



ADVOCACY APPROACHES TO PROMOTE MIDWIVES AND THE PROFESSION OF MIDWIFERY

Brief

Tamara Windau-Melmer, White Ribbon Alliance

Photo credit: White Ribbon Alliance

Midwives play a crucial role in saving the lives of mothers and newborns. However, in many low-resource countries, women and babies are dying needlessly because of a severe shortage in qualified midwives. Estimated to be 350,000 worldwide,¹ the shortage is made worse by poor working conditions in ill-equipped facilities, low salaries, and the lack of supervision and opportunity for career advancement, especially in rural areas. This situation has led numerous midwives—already overburdened by heavy workloads—to seek better opportunities in cities and other countries, leaving many women and newborns without adequate maternity care.

Compounding the problem is a lack of support and respect among the community for midwifery or midwives—often stemming from common misconceptions and misunderstandings.

With support from USAID-funded Health Policy Project (HPP), the White Ribbon Alliance (WRA) is striving to **promote midwifery and improve working conditions** by

- Influencing policymakers
- Involving the media
- Engaging youth
- Mobilizing the community
- Strengthening the capacity of midwives as advocates at the global, national, and local levels

The following examples demonstrate how the above approaches can lead to a more supportive environment for midwives and ultimately better maternity care and birth outcomes.

Where I am working at the moment, I can say it is bad because I am one of only ten midwives. We work day and night—not only in maternity, but in general wards too. We are trying our best just to give life to the mothers and babies—but the care we are giving is compromised. Because there are so few midwives, there are times when there is only one midwife to care for six to seven women who are all in labor at the same time.

Eness Banda, Nurse Midwife from Malawi

We know what's needed. More midwives means more lives saved. If births were routinely attended by midwives or health workers with midwifery skills, with the right equipment and the right support, the lives of 1.3 million newborn babies and 350,000 mothers would be saved every year. The world needs more midwives and more health workers with midwifery skills in the right places, at the right time, with the right education, the right support, and the right pay.

The *Midwives Save Lives* petition, a joint effort by the WRA, International Confederation of Midwives (ICM), and Save the Children, was signed by more than 5,000 midwives from 80 countries and was delivered to world leaders, including UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, at the GA.

Influencing Policymakers

The deployment of midwives has been identified by global maternal health leaders as the most strategic intervention to achieve the United Nations' Millennium Development Goal 5 (through the provision of prenatal and delivery care). However, advocacy at the policy level is still insufficient to draw attention to the important work of midwives and the improvements needed within the profession of midwifery. The WRA is working at both national and global levels to advocate for investments in midwives by (1) raising policymakers' awareness and understanding of the value of midwives and what they need to perform their job well and (2) collaborating with policymakers to ensure they allocate the necessary resources to promote and improve midwifery.

Advocates need to inform policymakers of the priority issues needing their attention and the steps necessary to improve midwifery. In its national campaign to promote midwives, the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood in Tanzania (WRATZ) used this approach by reaching out to Members of Parliament (MPs) and establishing the Parliamentarians Group for Safe Motherhood (PGSM). WRATZ organized and facilitated dialogue between the PGSM and midwifery stakeholders to discuss the challenges midwives face and explore potential solutions. As a result, MPs now have a better understanding of midwifery in Tanzania, are advocating for midwives during Parliamentary sessions, and are promoting accountability at the national level.

As part of its national campaign to promote midwives, the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood in Malawi (WRASM-Malawi) is working with the Ministry of Health (MOH) to make improving the conditions of professional midwifery a policy priority during planning and budgeting. The goal is for the MOH and professional bodies to take steps to improve client-provider interaction and the provision of respectful maternity care. WRASM-Malawi's advocacy efforts have led to a commitment by the MOH's Principal Secretary to collaborate with WRASM-Malawi in reaching its campaign objectives. The Principal Secretary specifically promised that all WRASM-Malawi recommendations—including those related to midwives' additional qualifications, direct-entry midwifery education, pay, and career path—will be discussed in the next ministry meeting. He also indicated



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that the designation of the nursing directorate, as well as the colleges where midwives are trained, will reflect both nursing and midwifery.

