

Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso 9th November 2010 - Elizabeth Kaboré says she has paid for each of her visits to the clinic, despite a government promise that prenatal check-ups in health centres would be free.

"Far from being free, at each consultation, I've had to pay 600 CFA francs (around \$1.20) to see the midwives," says Kaboré, several months pregnant. "For an injection, I pay 100 FCFA and the mid-wife explained to me that this money was for the guards at the facility." Human rights organisation Amnesty International points to financial obstacles as one of the leading obstacles preventing the reduction of high rates of maternal mortality in Burkina Faso.

"In our society, it's men who decide; women never have the power. Women are deprived of a number of their rights, and we are demanding that they be respected," said Gaétan Moutou, a researcher for Amnesty International.

According to figures from the Ministry of Health, 307 women die for every 100,000 live births, around 2,000 deaths each year.

According to Moutou, financial obstacles are the principal hurdle to women's access to care. He has seen firsthand the effect of subsidies for maternal care in various regions of the country, leading to many more women presenting themselves at health centres for check-ups.

In 2006, the government adopted a subsidy, envisioning covering 80 percent of the cost of giving birth - and making it completely free for the poorest women, according to the ministry.

The government does what it can within its means, says Dr Souleymane Sanou, the director-general of health in Burkina. "If donor partners can help us, that would be welcome."

But according to Amnesty, the existence of the policy is not well known, and people are often exploited by unscrupulous health workers. Amnesty also feels that the lack of clear criteria to determine who the beneficiaries should be, and the share of the cost (20 percent must be paid by women seeking care) remains an important obstacle.

The United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA, which finances reproductive health issues, recognises that there is a problem, but believes solutions.

"It's true that financial obstacles exist, and putting effective measures in place is difficult," says Olga Sankara, programme manager at the UNFPA office in Ouagadougou.

The UNFPA has supported a communication campaign by the Ministry of Health to better inform people so that they are not exploited, Sankara told IPS. Amnesty International has also called on the Burkinabé government to extend and improve access of women to family planning.

The health ministry confirms that the prevalence rate for contraceptives is growing, but remains low. Just over 14 percent of women in Burkina Faso have access.

According to the national programme for health development, the objective is to raise the rate of contraceptive use from six percent in 1998 to 19 percent in 2015.