



President Nelson Mandela
addresses the joint session
of Assembly and Senate.
South Africa, 1996.

Executive summary

Human rights are recognized in a number of legal instruments and other documents of the World Health Organization, including the WHO Constitution, the Declaration of Alma-Ata, the International Health Regulations and the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Member States of the United Nations have negotiated and agreed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Today, binding national human rights standards are commonplace, and are protected by numerous national and local bodies, including constitutional courts, ombudsmen-style national human rights institutions and democratically elected assemblies. Moreover, countries have put in place policies, programmes and other measures to ensure that human

rights move beyond laws and institutions to actually improve the lives and well-being of individuals, communities and populations.

The first of its kind, this report asks: what evidence is available to policy-makers that human rights have helped to improve women's and children's health? It considers whether or not evidence of beneficial impact supplements the compelling moral, political and legal reasons for adopting a human rights-based approach

Audience

This report is intended primarily for members of governments and public health professionals engaged in policy development, monitoring, evaluation and research in the field of women's and children's health. It will also be of interest to parliamentarians, foundations and civil society organisations that collaborate with public health policy-makers, and researchers in public health and human rights.

A focus on governments' human rights-shaped health interventions

Many stakeholders contribute to the implementation of a human rights-based approach to health, and there is compelling evidence that their contributions have a beneficial impact. This study focuses on the evidence of impact of governments' human rights-shaped health interventions, with particular attention to the initiatives of the executive branch. There are two reasons for this. First, governments have the primary legal responsibility for implementing human rights; and second, very little attention has previously been given to the evidence of impact of governmental human rights-shaped initiatives on women's and children's health.

What is a human rights-based approach to health?

This study uses the understanding of a human rights-based approach adopted by WHO and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). This approach aims to realize the right to the highest attainable standard of

While the studies do not attribute improvements exclusively to the use of a human rights-based approach, there is plausible evidence that human rights contributed positively to health and health-related gains for women and children in the four countries, such as increased access to emergency obstetric care (Nepal), increased access to modern contraception (Brazil), reductions in early childhood mortality (Malawi) and increased vaccination coverage (Italy).

The studies mainly draw from existing quantitative data collected for other purposes, but these data do not capture many of the distinctive elements of a human rights-based approach. This underscores the urgent need for more research and evaluation on a human rights-based approach to women's and children's health, as well as fresh thinking on the appropriate disciplines and methods to be used.

Although major challenges remain, the evidence suggests that a human rights-based approach can contribute to improved health and health-related gains for women and children in the four countries.

