

“Half the Sky” Discussion Guide

Fistula-specific information, questions and actions from The Fistula Foundation

What is Obstetric Fistula?

Obstetric fistula is a hole between the vagina and bladder and/or rectum that is caused by prolonged, unrelieved obstructed labor, leaving a woman incontinent of urine or feces or both. Fistulas occur most frequently during a first birth, to young women in rural areas of the poorest countries who bear children without access to any medical help. A woman with untreated fistula is often left by her husband and ostracized by her community, forced to live a life of shame and isolation. Her fistula can lead to skin infections, kidney disorders and even death. However, fistulas can be repaired through surgery and women who receive successful treatment can live a healthy, normal and productive life.

Fast Facts About Fistula

- Fistula used to be present in the U.S. and Europe, but was largely eliminated in the latter part of the 19th century and early 20th century with improved obstetric care and the use of Caesarian sections in particular to relieve obstructed labor.
- Fistula is more common in countries in sub-Saharan Africa than most other places, due in large part to lack of access to obstetric care and because girls are more likely to marry and have children at very young ages. Preventing adolescent pregnancies by increasing access to information and services and stopping child marriages would decrease pregnancy-related morbidity within this highly vulnerable group.¹
- The best available data shows that between 500,000 and 2 million women in the world are currently living with fistulas. This number grows every single year by 30,000 - 50,000 new cases.
- In 2010 there were only 14,231 cases of fistula reportedly treated;² there simply are not enough facilities or trained fistula repair surgeons available to meet the demand for surgeries.
- For every one woman whose fistula is healed, 50 women go without treatment.
- The cost of a fistula repair surgery is approximately \$450, which includes surgery, postoperative care and physical rehabilitation. Women whose fistulas have been successfully surgically repaired are able to lead a healthy, normal life.

¹ Source: The Campaign to End Fistula

² Source: The Global Fistula Map

Suggested Discussion Questions

- Edna Adan, founder of the Edna Adan Maternity Hospital in Somaliland, has said that “a fistula is one of the most humiliating things that can happen to a person.”³ What are the implications for a woman’s future if her fistula is left untreated? How would her life be different if she had access to treatment?
- How does the status of women in Somaliland and the importance of childbearing to a woman’s role in Somali society contribute to high rates of maternal death and devastating childbirth injuries like fistula?
- How do practices like child marriage and teen childbearing contribute to childbirth injuries like fistula?
- Many times women suffering from fistula are considered to have been cursed or to have done something wrong to bring the condition upon themselves. How can cultural traditions be overcome so women can receive treatment or preventative care?
- What role can men and/or husbands play in preventing fistula or in supporting treatment?

Act Now to End Fistula

- **Donate.** The Fistula Foundation works quickly to put donor funds to work at our grantee partner sites providing fistula care in the field, because that’s where lives are changed. Whether you give \$5 or \$500, every single dollar is important to a woman waiting for fistula repair surgery. Visit our web site to donate:
<https://www.fistulafoundation.org/donation/donatenow/charitable>
- **Join our Circle of Friends** and become an ambassador for fistula by hosting friends or colleagues for a discussion group. The Fistula Foundation provides resources and suggestions for activities you can host in your home, church or office to educate people about fistula. Learn more at:
<http://www.fistulafoundation.org/whatyoucando/circleoffriends/>
- Learn what it’s like to be a woman living with fistula through the one hour documentary, ***A Walk to Beautiful***. Available for free online through PBS.org, the film documents the stories of women suffering from fistula and shows how their lives dramatically improve after receiving treatment.
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/a-walk-to-beautiful.html>

“It is so great to have the Fistula Foundation as a partner where responsible stewardship doesn't translate into burdensome red tape.”

– Rick Manning, Medical Director of CURE International Hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan

³ Pulled from PBS Independent Lens video footage at <http://video.pbs.org/video/2240368349/>

- **Sign up for e-mailed news and updates** from The Fistula Foundation and receive periodic information, success stories from partners on the ground fighting fistula, and tips for how to get involved in ending fistula worldwide.
Visit: <http://www.fistulafoundation.org/cust/maillinglist>
- **Quiz yourself.** What's your maternal health IQ? Test your knowledge about maternal health by taking this interactive quiz: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/maternal-health.html>
- **Get crafty.** The Knit for Fistula – Blanket Project is a virtual group being run through Facebook that is knitting blankets to send to women recovering from fistula repair surgery. If you have knitting, crochet or quilting skills, this project may be for you!
Visit: <https://www.facebook.com/Knitforfistula>

Additional Resources

Organizations:

- **Fistula Foundation**
Link: www.fistulafoundation.org
Description: Fistula Foundation raises awareness and funds for fistula treatment, prevention and educational programs worldwide.
- **The Campaign to End Fistula**
Link: <http://www.endfistula.org>
Description: This is a coalition formed by the United Nations Population Fund to focus on strategies for ending fistula worldwide.
- **The Global Fistula Map**
Link: <http://www.globalfistulamap.org/>
Description: This map illustrates where fistula is most prevalent throughout the world and identifies regions most in need of fistula repair services.

Research:

- **Obstetric Fistula Needs Assessment Report: Findings from Nine African Countries**
Link: <http://www.unfpa.org/fistula/docs/fistula-needs-assessment.pdf>
Description: This report contains results from a groundbreaking needs assessment conducted in 2003 by EngenderHealth and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in nine African countries.

Films:

- **A Walk to Beautiful**
Link: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/a-walk-to-beautiful.html>
Description: "A Walk to Beautiful" tells the story of five women in Ethiopia suffering from devastating childbirth injuries. Rejected by their husbands and ostracized by their communities, these women are left to spend the rest of their lives in loneliness and shame. We follow each of these women on their journey to a special hospital in Addis Ababa where they find solace for the first time in years, and we stay with them as their lives begin to change. Through the intimate experiences all five share, we are no longer

in the heart of Africa-we are in the hearts of these women. The trials they endure and their attempts to rebuild their lives tell a universal story of hope, courage, and transformation. 2007.

- **Fistula Pilgrims**

Link:

http://www.safehands.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=72&Itemid=29

Description: This film highlights the devastating consequences of obstetric fistula and tells the story of Telanish, who was pledged in marriage at 3, married at 10, pregnant at 11 and gave birth to a still born at 12. Commissioned by the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO), 2003.

- **Love, Labor, Loss**

Link: <http://www.governessfilms.com/fistula/index2.html>

Description: LOVE, LABOR, LOSS is the first U.S.-produced feature-length film on the issue of obstetric fistula. Non-narrated with music by Zap Mama and local artists, LOVE, LABOR, LOSS follows five women in Niger, West Africa suffering from obstetric fistula and a U.S - Niger medical mission working to repair their fistulas to give them a second chance at a normal life.

Let's keep in touch! Find us on these social networks:



Facebook.com/FistulaFoundation



@Fistula_Fdtn

or [Twitter.com/Fistula_Fdtn](https://twitter.com/Fistula_Fdtn)