devastating levels of hunger have become more and more desperate. They're being forced to take steps that blight their children's lives now and for decades to come. This is a direct result of a man-made humanitarian catastrophe caused by the conflict. The international community needs to do everything in its power to bring an end to the fighting and ensure people have the food, water and medicine they so desperately need."

Fighting has forced many families to flee to isolated areas that lack basic infrastructure with no schools, water networks, proper sewage disposal systems or health centres. Many of them are living in small tents or mud houses which offer little protection against sun, rain or freezing temperatures during winter nights. With no income and limited job opportunities, many families can't afford enough food and resort to skipping meals, eating only bread and tea, buying food on credit, or begging.

Yemeni families can number up to 15 people, including older members who need special care and medication, further increasing living expenses which are already unbearable.

In surveys late last year of people in Taiz, in southern Yemen, who had received assistance from Oxfam, 99 percent said the adults in the family had reduced how much they ate to give more food to their children and 98 percent had cut down the number of meals they were eating every day. More than half said they had borrowed food from friends or relatives. Almost two thirds of people said they had taken on debt. In almost all cases this was to buy food, medicine or water.

Just over a week ago, Yemen's internationally recognized government and the Houthis agreed on the first phase of a withdrawal from the key port city of Hudaydah, following talks between the parties in Sweden in December. Reaching the agreement has been slow and it's not yet clear what, if any, impact it will have.

Siddiquey said: "Donors meeting today in Geneva to pledge assistance to Yemen need to make sure there's enough funding to get vital food, water and medicine to meet people's basic needs. But only an end to the conflict can halt the downward spiral that is forcing people to take desperate measures. All warring parties and their backers need to fully commit to a nationwide ceasefire and take concrete steps towards a lasting peace."