

International Initiative on Maternal Mortality and Human Rights

Call to global leaders on maternal health as a human right

Of all the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Goal 5 – improving maternal health – has made the least progress. More than 500,000 women die each year from complications of pregnancy or childbirth; 99% of these deaths occur in the developing world, with rural and poor women and women in conflict zones at greatest risk. Even nations with low aggregate maternal death rates show huge disparities, suggesting discrimination against low-income and marginalized groups. In spite of the goals established in 2000, the rate of women dying in pregnancy and childbirth declined less than 1% per year from 1990 to 2005, whereas an annual decline of at least 5.5% is needed to meet Goal 5.

The majority of maternal deaths are preventable. In wealthier countries, and some poorer countries that have invested in basic health care, almost all women give birth with a doctor, nurse or midwife in attendance and have access to lifesaving care in case of complications. But despite this progress, only 57% of births in developing countries – and a mere 35% in the least developed countries – are attended by a skilled health worker. A massive shortage of health workers undermines this basic requirement of reducing maternal mortality.

Maternal mortality is a matter of human rights. Preventable maternal deaths are caused by the deprivation of basic rights of women. Failure to provide available, accessible, acceptable and quality health care, including emergency obstetric care, for women during pregnancy and childbirth is a violation of women's rights to life, health, equality and non-discrimination. Respect and protection of women's rights to information and decision-making in reproductive health, to freedom from gender-based discrimination and violence, and to participation in planning and implementing health policies are essential to make pregnancy and delivery safer for women.

A **human rights** approach can lead to more effective programs and policies to guarantee maternal health.

focus
on 5!

Call to Governments and Donors

RESPECT, PROTECT AND FULFILL WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Increase... Political Commitment

- Develop national action plans for the reduction of maternal mortality that adopt a human rights approach supported by strong institutions, funding and accountability mechanisms.
- Ensure special attention to marginalized groups in health system strategies.
- Guarantee meaningful participation of women and communities in the design, development, implementation and monitoring of programs and policies to combat maternal deaths.
- Develop innovative strategies to rapidly increase access to skilled health workers for emergency obstetric care and comprehensive reproductive health services, including expansion of responsibilities (and corresponding enhanced compensation) and greatly increased numbers of nurses, midwives and non-physician clinicians.

Increase... Maternal Health-targeted Funds

- At the global level, increase funds for maternal and newborn health by \$US 5 billion annually by 2010 and by an additional US \$8 billion annually by 2015.
- At the national level, devote the maximum available resources, distributed equitably, to maternal and newborn health to reduce maternal death and disability.
- At the national level, and supported by significant and sufficient new external resources, fully fund comprehensive national health workforce strategies, including an increase in the number of trained birth attendants with basic obstetric skills in health facilities.
- At the national level, invest in health systems development and adequate health facilities that offer quality maternal and reproductive health care.

Strengthen... Maternal Health Programs

- Ensure that maternal and reproductive health information and services are sensitive to and respectful of women, especially poor and marginalized women.
- Ensure that all women have access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information and services.

Develop... Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms for Maternal Health

- Develop monitoring and accountability mechanisms that can guide efforts to improve existing policies and programs to combat maternal mortality, including health audits that look beyond simple clinical reasons and address the wider socio-economic, political and cultural barriers to maternal health, and fair access to justice for women.
- Promote national and local systems to ensure appropriate use of ear-marked funds.

The International Initiative on Maternal Mortality and Human Rights (IIMMHR) is the first civil society human rights effort aimed at reducing maternal mortality. We seek to ensure that the policies and practices of key stakeholders successfully address maternal mortality as a human rights issue.

Steering Committee:

- Averting Maternal Death and Disability Program, Columbia University
- CARE
- Center for Justice and International Law
- Center for Reproductive Rights
- Equinet, the Regional Network on Equity in Health in Southern Africa
- Family Care International
- Health Equity Group
- Human Rights Centre, University of Essex
- International Budget Project
- The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation
- Likhaan
- Physicians for Human Rights
- Sahayog

For more information, contact Morgan Stoffregen at mstoffregen@reporights.org

A Human Rights Imperative

MDG 5 is achievable... if we put women's human rights at the center of the equation.

“It is time to recognize that avoidable maternal mortality is a human rights problem on a massive scale.”

— Paul Hunt, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health