

March 2014

policy



# HEALTH POLICY PROJECT

Photo by: Makis

## Maternal Health

### Overview

Each year, nearly half a million women worldwide die as a result of complications in pregnancy and childbirth. Almost all (99%) of these deaths occur in developing countries, where pregnancy-related complications remain a leading cause of death for women in their reproductive years. Yet, most of these deaths are avoidable.

The health interventions needed to prevent or manage complications are relatively straightforward and often inexpensive. Over half (60 percent) of maternal deaths could be averted if all pregnant women in developing countries had access to high-quality antenatal care and basic, but well-equipped, health facilities staffed by competent midwives. Addressing unmet need for family planning also has the potential to drastically reduce maternal mortality.

Despite this, progress in achieving maternal health targets has been slow, with 90 percent of countries not on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goal for maternal health (MDG 5). Policy work can help accelerate gains in maternal health by strengthening health systems and improving access to high-quality maternal health services before, during, and after birth.

### What We Do

Sound policies and strong health systems are vital to improving maternal health. The Health Policy Project (HPP) is working in partnership with the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood (WRA) and host-country partners to

- Advocate for policies that promote improved maternal health and safe motherhood
- Raise awareness and build commitment to maternal health among leaders and decisionmakers
- Address barriers to access posed by gender and poverty
- Expand access to family planning
- Foster the integration of maternal health and family planning and reproductive health
- Introduce social accountability mechanisms to enable communities to hold governments and providers accountable for the quality and availability of maternal health services

- Promote the provision of respectful maternity care
- Improve the status and working conditions of midwives

## Promoting Respectful Maternity Care

While many interventions aim to improve access to skilled birth care, less attention has been focused on the quality of such care. Women often encounter widespread disrespect and abuse in facility-based maternity care. HPP is partnering with WRA to promote respectful maternity care for all women during pregnancy, childbirth, and in the time after birth.

## Advocating to Improve Midwives' Status and Working Conditions

The availability of skilled midwives is vital to improving maternal health, but midwives are often under-valued and struggle to overcome barriers posed by high patient loads and insufficient medical supplies. In partnership with WRA, HPP supports country-led advocacy campaigns to demonstrate the value of and increase support for midwives.

## Integrating Gender in the Scale-Up of Maternal Health and Related Programs

Multiple studies have shown that gender factors, such as women's status and empowerment (i.e., in education, employment, intimate partner relationships, and reproductive health), are linked with women's capacity to access and use maternal health services, a critical component of maternal health (Gill et al., 2011). HPP identifies and analyzes whether systematic attention to gender factors during the planning and process of scaling up family planning and maternal, neonatal, and child health programs would in fact achieve better programmatic outcomes (e.g., wider availability of health services and health interventions institutionalized and sustained) and health outcomes (e.g., increased contraceptive prevalence rate and decreased maternal mortality rate) among their clients.

## Reducing Maternal Mortality through Improved Family Planning

Use of family planning services not only prevents unintended pregnancy, it can also protect the lives of many women who face increased health risks when giving birth at a young age. HPP programs help integrate family planning and reproductive health services into existing health programs that focus on reducing maternal deaths during childbirth. We identify barriers that prevent women's access to these services and work with partners to develop guidelines to help service providers effectively deliver crucial family planning services that help protect the lives of women and infants.

## How to Work with Us

For over 40 years, Futures Group has managed large and complex international health and development projects for a range of major development players, achieving significant results on the ground in more than 100 countries. Host-country partners with interest in receiving project assistance should contact their USAID Mission. All Missions may participate through field support. For information on how to work with the Health Policy Project please contact:

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The Health Policy Project is a five-year cooperative agreement funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development under Agreement No. AID-OAA-A-10-00067, beginning September 30, 2010. It is implemented by Futures Group, in collaboration with CEDPA (part of Plan International USA), Futures Institute, Partners in Population and Development, Africa Regional Office (PPD ARO), Population Reference Bureau (PRB), RTI International, and the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood (WRA).

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