

UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is an international development agency that promotes the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity. UNFPA supports countries in using population data for policies and programmes to reduce poverty and to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, every young person is free of HIV/AIDS, and every girl and woman is treated with dignity and respect.



DELIVERING HOPE AND SAVING LIVES INVESTING IN MIDWIFERY

FOR A COUNTRY TO STOP WOMEN and newborn babies from dying, one of the most important investments it can make is in human resources to ensure skilled birth attendance with midwifery during labour and delivery.

Some 15 per cent of pregnant women worldwide face potential life-threatening complications during pregnancy, delivery or afterwards. Despite this, almost half of new mothers in developing countries will give birth either alone or without skilled care during what is one of the most dangerous passages a woman will undergo in her entire lifetime.

The shortfall of midwives and skilled health personnel is most acute in the poorest countries of the world. Fifty-eight countries, nearly all among the world's least developed, contribute 58 per cent of global births, but account for 91 per cent of global maternal death, 80 per cent of stillbirths and 82 per cent of neonatal death. These countries have just 17 per cent of the world's midwives, nurses and physicians.¹

Each year, an estimated 358,000 women die from complications in pregnancy or childbirth. Another 7-10 million women suffer severe or long-lasting illnesses or disabilities, the worst of which are obstetric fistula, severe uterine prolapse, depression and infertility. Skilled health care during pregnancy and childbirth is critical to lowering the number of women and newborn babies killed or injured while giving birth.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Almost all births in developed countries are assisted by skilled birth attendants. In developing countries, the figure is 57 per cent. In some of the least developed countries, it falls to less than 20 per cent. Just six per cent of all births are attended by skilled health personnel in Ethiopia, where most of the population lives in rural areas. A woman in rural Ethiopia who experiences a birth complication – as over

1,100 do each day – is unlikely to have help from a doctor, nurse or midwife.²

Of those who do receive assistance in developing countries, many will not receive the quality of care they need to preserve their life, their health or that of their newborns.

While the presence of skilled staff in urban areas is continuing to grow, progress is held back by stagnation in rural areas—mainly in South and South-East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where the population is still mostly rural or remote.

Since the 1990s, the provision of antenatal care has climbed 20 per cent worldwide. However, studies show that 7 in 10 women who do not give birth at a health-care facility are not receiving postnatal care.

The global shortage of roughly 350,000 professional midwives means that many women and babies die from complications that could have been prevented easily by a health worker with the right skills, the right equipment and the right support. A recent report found that 3.6 million lives could be saved each year by doubling the number of well-trained and supported midwives providing care in the 58 countries where most maternal and newborn deaths occur.³

Inadequate and Poor Training

Even where services are available, they are often inadequate or of poor quality. Studies in Benin, Ecuador, Jamaica and Rwanda show that practitioner knowledge is often lacking, with test scores between 40 and 65 per cent of pre-specified norms.

In Ghana, as few as 17 per cent of hospital births met the standards of good clinical practice while technical and quality of care scores were likewise woefully inadequate in health centres located in Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire. In some cases, women gave birth in a hospital with no professional support whatsoever.⁴

Cultural Issues and Lack of Sensitivity

A lack of cultural sensitivity and poor treatment can discourage women from accessing services, even where available.

Women have cited a variety of abusive behaviours as reasons for choosing the more perilous route of home birth. Among them: offensive and demeaning language on the part of health-care personnel and ridicule of a woman's clothing, smell, hygiene, cries of pain, or the desire to remain clothed while giving birth.

In some cases, the provider doesn't speak the local language.

Female providers may not be available when wanted.

Brain Drain

One of the key factors hampering progress is an inability to retain skilled workers in the regions that have the highest maternal mortality rates.

"Brain drain"—the migration of skilled practitioners to better-paying jobs in developed countries, or in the capitals of the country—coupled with HIV-related deaths among the professional classes is exacerbating an already dire health-care situation in much of sub-Saharan Africa.

In Malawi, HIV-related death is the leading cause of health provider loss—particularly among nurses and midwives.

BENEFITS OF ACTION

Skilled care during childbirth can lead to better health for both mother and newborn and prevent death and disability, which contributes to reducing poverty.

Skilled birth personnel can also play a decisive role in preventing the 47,000 annual deaths from complications due to unsafe abortions. They play a critical role in newborn care and in averting the death of newborns, as well as in detecting HIV incidence in pregnant and non-pregnant women.

Midwives help address critical family planning needs in communities not only as service providers but also as counsellors who are trusted members in societies.

In countries as diverse as Cuba, China, Jordan, Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Tunisia, investments in training, recruiting and retaining midwives, as well as in emergency obstetric care, have significantly reduced the number of maternal deaths.

The returns on investment in skilled birth attendants with midwifery skills are big. When empowered and authorized with all essential basic life-saving competencies, midwives can help avert up to 90 per cent of all maternal deaths.

WHAT MUST BE DONE?

The lives and health of millions of women and children would be saved each year if the donor community and countries invested more in midwife training and retention.

High-level political commitment, both nationally and internationally, is required to address the problem of the shortfall in skilled birth attendants. Education of midwives and others with midwifery competencies must be fostered if there is to be a rapid expansion and scale-up of the number of midwives and quality of midwifery care.

However, training is not the only issue. Regulation, accreditation, proper delegation of authority and supportive supervision of midwives are equally important. So is ensuring that midwives have appropriate employment protection, remuneration, incentives and motivation.

It is estimated that the number of midwives globally will have to increase by 350,000 if the Millennium Development Target of reducing maternal deaths by two thirds by 2015 is to be met.

WHAT IS UNFPA DOING?

In addition to working with governments to ensure reproductive health for all, UNFPA supports training of health personnel in various aspects of maternal care, including life-saving skills for emergency cases. To further scale up efforts, UNFPA in 2008 launched a joint programme with the International Confederation of Midwives entitled "Investing in Midwives" currently covering over 30 countries. Among other things, this programme supports strengthening of midwifery schools, midwives' competencies and skills, strengthening midwifery associations to promote the profession and high level political advocacy to ensure suitable legislation in the field of midwifery.

For more information on UNFPA's work – please visit www.unfpa.org

LINKS:

State of the World's Midwifery Report 2011:
<http://www.stateoftheworldsmidwifery.org>

UNFPA: Safe Motherhood Resource Kit:
<http://www.unfpa.org/public/site/global/lang/en/pid/4390>

UNFPA: Ensuring Skilled Attendance at Births:
http://www.unfpa.org/mothers/skilled_att.html

¹ UNFPA. State of the World's Midwifery Report 2011.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Koblinsky M, Matthews Z, Hussein J, et. al. Going to scale with professional care. *Lancet* 2006; 368: 1377-1386.