



Focusing on

Sexual and Reproductive Health

in Eastern Europe and Central Asia



Key Issues of Concern

Ensuring universal access to sexual health and reproductive rights is a key priority for UNFPA's work in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Since the early 1990s, the number – and rate – of women dying from pregnancy or childbirth has more than halved in the region. Women are better able to plan when to have children – and how many. But not everyone has benefitted equally from this progress. Young people, the poor, illiterate women, ethnic minorities, and members of migrant, mobile populations and rural population groups still face serious barriers in accessing the services and information they need to safeguard their health. Much more needs to be done to end preventable deaths and morbidity among women of reproductive age and to ensure that all individuals can exercise their basic human rights, including those related to the most intimate and fundamental aspects of life.

Persistence of preventable maternal deaths

Indicators of maternal health vary greatly across the region, both between and within countries, with the rates of preventable maternal mortality and morbidity generally higher in Central Asia. Marginalised population groups, such as the Roma, are also still facing high maternal mortality rates due to barriers in accessing high-quality sexual and reproductive health services.

Unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions

As the region has some of the world's lowest usage rates for modern contraceptives, in particular in South-Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, the number of unwanted pregnancies is high, especially among youth and socially marginalised population groups; adolescent birth rates are about three times higher in the region compared with Western Europe. Termination of pregnancy continues to be used routinely as a method of birth control in many countries, and unsafe abortions remain a challenge. Poor counselling, high costs, lack of choice, and unreliable supply are among the factors preventing people from using modern contraceptives.

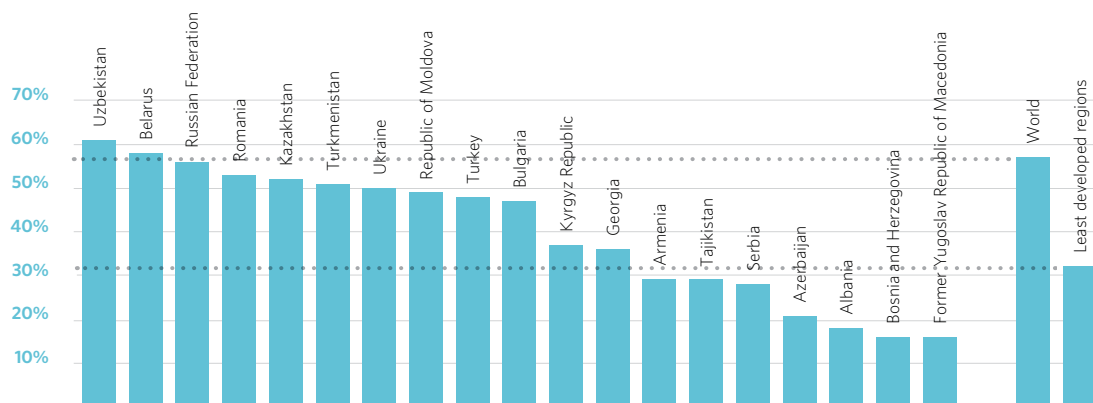
High rates of cervical cancer and sexually transmitted infections

High rates of cervical cancer, a generally high prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and rising rates of HIV pose serious and interrelated health concerns in the region. Eastern Europe and Central Asia is one of the few world regions with a growing rate of new HIV infections; an estimated 1.1 million people are living with HIV in the region. Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer among the region's women aged 15 to 44, and compared to their counterparts in Western Europe, women in Central and Eastern Europe are up to 10 times more likely to die of the disease.

Resurgence of socially conservative values and policies

Sociocultural and political barriers related to gender discrimination and the rise of socially conservative values continue to hinder efforts to apply a human-rights-based approach to providing universal access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services. In the face of declining overall population numbers, a number of countries in the region are also exploring or pursuing pro-natalist policies designed to increase fertility rates which can have negative effects on people's reproductive choices and health status.

