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WHO director-general Dr Margaret Chan says women must be allowed to develop their full potential

Women short-changed in healthcare

KUALA LUMPUR: The health needs of women all over the world are not being met at key moments of their lives, particularly in adolescence and old age, says a World Health Organisation (WHO) report.

Launching *Women and Health: Today's Evidence Tomorrow's Agenda*, WHO director-general Dr Margaret Chan called for urgent action within the health sector and beyond to improve the lives of girls and women from birth to old age.

"If women are denied a chance to develop their full potential, including their potential to lead healthier and at least somewhat happier lives, is society as a whole really healthy?" Dr Chan asked.

"What does this say about the

state of social progress in the 21st century?"

Worldwide, she said, women provided the bulk of healthcare — whether in the home, the community or the health system — yet their own specific health needs and challenges were not addressed.

She added that up to 80 per cent of all healthcare and 90 per cent of care for HIV/AIDS-related illness was provided in the home — almost always by women.

"Yet, more often than not, they go unsupported, unrecognised and unremunerated in this essential role."

When it comes to meeting women's healthcare needs, some services, such as care during pregnan-

cy, were more likely to be in place than those covering issues such as mental health, sexual violence and screening and treatment for cervical cancer.

But in many countries, she said, sexual and reproductive health services tended to focus exclusively on married women.

As such, the needs of unmarried women and adolescents were often ignored.

She added that few services catered to the needs of other marginalised groups, such as sex workers, intravenous drug users, ethnic minorities and women in rural areas.