

Malaria - we've barely scratched the surface

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Malaria is frequently referred to as a [disease of poverty](#). For many people, malaria is a daily reality that affects not only their health, but their mental and financial stability, family life, work, and education, too. Even if they recover physically, the long-term effects prove to be a burden.



Malaria is the sixth leading [cause of death](#) in low-income countries worldwide. A gender lens focus on women is critical in the battle against malaria, as women are particularly vulnerable, due in part to social, economic, and cultural factors putting them in harm's way and [keeping them from care](#). "Malaria holds back economies, communities, and families, with women and girls bearing the brunt of this impact. When we fight to eliminate malaria, we improve economic growth, advance gender equality, and alter the trajectory of poverty," says Sherwin Charles, CEO of Goodbye Malaria, an initiative that facilitates public private partnerships, bringing together the private sector, government and The Global Fund to support on-the ground malaria elimination programmes.

Women are more affected

Only female mosquitoes bite and thus transfer the disease, and so the irony that women are more affected by this disease is not lost. Pregnant women are more at risk of malaria because the mother's immune system is in [constant flux](#) during pregnancy. Not only is the mother at risk, their unborn babies are, too. Around [10,000](#) women and children die annually from malaria infection during pregnancy.

When malaria strikes a household, the impact of the disease is also felt more keenly by the women in the family. As a disease, malaria affects both men and women equally, but according to a UNESCO [report](#) socially-determined gender norms mean that women most often carry the extra burden of caring for sick family members. Additionally, whilst malaria accounts for [15%](#) of health-related absenteeism from schools, it impacts girls more heavily on a sociocultural level. When a family member falls ill with malaria, young girls in the family often [stay out of school](#) to tend to the sick at home. This limits their education and future earning opportunities, reinforcing cycles of poverty.

And, adds Charles, if a woman is the main breadwinner or heads up a single-parent household, and she is struck down by malaria, it often results in a loss of earnings and food for the family. “Every malaria episode causes an average of five lost workdays, three to the patient and two to the caregiver, and often the patient and caregiver are the same person. Therefore, any efforts to control malaria helps women affected by the disease to unlock their economic potential.”

Growing [evidence](#) also supports the fact that empowering women leads to better malaria outcomes for their communities, with one [study](#) finding that households where women have more decision-making power, are much more likely to use a bed net.

Access to care

The kind of protection offered by bed nets and other preventative measures is important because recovery from the disease itself is an uphill battle. It starts with a headache, fever, and chills, and spirals into what can be a life-threatening condition. There are treatments available, such as various medications, and most recently, a [vaccine](#), but this kind of treatment goes hand in hand with accessibility. Treatment is usually only available [in a hospital](#) and many rural communities simply don't have the means to travel far to reach a hospital.

These financial, educational, and developmental issues are some of the long-term effects that young girls and women in rural villages have to face daily. The UNESCO report sheds light on the fact that inequitable access to health care both intensifies a woman's vulnerability to malaria and affects her ability to access prevention and treatment services appropriately.

Goodbye Malaria, with support from private sector partners such as fast food franchise Nando's, aims to reach these remote areas by providing mobile clinics that provide access to various treatment options. “Innovative partnerships such as these allow us to make an impactful difference on the ground and in malaria endemic communities, and are integral to combating this disease,” says Charles.

“When someone moves from a place with malaria to somewhere without it, it's easy for the disease to flare-up and quickly cancel out the work that's gone into eliminating it there. And because we understand that most people affected by this disease are from disadvantaged communities, we don't charge anything to anyone who wants to get tested.”

To achieve their goal of malaria elimination in Mozambique by 2030, Goodbye Malaria also runs Indoor Residual Spraying (IRS) in Southern Mozambique, which involves spraying residual insecticide on the interior walls of houses where mosquitoes are found. “Mosquitoes die when they come into contact with treated surfaces, stopping them from spreading the disease. But to have a real impact, at least 80% of the houses within a targeted area need to be sprayed. Not reaching that goal means it'll be easier for mosquito populations to survive, finding nearby unsprayed houses to hide in and keep infecting people,” says Charles.

Using detailed data dashboards, Goodbye Malaria monitors operations with smartphone apps and GPS tracking to keep track of how many homes have been sprayed and where.

When it comes to eliminating the mosquito-borne disease, it truly takes a village. Another initiative partnering with Goodbye Malaria is [Relate](#), who sell beaded bracelets to raise funds for causes such as Goodbye Malaria. To date, Relate has raised over R14 million for this worthy cause.

There are other benefits to combatting malaria too. Countries that [reduce their malaria burden](#) experience higher GDP growth, driving economic development and opportunities for women and their communities more broadly. Empowering people with knowledge about malaria, and what they can do to support the fight is therefore of benefit to everyone.

“It is an honour to collaborate with Goodbye Malaria, uniting our efforts to safeguard vulnerable communities, particularly women and young children, from this deadly disease,” Shekel concludes. “Our partnership embodies our shared commitment to turning the tide against malaria, and I am profoundly inspired by the difference we're making together.”

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