

# Gender and immunisation

The GAVI Alliance is committed to ensuring that both boys and girls benefit from life-saving vaccines.

The GAVI strategy positions gender equity as an overarching principle for all of GAVI's work, and the gender policy recognises equal access as a key factor for expanding vaccine coverage and making immunisation more equitable.

## Girls and boys have the same likelihood of being immunised

In 2010, GAVI funded a comprehensive review by the World Health Organization (WHO) which showed that globally there are no significant differences in immunisation coverage between girls and boys. However, differences in coverage favouring either boys or girls are found in some countries and groups. In countries with high levels of gender inequity and "son preference", meaning that many families prefer having sons over daughters, more boys than girls are immunised. In other groups, such as among children in the poorest households, girls are more often immunised than boys.



**"Improving the status of women in the couple and family is critical to improving child vaccination status."**

Gender and Immunisation, Summary Report, Swiss Centre for International Health

## Empowering women is critical

Although mothers tend to be the primary caretakers of children and are generally held responsible for their health, many do not have the decision-making power or the resources to access immunisation and other health services. In societies where women have low status, their children – both girls and boys – are less likely to be immunised.

The WHO review found that when women are empowered, immunisation coverage increases. Countries with a high level of gender equity, as measured through the Gender

Development Index, have higher immunisation coverage, and the mother's education is strongly related to her children's vaccination and health.

According to the review, health service providers can improve immunisation coverage by better understanding and considering the barriers women face in accessing immunisation and other health services for their children. This includes accommodating the schedules of working women and taking into consideration other constraints women may experience in their multiple roles and responsibilities. More female health providers can contribute to increasing immunisation uptake, as they are perceived as better able to understand the needs of mothers.

Interventions that target both women and men, families and communities are an important part of challenging gender bias in immunisation and other child health services, and of increasing immunisation coverage.

### **Fulfilling all children's right to health**

GAVI works together with countries to overcome gender inequities. GAVI's guidelines for country proposals call attention to the need to identify and address gender-related and other barriers to the access and delivery of health services. Countries are encouraged to separate data based on sex, income and geographic location to help identify reasons for low immunisation coverage.

Through its approach to health systems funding, GAVI aims to strengthen linkages between immunisation and other health services to improve outcomes for all girls, boys, women and men throughout their lives.

### **Vaccines safeguard the health of women and mothers**

Childhood vaccines protect the health of all women and reduce the burden of caring for sick children. Vaccines against hepatitis B directly benefit women's health by preventing cirrhosis and liver cancer. GAVI and UNICEF have supported countries in reaching more than 40 million women with vaccines

that protect against maternal and neonatal tetanus, one of the most common lethal consequences of unclean deliveries.

In November 2011, the GAVI Board took steps towards supporting human papillomavirus (HPV) and rubella vaccines, which directly benefit women's health, in GAVI-eligible countries. Vaccines against HPV infection, the major cause of cervical cancer, are the first to protect against a women's cancer. Some 275,000 women die from cervical cancer every year. The vast majority of those deaths occur in developing countries, where women lack access to cancer screening and treatment services. HPV vaccines can prevent 70% of all cervical cancer cases.

Rubella vaccine protects pregnant women against an infection that can cause miscarriage and stillbirth, or severe congenital defects and life-long disability in children. Each year, 90,000 children in GAVI-eligible countries are born with birth defects because their mothers suffered from rubella during pregnancy. GAVI's support to rubella vaccine will help to fight this disease and protect both mothers and babies.

## **Educated women, healthier children: Sri Lanka's keys to success**

Despite the severe challenges that Sri Lanka has faced in recent years, ranging from natural disasters to internal conflict, its immunisation programme has been a major success. In 2010, the island state reached an estimated 99% coverage for immunisation with three doses of the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis combination vaccine.

***"I think vaccines are important because they promote good health in our child so he can stay healthy. Isn't that what all parents want for their children?"***

The strong demand for vaccines is partly the result of women's education and equality, according to Sri Lanka's chief epidemiologist, Nihal Abeysinghe. "One of the main reasons is our culture, where women and men are equal and receive good education. This teaches them the importance of healthy living, including making sure that children get their vaccines."

Sri Lanka has provided strong political commitment and government funding for health, with free health services available for all. The call for high-quality and accessible health services has largely been generated by a highly educated and health-conscious population, particularly women.

Chandi Swarnandi Wyaye and her husband Nuwran have brought their six-month old baby, Sauinu Charmithan, to the local clinic for his regular check-up and shots. Chandi is 27 years old and works as an insurance sales consultant. She says she was keen to know all about child health when her son was born. "I borrowed books from the library about pregnancy and birth and I remember reading about the importance of vaccines", says Chandi. "Also at the hospital after the delivery, we were given information about vaccines."

Chandi says for her it's a simple equation. "I think vaccines are important because they promote good health in our child so he can stay healthy. Isn't that what all parents want for their children?"

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