

To date, an estimated 314 million people globally are visually impaired, among whom 45 million are blind. Nearly two-thirds of blind people worldwide are women. In many developing countries, women are less likely to receive eye care services than men. As well, the incidence of some blinding diseases (cataract and trachoma) is higher among women than men. Cataract is the main cause of blindness.

Globally, up to 80% of blindness is either preventable or treatable with available cost-effective interventions such as cataract surgery, which costs around US \$50 per patient. In an effort to reduce the burden of blindness and visual impairment, WHO in collaboration with ministries of health and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness launched a global initiative, VISION 2020: The Right to Sight, aiming to eliminate the main causes of avoidable blindness by the year 2020.

In support of the global VISION 2020 initiative, the World Health Organization and its partners organize an annual global event, World Sight Day, to raise awareness and advocate on behalf of blind and visually impaired people. The theme of this year's World Sight Day is "Gender and eye health—equal access to care".

In the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region, around 37 million people are visually impaired, among whom 5.3 million people are blind. The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean will celebrate World Sight Day on 8 October 2009 in Alexandria, Egypt, jointly with the Ministry of Health of Egypt, the International Agency for Prevention of Blindness (IAPB), IMPACT-EMR, Suzanne Mubarak Centre, Lions Club International Foundation, Rotary International, Alexandria Chamber of Commerce, Al-Noor Magrabi Foundation, and other nongovernmental organizations. The objectives of the World Sight Day 2009 celebration are to:

- raise public awareness of blindness and vision impairment as major public health issues;
- advocate with governments/ministries of health to participate in and designate funds for national blindness prevention programmes;
- educate target audiences about blindness prevention, VISION 2020 and its activities, and

generate support for VISION 2020 programme activities;

- address gender inequities in the use of eye care services and service outcomes.

Recent data indicate that infectious causes of blindness are decreasing as a result of public health interventions and socioeconomic development. In contrast, ageing populations and lifestyle changes mean that chronic blinding conditions such as diabetic retinopathy are projected to rise exponentially. Women comprise more than half of the elderly population, and they face a significantly greater risk of acquiring diseases that can lead to blindness and vision loss than men. Adopting approaches to improve the use of eye care services by women and girls will not only improve gender equity in eye health, it will also have a significant benefit to the family, community and society.

Among the many blindness prevention activities in Egypt, WHO in collaboration with the Lions Clubs International Foundation is supporting the Childhood Blindness Centre in Alexandria Eye Hospital. As well, Alexandria Chamber of Commerce has signed a protocol with WHO to support 2000 free cataract surgeries and provide spectacles. Al-Noor Eye Foundation and the Egyptian Association for the Prevention of Blindness are conducting free eye camps in different areas in Egypt. Many other organizations such as Rotary International are also providing support.

To eliminate avoidable blindness, WHO is working closely with key partners including HRH Prince Abdulaziz bin Ahmed bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Chairman, IMPACT-EMR and the International Agency for Prevention of Blindness, H.E. General Adel Ali Labib, Governor of Alexandria, Alexandria University, the Egyptian Association for Prevention of Blindness and Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services.

Achieving gender equity in eye health, including addressing cataract, trachoma, refractive errors and other causes of vision loss, will require concerted efforts by all partners involved in the prevention of blindness.

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