

# SELF-CARE AND WOMEN'S HEALTH

## THE BIG PICTURE

Achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) requires greater investment, particularly for marginalized groups, including women and girls, who face systemic barriers to quality healthcare.

- 3.6 billion people lack access to essential health services, highlighting a concerning stagnation in progress toward UHC.<sup>1</sup>
- Women spend 25% more of their lives in poor health than men.<sup>2</sup> Structural inequalities – including social, cultural, financial, and legal barriers, continue to limit their autonomy, decision-making power, and access to health services.
  - » Sexual and reproductive health inequalities persist – 218 million women and girls of reproductive age have an unmet need for contraception, over half of adults with HIV are women, and unsafe abortion remains a major cause of maternal death.<sup>3,4</sup>
  - » Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) cause 19 million deaths annually among women, making them a major public health concern.<sup>5</sup>
  - » Adolescent girls face high rates of violence. Nearly 1 in 4 girls in relationships experience intimate partner violence before age 20, with severe consequences for mental, physical, and reproductive health.<sup>6</sup>
  - » 500 million women and girls lack access to safe menstrual hygiene, affecting their physical and mental well-being.<sup>7</sup>
- Women, especially in low- and middle-income countries, bear disproportionate caregiving responsibilities, often at the expense of their own health.
- Intersecting inequalities – including disability, displacement, poverty, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and HIV status – further exacerbate health disparities.

## THE ROLE OF SELF-CARE

Self-care interventions provide an additional option to facility-based care, enhancing the autonomy and agency of women and girls in managing their health.

- Self-care interventions are among the most promising strategies to improve health coverage for women and play a critical role at every stage of their lives.<sup>8</sup>

- When integrated into health systems, self-care interventions expand the autonomy and agency of women and girls and improve access to services.
- Examples of self-care interventions to support women's health include:
  - » Contraceptive self-care, such as oral contraceptive pills, self-injection of DMPA-SC, and use of emergency contraception, expands access to family planning while supporting autonomy and privacy.
  - » HIV prevention, including HIV self-testing (HIV-ST), which is especially valuable for populations facing stigma or discrimination, and self-managed abortion, in line with WHO self-care guidelines.
  - » Maternal health support, such as self-monitoring blood pressure during pregnancy, self-testing for pregnancy, and self-management of iron and folic acid supplementation.
  - » Menstrual health management, supporting physical well-being (including managing cramps, migraines, and hygiene) while ensuring equitable access to menstrual products and care.
  - » Digital and online mental health support, providing self-guided resources and tools to help women and girls manage stress, enhance emotional well-being, and build mental resilience.
  - » Chronic disease prevention and management, such as self-monitoring for diabetes or hypertension, that supports early detection and long-term management.

## THE CALL TO ACTION

Join the Self-Care Trailblazer Group (SCTG) in accelerating access to self-care for women and girls.

- Champion self-care as a fundamental component of women's and girls' health and well-being, recognizing its transformative role in enhancing autonomy and agency.
- Advocate for expanded access to self-care resources, including menstrual hygiene products, mental health support, and comprehensive sexuality education.
- Promote the integration of self-care into health policies and programs, ensuring that women's diverse health needs, including family planning, sexual and reproductive health, and other related issues, are addressed throughout the life cycle.
- Engage communities in destigmatizing self-care, particularly in settings where barriers to sexual and menstrual health persist.
- Drive legal, policy, and regulatory reforms to broaden access to self-care interventions for women and girls worldwide.

## DIG DEEPER

- [The Role of Supportive Self-Care Environments in Advancing Menstrual Equity](#)
- [Self-care interventions for women's health and well-being](#)
- [Why self-care is essential for sexual and reproductive health and rights](#)

## REFERENCES

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