

## What women really want

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*Photo credit: Reuters*

Tahani, front, who married her husband, Majed, when she was six and he was 25, poses for this portrait with former classmate Ghada, also a child bride, outside their mountain home in Hajjah, Yemen. Almost half of all women in Yemen were married as children. A UN report says many women marry very young instead of pursuing further education.



Flowers, chocolate, and cards are standard gifts women would have received on Valentine's Day on Tuesday. But the gift many of the world's women desperately want and need is reproductive health.

According to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), 1 000 women die every day – one woman every 90 seconds – because of pregnancy or childbirth. Ninety-nine percent of these deaths occur in the developing world, 90 percent in Africa and Asia.

A handful of complications account for 80 percent of these maternal deaths – severe bleeding, infections, high blood pressure, obstructed labour, and unsafe abortion – and the bulk of these deaths are preventable.

“Reproductive health, including access to the information and means to plan a family, is a human right the world's nations have recognised in various forms since 1968,” says Worldwatch Institute's president Robert Engelman.

In his book, *More: Population, Nature, and What Women Want*, Engelman explores centuries of reproductive history and concludes that, if given the chance to do what they really want, women on average have smaller families, with childbirths later in their lives.

This pattern is safer for women and promotes environmental sustainability through the slower population growth that lower fertility rates and later births bring about.

The UNFPA report, “Women and Girls in a World of 7 Billion”, notes that poverty, marginalisation and gender inequalities based on culture are the key challenges to reproductive health. The report says women own less than 15 percent of the land worldwide; their wages, on average, are 17 percent lower than men's; and they make up two-thirds of the world's 776 million illiterate adults.

This means that women, particularly in the developing world, must often rely on men for financial support – creating situations in which women are subject to their partners' views on contraception,

feel trapped in physically or emotionally abusive relationships, and marry and have children young instead of pursuing further education or employment outside the home.

In the developing world, one in seven girls will be married before she turns 15, and worldwide, complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for girls between the ages of 15 and 19.

Many women are not empowered to make their own decisions on if or when to have children, how many to have, and how long to wait between them.

About 40 percent or more of pregnancies are unplanned, with more than 21 percent of all births resulting from such pregnancies worldwide, according to estimates of the Guttmacher Institute.

### **Access**

If given access to family planning, and permission by their families and societies to use it, fewer women and children would die from unsafe abortions and high-risk pregnancies.

The UN Foundation sponsors Girl Up, an organisation that encourages a world where young girls can avoid the pitfalls of too-early marriage and childbearing and can instead go to school, enjoy health and safety, and grow into the next generation of leaders.

In the Amhara region of Ethiopia, where half of adolescent girls are married, Girl Up is helping to promote education for young girls.

The project offers basic literacy classes, family planning information and agricultural training.

Engelman says: “When women and girls are empowered with education and the capacity to make choices about sex, marriage and childbearing, they have opportunities to realise futures as farmers, businesswomen, politicians, or whatever dream drives them.

“These benefits ripple out from the lives of individual women and girls to their families, their communities, their nations – and ultimately to the entire world.”

Reproductive health is not about state-mandated family sizes; it is about freeing women to make their own choices about when and how often to give birth.

According to Engelman, in all countries where affordable access is offered to family planning resources and women have the option of safe and legal abortions, fertility rates drop to two or less children per woman.

When women are free to make their own choices, they improve their own health and that of their families. A study by the UNFPA and the Guttmacher Institute suggests that it would take \$24 billion (R185bn) to fulfil unmet reproductive health needs in developing countries, several times what countries spend today.

According to the report, such an investment would “provide every woman with the recommended standard of maternal and newborn care” and would “reduce unintended pregnancies by more than 66 percent, prevent 70 percent of maternal deaths, avert 44 percent of newborn deaths, and reduce unsafe abortion by 73 percent”.

Kumar writes for the Worldwatch Institute, an independent research organisation based in Washington, DC. For more information, visit [www.worldwatch.org](http://www.worldwatch.org)