

# Midwives Provide Lifesaving Care Globally

By Margaret Matthews

When you hear the word “childbirth”, what comes to mind?

Does the painful process of delivering a baby pop into your head? What other details are there? A clean room at a beautiful hospital, with nurses, a doctor telling the mother when to push and the beautiful baby crying as he or she is welcomed into the world? This is the mental image we have the luxury of knowing is possible. The modern hospital, nurses and doctors are available to us because we live in a developed country, with access to western medicine.

Developing countries, on the other hand, share three common characteristics: low income, low literacy rate and high infant and mother mortality.

- 50 percent of the world’s population lives on less than \$2.50 a day.
- 774 million people can’t read or write.
- Countries like Mali in Western Africa see 102 deaths for every 1,000 live births compared to Norway with 2 deaths for every 1,000.

This makes it no surprise then that developing countries have little to no access to medical professionals, little to no money to pay for the medical services and little to no opportunity for education which would change these trends.

For example, in Guatemala, maternal mortality is estimated between 88 and 153 deaths per 100,000 live births. Among indigenous Mayan women this figure is likely higher. Infant mortality is approximately 40 per 1,000 live births. About 75% of Guatemala’s overall population lives in poverty; 93% of the indigenous population is poor. What is the best way to provide maternal and child care under such difficult conditions?

This is where alternative forms of health care can come into play. According to the World Health Organization, the person best equipped to provide community-based, technologically appropriate and cost—effective care to women during their reproductive lives are midwives who live in local communities. Midwife-based maternity care is an ancient practice that has been essential to the survival of mothers and children all over the world. In countries like Guatemala where majority of the population lives in poverty, an overwhelming 80 percent of women seek assistance from midwives. Traditionally, these midwives assisted pregnant women with preparations for birth, stayed with them during the process and even provided care for the mother and infant afterward.

Yet, instead of empowering and supporting traditional midwives by providing comprehensive and culturally appropriate training, essential equipment, and practical support, Guatemalan health officials seek to exclude midwives from the formal health system in an attempt to centralize medical services within hospitals.

This is very short-sighted because these midwives could easily be trained in basic biomedical techniques and given sterile equipment to use at limited cost. Since the majority of births are uncomplicated, it makes more sense to empower existing providers who would be able to combine traditional and biomedical techniques to provide both physical and emotional care and support to poor mothers, many of whom live too far from medical services to be able to use them.

The extension of centralized hospital care for birth is beyond the financial abilities of many developing nations. That is why the utilization of existing midwives is so important. These women are already respected in their communities and have the ability to provide care with proper training. Empowering them would help these countries to build a healthy populations that could continue to strive toward economic independence.

According to UNICEF, the most common causes of maternal death are hemorrhaging, infection, obstructed labor and unsafe abortion. In order to ensure the success of midwives and the safety of mothers and children, proper training and adequate resources need to become more easily accessible to communities around the world. Midwives need a clean and safe space to work, as well as sterile equipment to prevent the spread of illness.

How can this be done?

Non-profit organizations already attempt to educate women on proper midwifery techniques through short classes and provide basic equipment, but this initiative needs to be expanded and promoted. Stable countries around the world need to acknowledge that the economic and civil distress experienced by developing countries starts from the very beginning. If we can help keep mothers and children alive through pregnancy and childbirth, an increasing population can then begin to build a more stable nation.

If we honestly believe that every life is important, and that life begins in the womb, the moral thing to do would be to act.

1. Raise awareness at your school, church or community center on how many women around the world die every day due to a natural life event, how many baby boys and girls struggle to survive after birth because of the lack of basic medical attention, and the global importance of training more midwives in every country.
2. Write to your congressman or congresswoman, asking them to bring this issue to the forefront. Raise money at your local church or school and donate it to organizations like [Maya Midwifery International](#), which focuses on

providing competency-based programs to help train midwives in indigenous populations within Guatemala.

Every single attempt to raise awareness as well as increase the amount and success of midwives means the difference between life and death for thousands of mothers and infants around the world.

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