

Guiding Principles for Maternal Health Policy Change

A Proactive Approach to Equity & Rights

The U.S. Maternal Health & Rights Initiative promotes the human rights of pregnant, birthing, and postpartum people in the United States. Harnessing the power of law, policy, and strategic advocacy, the Initiative seeks to improve access to safe and respectful maternal health care for all who need it, and to ensure that all people have an opportunity to attain the highest standard of maternal health possible for themselves. The Initiative seeks government accountability for discrimination and inequalities in U.S. maternal health, and it provides advocates, lawmakers, and leaders with human rights-based advocacy tools that they can use to catalyze policy change.

The U.S. Maternal Health & Rights Initiative is rooted in the human rights framework and guided by the following core principles:

Maternal health is a matter of human rights.

Sexual and reproductive rights are fundamental human rights. These rights must be reflected in both law and practice, because all pregnant and birthing people have the right to safe and respectful maternal health care, free from discrimination, coercion, and violence. To align with international human rights standards, maternal health care must be *available*, physically, economically, and culturally *accessible*, medically and ethically *acceptable*, and of good *quality*.

Governments have a duty to protect, respect, and fulfill human rights related to maternal health.

Preventable maternal health harms—including death, morbidity, disrespect, and abuse—are recognized human rights violations that governments are obligated to address. Legal standards and formal policies that promote government accountability, transparency, and inclusive stakeholder participation at the local, state, and federal level must be proactively implemented and upheld.

Racial disparities in maternal health are indicators of racial inequality.

Racial disparities in maternal health outcomes reflect the ongoing, systemic devaluation of Black, brown, and indigenous women's lives. Eliminating the disproportionate risks that marginalized people face while forming their families is an essential component of a broader struggle for racial justice. Because structural, institutional, and interpersonal racism constrain the lives and choices of women of color, new policies that advance both reproductive freedom and racial justice are necessary to alleviate the long-term impact of racism on maternal health outcomes.

Access to health care is essential to improving maternal health.

Access to appropriate maternal health care protects health and saves lives. Expanding meaningful access to affordable, comprehensive, culturally appropriate, high quality, evidence-based health care for women and pregnant people, wherever they live, throughout their lives, is essential to achieving optimal maternal health in the United States.

Gender discrimination contributes to negative maternal health outcomes.

Maternal health has historically been viewed as an issue that only impacts women, and health services that only women need have long been neglected. Additionally, not all people who become pregnant and give birth are women, and trans and gender-diverse people are also harmed by gender discrimination that deprioritizes, stigmatizes, and denies their health care needs. Consequently, public policies to improve maternal health must address legacies of sex and gender discrimination, with the aim of ensuring substantive equality and better outcomes for all.

Improving maternal health requires systemic changes within and beyond health care systems.

Pregnant and birthing people may experience violations of their human rights on the basis of multiple, often overlapping identities, as well as real or perceived characteristics, including gender, race, ethnicity, disability, health status, class, sexual orientation, age, immigration status, and geographic location. To improve access to the social, economic, and political conditions that support healthy pregnancy outcomes, proposed policy changes must challenge culturally and legally constructed inequalities that advantage certain groups, while harming others. New policy proposals must address both the current state of maternal health, and the role that previous policies have played in shaping unequal conditions in housing, employment, health care, and other social determinants of health.

Movements for change are most impactful when affected communities lead.

Efforts to change policy must center the experiences and leadership of people directly impacted by poor maternal health outcomes and related violations of their human rights. At the same time, the work of eliminating poor outcomes, disparities, and human rights abuses in the field of maternal health belongs to everyone. Decision makers must engage community leaders in authentic collaborations, and policy advocacy must respond to the needs identified and prioritized by the most severely affected individuals and communities.

Guided by these core principles, the U.S. Maternal Health and Rights Initiative identifies legal and policy opportunities to advance the health and rights of women and pregnant people.

The Initiative leverages these strategic opportunities by (1) promoting policies that support maternal health, within and beyond the health care system, (2) defending against retrogressive measures that undermine the maternal health of pregnant and birthing people, and (3) respecting the knowledge and ideas generated by those on the margins of maternal health, especially Black women, their organizations, their scholarship, and their communities. Working in partnership with organizations and communities, the Initiative provides human rights-based policy resources and technical assistance to advocates seeking action on maternal health at the local, state, and federal level.