



# Advancing the Universal Health Coverage Agenda

## Merck for Mothers' Contributions

Universal health coverage (UHC) — a cornerstone of the third Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of good health and wellbeing — is a global call to ensure that every individual is able to obtain high quality health services without facing financial hardship.<sup>1</sup> In 2017, leaders of both the World Bank and World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the achievement of UHC is paramount;<sup>2</sup> today, UHC has received support<sup>3</sup> across the globe.

National governments are committed to achieving UHC but in many countries, this remains an aspiration. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and exacerbated existing structural weaknesses within health systems and underscored the financial, resource and quality gaps that prevent many countries from achieving UHC. In many of these countries, the private sector represents an untapped resource that can help close those gaps.

Local private providers deliver a significant proportion of care globally. However, governments' efforts toward UHC often focus exclusively on the public health sector, neglecting private care and its potential to expand the availability of vital health care services.<sup>6</sup> In 2020, the WHO released a [report](#) that looked at the private sector's role in strengthening health systems and bridging access to health care services. The global analysis underscored the private sector as a crucial actor in mixed health systems to achieve UHC and the SDG agenda. In many WHO regions, the private sector delivers more than half of all care and continues to grow.<sup>7</sup> In response, the WHO published a [governance strategy](#) to leverage and integrate the private health sector into mixed health systems.<sup>8</sup>

## Our Contribution

Merck for Mothers is Merck's initiative to help create a world where no woman has to die while giving life. Our investments in maternal health strengthen health systems so they can meet the demands of UHC.

Since 2011, Merck for Mothers focused on private care, because we acknowledge that both public *and* private providers must improve the quality of care they offer to promote better — and more equitable — maternal health outcomes.

We are working with governments, provider associations, local entrepreneurs and NGOs to help build the capacity of private maternity providers – doctors, nurses, midwives, drug shop owners, community health workers – to deliver high quality care that aligns with national standards. By investing in private maternity providers, we aspire to augment the capacity of national health systems and contribute to the equitable delivery of high-quality maternal health services. Our goal is that all women have a healthy pregnancy and safe childbirth regardless of where they seek care.

## Availability

**By integrating local private providers into strategies to achieve universal health coverage, we expand the availability of health services to reach more people**

Availability of reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health (RMNCH) interventions is rising globally, but we still have far to go to achieve universal health coverage.<sup>9</sup> Some indicators, like institutional delivery, are improving. However, availability of emergency obstetric care is not adequate; for example, median coverage for C-sections remains low at only 6%, well below the WHO-recommended rate of 10-15%.<sup>10,11</sup>

Globally, private providers are a primary source of care for reproductive, maternal and child health services in many places. In Nigeria and India, two countries with the largest number of maternal deaths per year, most women seek care in the private sector — over 50% of women in India receive maternal health services in private facilities and more than 40% of women in Nigeria seek family planning services in the private sector.<sup>12,13</sup> The same is true in many low- and middle-income countries where approximately 40% of women seeking care receive maternal health and family planning services from private health providers.<sup>14</sup> Given the significant role these providers play, it would be a missed opportunity if health systems failed to integrate them into national efforts to expand maternal health care coverage more broadly.<sup>15,16</sup>

Merck for Mothers advocates for the inclusion of private care in national health strategies in contexts as diverse as India, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal and Uganda.



## INVESTMENT SPOTLIGHT

### Improving the quality of care among private providers in India

Since 2013, Merck for Mothers has collaborated with JHPIEGO in support of Manyata – a quality certification for private maternity care providers based on a quality improvement model that significantly improves private providers' adherence to WHO-aligned quality standards. Led by the Federation of Obstetric and Gynecological Societies of India (FOGSI), Manyata supports quality improvement efforts among private providers in six states (Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka), where almost 1,000 providers have achieved Manyata certification upon meeting quality standards. Manyata also prepares providers to apply for accreditation from the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals & Healthcare Providers, which entitles them to become eligible for reimbursement from payors. Providers certified via Manyata can access patient ratings and feedback of care through the Together for Her Health platform.