Contraceptive prevalence rates (modern methods)*

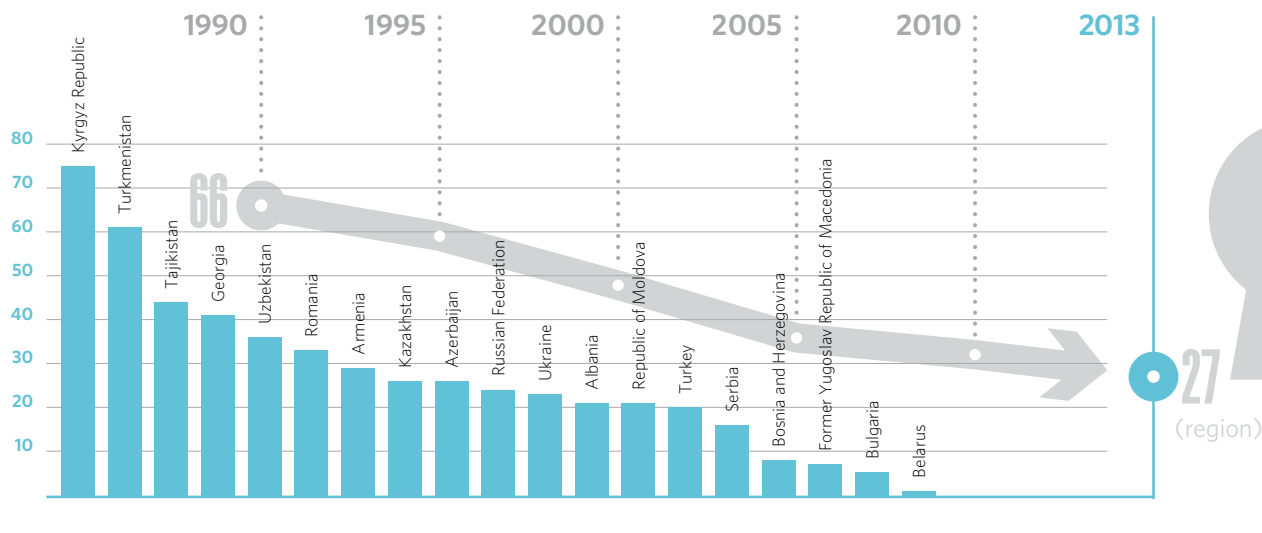


* Use of modern methods of contraception among women of reproductive age (15-49) who are married or in union. Source: UNFPA, State of World Population Report, 2014.

UNFPA's Work in the Region

UNFPA works to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health and promote reproductive rights and family planning – both essential preconditions for reducing maternal mortality and morbidity – through a variety of innovative, country-tailored programmes, implemented in partnership with governments, civil society, and healthcare providers.

Maternal mortality ratio in Eastern Europe and Central Asia*



Increase access to modern contraceptives and quality SRH services

UNFPA utilises public-private partnerships, social marketing, and a total market approach to improve access to modern methods of family planning. It also works with national governments to develop and enact national sexual and reproductive health strategies and plans, healthcare reform programmes, and contraceptive security strategies that improve access to family planning, particularly among marginalised communities. The eventual goal of these efforts is reducing the number of abortions and maternal deaths by preventing unintended and high-risk pregnancies, and preventing thousands of new cases of STIs and HIV through improved access to condoms.

- ✓ As a result of UNFPA's evidence-based advocacy and policy dialogue, Albania, Armenia, Moldova, and Turkmenistan have developed national policies, commodity security strategies, and action plans to ensure state procurement and sustainable supply of contraceptives.

* Estimates of maternal mortality rates (maternal deaths per 100,000 live births) by country, as of 2013 (in blue) and for the entire region, from 1990 to 2013 (in grey). Source: Trends in Maternal Mortality: 1990 to 2013. Estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, The World Bank and the United Nations Population Division.

Strengthen emergency obstetric and new-born care

UNFPA supports programmes to advance policies and successful practices in emergency obstetric and new-born care, effective perinatal care, and confidential enquiry into maternal deaths, and works to scale up and institutionalise such practices with a particular focus on remote and rural areas.

- ✓ The Eastern Europe and Central Asia region has achieved almost universal access to antenatal care, and skilled personnel attend 95 per cent of births. Since 1990, maternal mortality fell from 66 to 27 per 100,000 live births.

Support efforts to improve the quality of health services

In collaboration with government ministries and service providers, UNFPA works to improve the quality of sexual and reproductive health services and the ability of health service providers to contribute to maternal and child health. It also helps support the development and implementation of evidence-based clinical guidelines on sexual and reproductive health in accordance with international standards.

- ✓ In Tajikistan, UNFPA supported the Ministry of Health in setting up reproductive health centres across the country, resulting in increased numbers of women receiving health checks during their pregnancies and benefitting from professional hospital services to deliver their babies.

Assist with the prevention of cervical cancer

Closing gaps in sexual and reproductive health services related to cervical cancer prevention — including high-level advocacy and improving knowledge among the general populace about how to prevent the disease, and ensuring the incorporation of prevention efforts in healthcare systems — is a key focus of UNFPA and its partners at the national, regional, and global levels.

- ✔ More than 44,000 women each year benefit from cervical cancer screening services that have been offered in Georgia since 2008 with the support of a UNFPA-government partnership programme.

Boost data collection and analysis for evidence-informed policies

UNFPA provides support for data analysis and research on all key aspects of sexual and reproductive health, including behavioural patterns that negatively affect the demand for family planning services, particularly modern methods of contraception, and information about the needs of vulnerable groups. It uses this data in evidence-based advocacy to improve legislation and policies related to sexual and reproductive health.

- ✔ UNFPA's evidence-based advocacy for improving national capacity for data collection, analyses, and application to policy dialogue has resulted in advanced sexual and reproductive health policies and increased state funding for SRH programmes in Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.



Priorities for the Future

- Work with governments to remove barriers to access (e.g. based on age, marital status, socioeconomic conditions, or geographic location) to sexual and reproductive health services and commodities.
- Advocate for improved access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education.
- Improve responses to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, which has a rising rate of newly reported cases in the region.
- Create enabling legislative environments that respect and protect reproductive rights and enable all individuals to know about their rights and exercise them without discrimination.
- Strengthen countries' capacities for data collection and analysis and ensure that national policies and programmes are informed by evidence.
- Strengthen national health systems and the capacities of institutions to implement health strategies and plans for reducing preventable morbidity and mortality by addressing their causes; and for provision of effective antenatal and obstetric care, family planning services, cervical screening and prevention and management of complications of unsafe abortion.

