

Women's health in the Region of the Americas

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In 2000, the United Nations' Member States committed to achieving eight basic development objectives by the year 2015 known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (1). The most relevant MDGs related to women's health are to promote gender equality and empower women; improve maternal health; and combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.

Although gains have been made in all of these areas, the proposed quantitative targets have not been met at the global level. Thus, equality in primary education between boys and girls was achieved, but women continue to suffer discrimination; maternal mortality fell by 45% (2), while the target was 75%; and although gains were made in treatment coverage for HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases, 50 women are still infected with HIV every hour (3), and malaria caused 627 000 deaths in 2012 (4).

In 2009, the World Health Organization (WHO) published its report, "Women and health. Today's evidence, tomorrow's agenda" (5). The research behind this publication confirmed the following facts: (a) there are broad, persistent inequities between men and women, between high- and low-income countries, and within countries; (b) chronic diseases, injuries, and mental disorders take a major toll in women; (c) sexuality and reproduction are central aspects of women's health; (d) a fair start for all girls is decisive for women's health; and (e) society and health systems are not meeting their obligations to women. Based on this, a new women's health agenda needs to be drafted to overcome these shortcomings.

In 2013, a special issue of the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* (6) was devoted to "Women's health beyond reproduction: a new agenda." In the editorial for that volume, Flavia Bustreo, WHO Assistant Director-General for Family, Women's and Children's Health, together with other authors, identified the growing role of non-communicable chronic diseases in women's health in all regions of the world and at all socioeconomic levels, together with some of the difficulties health systems face in responding to these new challenges.

In our Region, although universal health coverage is beginning to take shape, quality of care remains a challenge. As in other areas of health, an unfinished agenda with persisting items—reflected in what is still needed to meet the proposed MDGs targets—coexists with a new agenda that is not yet fully developed and includes the aforementioned problems, in a context of inequality in the countries of the Region and among them (7).

The year 2015 marks a critical point in international work on health and development. We are at a key juncture for three highly relevant global efforts: the Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (8), the Millennium Development Goals (1), and the final drafting of the Sustainable Development Goals (9). This is a singular opportunity to redefine the women's health agenda, with a new approach that is based not on "public health" alone, but on the "right to health" as an essential element of human rights.

This special issue of the *Pan American Journal of Public Health* on women's health aims to identify and reflect on the main challenges that demographic, social, and epidemiological changes will pose to women's health in the Region of the Americas in the coming years.

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To that end, a call for articles was issued in 2014, and 130 articles were received from the Region of the Americas and other regions. After careful analysis by the editorial committee and external revisers, 24 articles were selected for publication based on their scientific quality and regional, thematic, and linguistic balance criteria.

Thus, this special issue addresses a variety of subjects ranging from the health of women at different stages of life, sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence, non-communicable chronic diseases, infectious diseases, and mental and occupational health, to adapting quality health services to meet promotion, prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation needs during the different stages of life and in several regional contexts.

This material contributes scientific evidence to the discussion on the new women's health agenda that will support policy-making, both in the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization and in the countries of the Region of the Americas.

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