

The Guardian

Taking A New Look
At The News

Established in 1995

Editorial

Improve child, maternal care

LAST week Tanzania had the opportunity to host British born supermodel, Naomi Campbell who is also Global Ambassador of White Ribbon Alliance (WRA). While she had a heavy schedule as part of her charity work, it is what transpired during her visit to the maternity ward at Dar es Salaam's Temeke hospital that touched our hearts.

An emotionally overwhelmed Campbell was heard repeatedly saying: "This is unbelievable" amid sobs and tears after witnessing mothers and their newly born babies sharing beds or sleeping on the floor at the hospital.

Three women who had just delivered shared a small bed, a number of others lay on the floor and benches with their newly born babies and those who were yet to deliver sat on the floor due to acute shortage of beds and wards.

We too share the agony and deep concern over the poor state of the country's infant and maternal health care system and call for urgent measures to improve the situation and save children and mothers from what, we say, are unfair and unacceptable deaths.

If the situation in a Dar es Salaam hospital is as witnessed by Campbell, we fail to predict what would be the case if she was to visit some of the hospitals and health centres in other parts of the country such as Kigoma, Mara and Rukwa regions.

Available statistics indicate that while pregnancy and childbirth kill more than 536,000 women a year in the world, more than half of them in Africa; Tanzania accounting for roughly 13,000 of the deaths annually.

While Tanzania is reported to have reduced its death rate for young children, it has not succeeded on the part of maternal mortality. The Ministry of Health puts Tanzania's maternal death rate at 578 per 100,000 births, but the World Health Organization puts the figure at 950 per 100,000. By contrast, the health organization estimates the rate in Ireland, the world's lowest, to be 1 per 100,000.

In 2000, the United Nations set a goal to reduce maternal deaths by 75 per cent by 2015. Going by what was witnessed at Temeke hospital and the reality in other parts of the country, it is a goal that poor countries, including Tanzania, seem far from achieving unless some drastic resource infusion occurs.

But they reduce the numbers of those dying by working on the possible within the given resources.

Experts say that what kills many women are "the three delays" - the woman's delay in deciding to go to the hospital, the time she loses travelling there and the hospital's delay in starting treatment once she arrives.

It is our view that by continuing to focus on the areas we can change, such as ensuring pregnant women attend clinics regularly, could go some way in reducing the death rates.

Apart from doctors, nurses, drugs and equipment, passable roads and improved transportation play a crucial part in dealing with the problem. Let us dedicate ourselves to doing all that is possible so as to save lives of mothers and children.