



Safe Maternity and the Role of the Midwife

Maternal Health Matters, seeks for all women to have access to family planning and midwifery birth attendance with backup emergency obstetric care in order to prevent and recognise problems before, during and after childbirth

Every day almost 810 women die in pregnancy or childbirth. Ninety per cent of maternal deaths occur in Africa, Asia and Pacific Island Countries. Every loss of a mother impacts a family and threatens the well-being of surviving children. Infants whose mothers die are more likely to die before reaching their second birthday than infants whose mothers survive. For every woman who dies, 20 to 30 or more women experience serious complications.

Maternal death and disability rates mirror the enormous disparities that exist between the poor and well-off both within and between countries. Impoverished and rural women of all countries are far less likely than their urban or wealthier counterparts to receive skilled care during childbirth. In rural areas, health clinics and hospitals are often spread out over vast distances and transportation systems are often rudimentary.

Strengthening the midwifery workforce and their skills can help prevent some 80 per cent of maternal deaths when midwives are authorized to practise their life-saving competencies, and when there are adequate policies surrounding their retention, deployment and distribution.

WHO & UNFPA recognise the vital role midwives play in the global challenge to ensure that no woman dies giving life. Midwives not only assist mothers to deliver babies, they play a central role in providing family planning, counselling, preventing HIV transmission from mother to child, and promoting good health in societies as a whole. They are an essential workforce in an effective healthcare system. Significant declines in maternal mortality have occurred as more women have gained access to family planning and midwifery birth attendance with backup emergency obstetric care. Professionally trained midwives have been critical to these successes. In many countries though, severe shortages of trained health providers with midwifery skills are holding back progress. There is a need to increase the capacity of national health systems to provide a broad range of quality maternal health services, reduce health inequities, and empower women to exercise their right to maternal health.

Skilled midwives functioning in or very close to the community have a significant impact on the reduction of maternal and neonatal mortality. Skilled midwives at all births is considered to be the single most critical intervention for ensuring safe motherhood, because it hastens the timely delivery of emergency obstetric and newborn care when life-threatening complications arise. Skilled attendance denotes not only the presence of midwives *but also* the enabling environment they need in order to perform capably. It also implies access to a more comprehensive level of obstetric care in case of complications.

healthy girls, make healthy women, make healthy babies, make healthy nations



In spite of this, in the developing world, about 81 per cent of all births are reported as attended by skilled health care providers. In some countries, the figure is closer to 10-12 per cent. In many of those cases, the woman does not have access to life-saving emergency care should something go wrong.

Up to 15 per cent of all births are complicated by a potentially fatal condition. While it is possible to screen for risk of complications, the great majority of complications arise with little or no warning among women who have no risk factors. Every minute, 110 women in the world experience a complication in their pregnancy, and every 11 seconds, a pregnant woman or newborn dies somewhere around the world will die. Although many of these complications are unpredictable, almost all are treatable.

Midwives are trained to recognize problems early, when the situation can still be controlled, to intervene and manage the complication, or to stabilize the condition and refer the patient to a higher level of care, if needed. Midwives are also vital to protecting the health of newborns: the majority of perinatal deaths occur during labour and delivery or within the first 48 hours after delivery.

Since it is difficult to predict who will develop a life-threatening complication, all pregnant women should have access to a qualified health provider – preferably a midwife - for prenatal and delivery care, operating in a health centre with adequate referral services to a higher level of facility if needed. Midwives have proficiency to manage normal births, are able to recognize the onset of complications, perform essential interventions, start treatment, and supervise the referral of mother and baby for interventions that are beyond their competence or not possible in the particular setting.

Midwives must be supported in an enabling environment, with a health system capable of delivering appropriate emergency obstetric care with the facilities, supplies, transport and professionals to provide emergency obstetric care when it is needed for all women who develop complications during childbirth.

The world currently faces a shortage of midwives. As a result, women and their newborns die from complications that could have been easily prevented by a midwife with the right skills, the right equipment and the right support.

“For midwifery, recognition of their full breadth of skills, knowledge, and care of the health of women and communities remains a challenge. Midwives, and the antenatal care they provide, are crucial to preventing the complications and illnesses that lead to maternal and child mortality. Midwifery services also go beyond assisting childbirth to caring for pregnant women, neonates, and families, as well as providing family planning and reproductive health services. These comprehensive roles have been inadequately recognised” (5). As long as women continue to give birth without skilled care, the number of women dying in childbirth will remain stagnant.

The lives and health of many millions more would be saved with greater investments in midwives. "Addressing the shortage of midwives through education, training and deployment to underserved areas would bring us much closer to achieving the Sustainable Development Goal of improving maternal health," said Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, UNFPA's Executive Director. "A strong midwifery profession is the key to achieving safer childbirth, and all women should have access to a midwife." "Midwives form the bridge between communities and facilities. They transcend the levels of care within health systems, and are essential to the continuum of care during the childbearing cycle."(2)



- **Respectful Maternity Care** - <http://www.whiteribbonalliance.org/index.cfm/act-now/respectful-maternity-care/>
- **United Nations Population Fund** - <http://www.unfpa.org/public/mothers>
- **State of the World Midwifery Report** - International Confederation of Midwives
<http://www.internationalmidwives.org/Whoweare/Partners/StateoftheWorldMidwiferyReport/tabid/933/Default.aspx>
- **The Midwife in the Community** - http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/documents/1_9241546662/en/
- **The status of nursing and midwifery in the world**, The Lancet. Published: April 07, 2020,
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