



At 200 deaths per 100,000 live births, the maternal mortality rate in Myanmar is one of the worst in the region, according to a recent United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) [report](#) . Although the number has been halved since 1990, the Millennium Development Goal of 130 deaths per 100,000 live births by 2015 is still unlikely to be reached, UN officials warn.

Despite donor funding to advance Myanmar's healthcare system, more work is needed in life-saving family planning services, according to experts.

The UNFPA notes that 87 percent of maternal deaths occur in rural areas, where poor infrastructure and the lack of reproductive health access are contributing factors. Many women in Myanmar don't have access to the full range of family planning choices and as a result there is a high rate of maternal mortality.

The unmet need for [family planning](#) in Myanmar stands at 19 percent, compared to only 3 percent in neighbouring Thailand, and services need to become more widely available.

[Official statistics](#) put contraceptive usage at less than 40 percent, which Burmese officials hope to increase to 50 percent, as well as lowering the unmet need for family planning to 10 percent in the next two years.

However, the local government considers Myanmar under-populated compared to other countries in the region and the authorities continue to back a pro-natalist policy that encourages childbearing, another UNFPA [report](#) notes.

Further challenges to family planning include security concerns in conflict-affected areas along the 1,800km Thai-Burmese border. There are also cultural pressures from conservative community and religious leaders who see large families as a blessing and view family planning as unnatural.

Traditions have strained the resources of already impoverished families that cannot afford more children, Saw Nay Htoo, programme director of the Burma Medical Association, an NGO based in the Thai border town of Mae Sot, told IRIN News. "If they have a big family, they will have less income and struggle to provide for their children."

Without access to family planning, many Burmese women are forced to undergo homemade abortions or suffer obstetric emergencies as a result of dangerous pregnancies.

Terminating a pregnancy is illegal, and carries a prison term of up to three years for the provider and seven years for the mother, causing unsafe abortions to become one of the leading causes of maternal death.

Source: [IRIN News](#)