In collaboration with other organizations, the WRA Global Secretariat is putting pressure on world leaders to take action for midwives. The WRA jointly organized the Health Workers Count campaign, which called for 3.5 million more health workers—including 350,000 midwives and 1 million community health workers—as well as for better working conditions and support. In collaboration with 300 participating organizations, more than 1 million people worldwide have shown support to the campaign.

The WRA is also working with the Frontline Health Workers Coalition, whose mission is to urge the United States (U.S.) to invest in frontline health workers. The coalition is urging the U.S. government to create concrete targets and timetables to support and train 250,000 new health workers and improve the capacity and impact of existing health workers. WRA and the coalition held an event at the United Nations General Assembly (GA) in collaboration with the Secretary General's Office. In addition, the President of the WRA spoke at a U.S.

Congressional Briefing organized by the coalition to illustrate how investment in midwifery can save lives and improve the health of women and newborns and how the US can help expand access to midwifery, both domestically and globally.²

We are advocating for women to come and deliver in the health facilities. They are indeed coming to us but are finding few health workers, which is a challenge and compromises quality of care. Partners and nongovernmental organizations should support governments to make the conditions of the midwife very conducive. Midwives are prepared to work, but they need to be supported.

Fannie Kachale, Deputy Director
Reproductive Health Unit Ministry of Health
Malawi

Involving the Media

Some negative individual cases involving midwives have been sensationalized in the media. These stories can influence both the general public's and policymakers' perception of midwives and can result in a poor opinion of their work and the profession. WRA is working with the media to (1) focus on positive stories and promote the vital work of midwives in saving women and newborns and (2) clear up any misunderstandings and misconceptions the public may have regarding midwifery.

Both WRATZ's and WRASM-Malawi's media strategy, which engages midwives as mothers and advocates, is a core tactic in their national campaigns to improve the public's perceptions of midwives. For example, WRATZ developed a short film and public service announcement (PSA) in English and Swahili, titled *What I Want Is Simple*. The film was aired on ITV, a media house viewed by 85 percent of Tanzanians, and the PSA was played on Radio One, which is heard by 35 percent of Tanzanians at a time.³ *What I Want Is Simple* features women describing the conditions of a health facility in which they wish to deliver their children. These women are also midwives; they understand what mothers want because their requests illustrate the environment they want and need in order to perform their job well. Midwives and mothers are one in the same—they all want the best birth experience and outcome possible (to view the film, go to <http://bit.ly/13vEQHW>).

WRASM-Malawi has also developed a film, which features interviews with midwives and MOH policymakers on the current situation in Malawi and what is needed to improve working conditions and birth outcomes (to view the film, go to <http://bit.ly/1bEDBRm>). In addition, WRASM-Malawi is engaging the media in its efforts; for example, the alliance invited the media to its campaign launch, where it was underscored that the media needs to highlight the commendable work of midwives, give midwives and the midwifery profession due recognition, and amplify the community voice in the campaign. The alliance is also planning to hold a contest for journalists to increase the media's involvement.

WRA is reaching a wide audience and asking the public to take action to promote midwives—

- The WRA Global Secretariat has called for all WRA's 18,000+ members in 152 countries via social media to mobilize and focus on the need to improve the numbers, distribution, working conditions, and competencies of midwives in the lead-up to the International Day of the Midwife (IDM).
- WRA National Alliances have published op-eds in major news outlets in their country on IDM.

Engaging Youth

Although communities desperately need more midwives, the realities of midwives' working conditions and negative public perceptions inadvertently discourage young men and women from pursuing a career in midwifery. In response, WRA has been engaging youth in several ways to promote the profession.