- To help demonstrate the value of engaging the private sector, we are collaborating with the WHO Quality of Care Network to analyze current engagement of and future mechanisms to involve the private sector in national health systems for improving quality maternal, newborn and child health services.
- We have also supported Results for Development (R4D) to develop a toolkit for public-private collaboration to strengthen health systems.

These collaborations are generating and curating evidence to guide government leaders, policy makers and donors on effective strategies to integrate private providers into national health systems.



## INVESTMENT SPOTLIGHT

### Using digital innovations and mobile money to improve access to affordable, quality care

Alongside PharmAccess Foundation, Merck for Mothers is supporting the development and scale of MomCare, a digital platform that helps a woman track and complete her maternal health journey, provide feedback on the care she receives and pay for quality care offered by accredited providers. Providers also use the platform to track their patients' care, improve the quality of care they offer and increase the speed of receiving payments. To drive value-based care, payers use the platform to access real-time insights on the costs, utilization and outcomes of the maternal health journey.

## Affordability

### By investing in innovations that encourage women to plan and save for childbirth, we help patients safeguard against catastrophic health expenditures

Health services must be available and affordable to achieve equitable access. Globally, many countries are putting financing models in place that protect patients from catastrophic health expenditures. Merck for Mothers advocates for including both public and private providers in these financing schemes, such as vouchers or insurance, to provide health care coverage wherever women choose to seek care.

However, financing the cost of care will not improve health outcomes if the quality of that care is poor.<sup>17</sup> We are exploring the impact of mobile platforms that help link women to maternal health care services that are both affordable and of quality.

## Quality

### By focusing on quality, we can foster effective health services so that consumers and payors receive better value

Expanding availability and affordability of care without improving quality will not improve population health. Currently, more than 8 million people per year in LMICs die from treatable conditions and 60% of preventable deaths are due to poor-quality care. Poor-quality care has become a greater barrier to reducing mortality than insufficient access.<sup>18</sup> UHC cannot achieve its primary objective of creating better health unless patients have access to services that are high quality.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, in many low and middle-income settings, there is poor quality care in both the public and private sectors.<sup>20,21,22</sup> Often, standards for quality maternity care are inconsistent, making it difficult to define and measure quality. Private maternity providers also often lack the tools and capacity to improve the quality of care they offer.

To support local private providers in their delivery of quality care and contribute toward UHC, the right incentives need to be in place.<sup>23</sup> Merck for Mothers takes on this challenge by working with collaborators to streamline quality standards and tools for maternity care and integrate those standards into quality improvement and quality assurance systems.

Patient demand is also important to sustain the delivery of high-quality care. A woman's perception of the care she receives is an integral part of her clinical experience and; therefore, an important consideration in improving the quality of maternity care. Health systems that ask and act on women's views of their maternity care experience are better equipped to deliver the respectful quality care that women deserve. Women's perspectives must be at the center of all efforts to achieve quality maternity care and all maternal health policies, programs and services should reflect what women want.

## INVESTMENT SPOTLIGHT

### Igniting consumer demand for quality care

Health care in India seldom incorporates patients' experiences and outcomes - or educates patients on what "quality" means. Since 2016, we have supported the development, refinement and expanded use of Together for Her Health (Together), a digitized pregnancy care program that supports antenatal care coordination, tracking and risk assessment and provides educational content on what quality care should look like. Post-delivery, people use the digital platform to anonymously rate the quality of care they received. Feedback is made available to providers, prompting them to be responsive to the needs of their patients. Since implementation, facilities registered with Together show significant improvement on many quality-of-care indicators including increased ability to initiate skin-to-skin contact, early breastfeeding and counseling on postpartum and newborn danger signs.



## Way Forward

Expanding access to quality health care and attaining Universal Health Coverage requires standardizing care across the public and private sectors, integrating care delivered by both sectors and setting policies that enable strong governance of the entire health system. Looking ahead, Merck for Mothers will continue to collaborate with key global health stakeholders to engage private maternity providers in health service delivery, include them in quality improvement efforts, incentive them to offer quality care and certify them for doing so, as these are vital steps toward ensuring increased and more equitable access to quality health care. Quality care is central to Merck for Mothers approach to save women's lives, improve maternal health and foster women-centered solutions for more equitable health outcomes for women around the world.

## Endnotes

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