

# THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL FACTORS IN THE DEATH REGISTRATION SYSTEM: THE CASE OF TURKEY

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The level of maternal mortality, which is more frequently encountered in developing countries, is used as a multi-dimensional indicator of development. The improvement of the mother's health is accepted by international groups as an indispensable indicator of development in the development summits not only because the indicator is important and there is large number of deaths occurring worldwide, but also because a great portion of maternal deaths can be avoidable with relatively low-cost interventions.

This paper will evaluate the findings of a qualitative survey by making use of the social cultural factors as supplementary or as explanatory forces to understand the problematical points in the registration of maternal mortality. Thus, in addition to quantified data, qualitative data is expected to contribute to the improvement and development of new policies so as to avoid the deficiencies in the system.

## Methodology

Turkey has limited information regarding maternal mortality. National Maternal Mortality Study (NMMS) conducted in 2005 was designed to obtain valid and representative data on maternal mortality that would enable to estimate the maternal mortality rate and ratio for Turkey. In the quantitative part of the survey, information about the death of women aged 12-50 years was collected by two different methods. A 'health facility form' was applied if the death occurred in a health facility or was attended by a trained health staff, or a 'verbal autopsy' was performed with the families of the deceased to ascertain the cause of death if the death was not attended by trained health staff or could not be ascertained from the reviewed health facility record. Additionally, a qualitative research was conducted to understand the reasons for the lack of female burial notification in particular and to obtain suggestions for improving the level and quality of causes of death and mortality records. The qualitative study aimed to provide information which is expected to guide the policy makers to improve the current registration system.

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with the government officials, village headman (*muhtar*), cemetery officials and the project teams as well. In municipal areas, it is the cemetery officials who are in charge of the burial records whereas in villages this is the responsibility of *muhtar*. In the NMMS they are defined as primary informants since they deal directly with the registration of the deceased when the burial is considered.

In-depth interviews were held with people who are responsible with recording the burials to understand how they perceive their duties, what problems they encounter and what issues cause the existing system to dysfunction. Interviews with families that had experienced

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maternal death were also made. Individual interviews enabled us to see how this subject was viewed by the people working in this field and helped to understand the social structure and processes forming the present situation. Interviews were held with people working in the record follow-up, statistical compilation and death notification systems of the state and of the NMMS. In depth interviews were conducted in two of the project provinces, Ankara and Diyarbakır. Besides, a Central Anatolian province (Kayseri) was also included for in-depth interviews to be conducted in order to compare the burial registration processes with the ones that are not included in the project.

Moreover, focus group discussions were held with the province project teams -project coordinators, the project doctors and the project researchers- who were either themselves or in close contact throughout the survey period (one year) with people working in the death registration system.

All of the interviews were tape-recorded and the transcription was done by the interviewer and the observer. The common and different points declared by the participants about the current registration system and NMMS was discussed during the analysis of the data. Their point of views about each other's duties and responsibilities were taken into consideration. Moreover, the reasons of the problems in the current registration system, the required opportunities and relations among the institutions in order to improve the system are also evaluated in the light of the participants' suggestions.

## **Evaluation**

The transcripts from the in-depth interviews and focus groups provided valuable information for taking steps in the formulation of plans and strategies to overcome the deficiencies of the existing registration system that provide the basis for estimating maternal mortality. The picture that emerges from the qualitative data brings into light the issues that have never been considered ever before. To overcome the existing shortcomings of the system topdown measures have usually been the implemented procedure. However, these attempts have mostly been null, resulting with the non-existence of an indicator which is required essential to know in order to be able to save the lives of mothers.

The main emerging issues in the system can be gathered under six main headings.

- *Underreporting by the village headmen who are in a responsible position at the initial phase of reporting.*

The lack of interest in the work to be done and the insufficient level of education appeared as the issues that hamper the system at the village headman level. Besides, the structure of the headmanship institution cause a disrupture in the flow of the registration system because it is understood that there is a conflicting situation in the system since *muhtars* are elected they prefer to focus more on services visible by the public among which the infrastructure services have the priority. On the other hand they are not convinced as to what the general use is of dealing with dead people. Moreover carrying out a study based only on women in particular the dead womewn is not very much understandable by them indicating their gender perspective.

- *Considering registration as an action to be performed only for judicial cases.*

Since keeping records was associated more with a judicial case by *muhtars*, it was observed that they feared making notifications. Similar to *muhtars*' fear of judicial cases, it has been noticed that the hospital personnel did not fill out the forms completely due to their fear of being investigated as well.

- *Lerning the job in practice*

At the time *muhtars* are elected, they do not have thorough information about their jobs and they learn the job in practice. Furthermore, it was also observed that the *muhtars* who were succeeded as a result of an election did not transfer any information while handing over the post about the work and procedures carried out.

- *Insufficient importance given to the registration system in the health sector*

Defective records owing to the little importance attributed to registering causes of death as well as keeping regular records. It was mentioned that as there is very much circulation in the health sector, many problems are experienced in reaching information of patients. The bad aspects of the high turn-over occurring in the posts of high level administrators especially after a change in government and its impacts upon the entire staff were mentioned.

- *Prevailing beliefs for burials*

In some places, in view of the fact that burial should immediately be performed according to the prevailing beliefs, burials are made without a burial permit and without informing the officials; in such cases even night burials come upon.

- *Gender discrimination in reporting deaths*

It is understood that female burials are insufficiently notified compared to that of male's, because in most of the cases women do not have property registered on themselves and had no salary. Thus, lack of inheritance engenders the deceased to be omitted from being registered. On the other hand, although no discrimination is made at the registration phase by the *muhtars* or the municipality officers, they are unfortunately not aware of the missing female burials.

- *Quality of the existing registers*

It was emphasized that the data collected regarding the causes of death were insufficient in terms of scope and quality. The reasons range from substantial causes, such as not filling death causes, to formwise reasons such as being incompetent in writing the death causes and having problems in reading the forms etc..

The preliminary analysis of the qualitative study put out the foregoing facts as the challenging points in the improvement of the death registration system and maternal deaths in particular. In understanding the demographic outcomes the connection that exists between individual behavior and the cultural and social contexts of its occurrence are in a central position. Besides a number of administrative and management-level troubles, established habits,

traditions, local, regional behavior patterns and many other culture related factors come into view as major issues that need to be considered by policy makers.