For example, in Tanzania, WRATZ leveraged additional support from the Merck and Bertarelli Foundations to promote a midwife career among secondary school students in three regions. This effort also involved engaging their parents, policymakers, and the community at large. Through advocacy meetings and presentations, 16,625 students at 22 secondary schools were reached. Students' awareness and understanding of midwifery, as well as their perception of midwifery as an attractive career path, increased dramatically. The percentage of students indicating an interest in midwifery increased from 7 percent at the start of the campaign to 83 percent at its end.



Photo credit: White Ribbon Alliance

White Ribbon Clubs were also established in schools to provide students a place to discuss midwifery and receive additional information on the profession. WRATZ, with the Tanzania Midwives Association, continue to visit these clubs to follow up on activities, provide additional materials, and share experiences and address challenges together. Club members are advocating to district authorities to invest in laboratories and science teachers so students can study science and prepare to pursue a career in midwifery.

Mobilizing the Community

Many people are simply unaware of how important midwives are in securing positive maternal outcomes and of the vast improvements needed to enable midwives to perform their jobs well. By mobilizing the community through public hearings and community dialogue, WRA is working to (1) raise awareness of the benefits of midwifery, (2) promote midwives, and (3) devise community solutions to improve their working conditions.

Since WRATZ started this campaign, there has been an increase in the numbers of students enrolling to study nursing midwifery country-wide. I spoke with teachers at the Muhimbili School of Nursing Midwifery; they indicated a tremendous increase—from 25 to 60 students. The school had to alter its structure and schedule to accommodate so many students; they divided the students into morning and evening sessions.

Rose Mlay, WRATZ National Coordinator

WRASM-Malawi gathered members of the community to better understand their perspectives on midwifery and to provide contextual analysis on the status of midwifery in Malawi. Through these dialogues, WRASM-Malawi engaged alliance members and other key stakeholders as active partners in the advocacy strategy planning process. The dialogues focused on the following key areas:

- Community's general perception of midwives; for example, who is a midwife?
- Quality of service delivery by midwives
- Availability and performance of midwives
- Challenges faced by midwives in performing their duties
- Midwifery as a career for youth (student and parent views)
- Use of and access to midwifery services
- Community involvement in the management of health services (specific to midwifery)

WRASM-Malawi will strengthen community voices...so that the community calls for better care and services...until the government allocates more resources...to ensure more midwives working in improved conditions...to enable midwives to provide high-quality care...so pregnant women are treated with respect and mothers lives are saved.

WRASM-Malawi then used a community dialogue to introduce and launch its campaign, further encouraging its members and stakeholders to take ownership of implementing the campaign.

WRATZ also held several public hearings and community dialogues to increase understanding of midwifery and encourage various groups to get involved.

For example, WRATZ held

- Dialogues between the PGSM and religious leaders to encourage their involvement in improving the public's perception of midwives.
- Public hearings with the community—especially parents—and district and regional authorities to increase understanding of midwifery and the need to promote midwifery as a career among secondary school youth. Influential leaders, including district commissioners, executive directors, and councils, promised to keep campaigning for the issue in their meetings in and outside the region.

Strengthening the Capacity of Midwives as Advocates

At the core of the movement to promote midwives and the profession of midwifery are midwives themselves. Midwives must view themselves as change-makers in their communities and demand change to foster improvement. WRA, in collaboration with other organizations, is strengthening the capacity of midwives to advocate for themselves and their profession. By increasing their knowledge and advocacy skills, midwives can lead the way for positive change in maternity care.

With the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM), and the American College of Nurse Midwives (ACNM), WRA is developing *Midwifery Voices*, a global collection of dynamic first person narratives to highlight the reality of midwives and barriers they face in providing high-quality, respectful care. From an aspiring student of midwifery, to a young midwife in training, to a midwifery teacher or practicing midwife in different parts of the world, *Midwifery Voices* creates a global network of midwives and positions them as agents for change in their profession. WRA has collected stories from Malawi, Tanzania, and Rwanda and will collect more stories from additional countries. Some of the stories were used by the Rwandan Association of Midwives, which also developed an advocacy plan for maternity care improvements at its International Day of the Midwife event. Attended by more than 150 midwives, student midwives, and midwifery supporters from all over the country, the association featured midwives voicing their

stories and the Minister of State Health, who reiterated the need for more midwives to continue to provide high-quality services and care.

WRA, in collaboration with the ICM, is conducting training to promote regional sharing and build capacity at the national level to improve midwives' advocacy skills. Through hands-on training, participating midwives and midwifery regulators and educators from across Africa and Latin America are enhancing their ability to advocate for (1) specific actions to improve the numbers, distribution, working conditions, and competency of midwives in their countries and (2) the adoption, adaption, and utilization of global ICM midwifery standards and tools. In addition, the WRA and ICM are strengthening the advocacy capacity of professional associations of midwives by developing concrete plans to bolster midwifery activities at the regional, sub-regional, and country levels in 2013 and beyond (per the example of the Rwandan Association of Midwives above). Related to these efforts, WRA conducted targeted advocacy training for the global teams of the ICM and member associations to advocate for governments to adapt and adopt the global midwifery standards.

With support from the UNFPA, the WRA developed *Stories of Midwives* to mobilize the global community to celebrate midwives and the profession of midwifery. Launched at the ICM Triennial Congress, the *Stories of Midwives* film initiated the presentation of the *State of the World's Midwifery Report* and was shared as an advocacy tool for midwifery partner organizations working to elevate the status of midwives in their countries. To view the film, go to <http://bit.ly/1bp8FU1>.

Conclusion

The WRA envisions a world with a sufficient number of health workers, particularly midwives, who are better supported to provide high-quality maternity care for all women and their newborns. WRA's multi-level, multi-pronged advocacy approach to promote midwives and the profession of midwifery is achieving the desired results. As evident by the examples presented above, change is happening.

Continued and additional advocacy efforts are needed to further position midwifery as a central component of integrated maternal and newborn health systems.

Midwives are essential healthcare professionals for the provision and seamless coordination of community and facility-based maternity care.

Sometimes midwives have five women in labor. This affects the type of care that midwives provide. We still need to train more midwives here in Rwanda because they are not enough.

Rwandan Midwife

The following is a short excerpt from *Stories of Midwives* submitted by the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood in Tanzania (WRATZ) about Agnes Mwita, a 44-year-old midwife who works in rural Tanzania and is making a difference and saving the lives of women and newborns:

I graduated as a nurse-midwife from Kilimatiinde School of Nursing in 1985 and worked at Tabora Regional Hospital from 1986 to 1992. My husband died after this, which was very difficult for my children and me. However, I realized I needed to focus on improving our lives. I traveled to my family's rural farm outside of Dar es Salaam and saw a woman giving birth with no help—and so I helped her. This community needed a midwife! With this thought in my mind, I visited the Private Nurse-Midwives Association of Tanzania, and with their help, I founded the St. Magdalene Maternity Home, where I conduct 10–12 deliveries per month. I think if I was not a midwife here, lives could have been lost.

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Endnotes

¹ United Nations Population Fund, et al. 2011. *The State of the World's Midwifery 2011: Delivering Health, Saving Lives*. Available at: <http://bit.ly/koU2QT>.

² Members of the U.S. Congress have introduced the following resolutions and bills, which are currently awaiting vote: (1) Resolution H Res 135 would call for a U.S. government-wide, global health workforce strengthening strategy focused on frontline workers like midwives; (2) Bill HR 2286 would enable designation of a maternity care shortage domestically so that critical workforce issues can be addressed; and (3) another measure (S 425, HR 896) would aim to improve care for moms and babies domestically by investing in inter-professional collaboratives and updating quality measures used by Medicaid.

³ According to ITV statistics, 37,700,000 out of 42,000,000 people in Tanzania tune into the television station (85% of Tanzanians). And according to Radio One, it has a listening audience of 14,700,000 people out of the 42,000,000 people in Tanzania (35% of Tanzanians).

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