



# CASE STUDY

## FROM AID TO IMPACT

# GENDER DISCRIMINATION: Dire Consequences for Maternal Health

- If a woman cannot leave her home by herself, how can she be sure that she gets the medical care and information she needs during her pregnancy?
- If by custom a woman is always the last person to eat in her household, how can she be sure to get adequate nutrition for her and her growing baby?
- If a woman is blamed for giving birth to girls, how can she ensure proper care and support for herself and her daughters?

CARE understands that access to healthcare is not the only determining factor when it comes to maternal health. Social customs, beliefs and attitudes about men's and women's traditional roles and responsibilities also play a key role in health outcomes. In some parts of the world the very fact that a woman is pregnant is stigmatized. CARE is working within communities to make sure women's and girls' rights and health are valued.

### **Success in India: Innovative Approaches Help Shift Attitudes and Improve Maternal Health**

*"I find that when I talk to the men, they begin to take a greater interest in their wives' pregnancies. Sometimes they stop me on the road to ask, 'My wife is pregnant. What should I do?'"* – Comment from a female government village health worker after CARE training

In Uttar Pradesh, India, CARE implemented a program called the Inner Spaces Outer Faces Initiative (ISOFI) that addressed the cultural barriers at the root of poor maternal health. In partnership with the community, CARE identified key gender barriers that were negatively affecting maternal health including mobility restrictions, eating customs, domestic violence and son preference.

### **Maternal Health Outcomes Improved as Social Attitudes Changed**

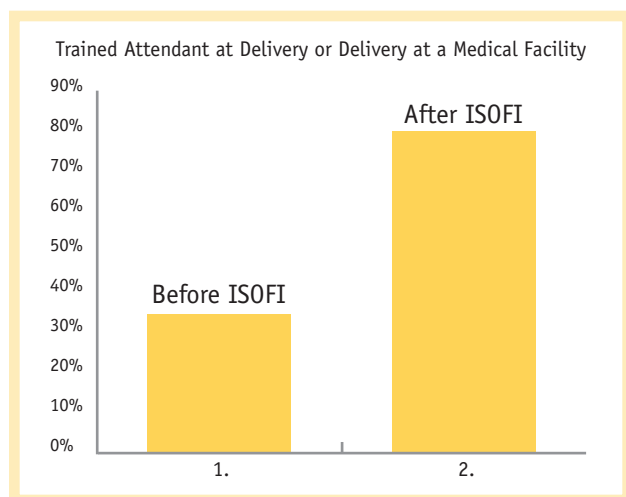
CARE staff was challenged to explore their own personal beliefs and values. As trusted members of their own communities, staff learned to facilitate discussions in a safe environment by:

- Introducing new ways of thinking about men's roles as husbands and fathers through flash cards and simple games.
- Organizing meetings for couples and new parents where men and women gathered together in public to discuss topics such as how the sex of a baby is determined, why women eat last, or the value of joint parenting. These meetings reinforced the ideas that it is normal for women to be seen in public, and that men have an equally important role in caring for their children.
- Addressing sensitive topics such as domestic violence and women's mobility. Men's and women's group participants heard from their peers who had more egalitarian views, in effect using peer influence to reinforce more gender equitable attitudes.

## Strengthening Families

With the help of CARE, maternal health in Uttar Pradesh improved.

- More women are receiving help from family members during pregnancy.
- More women are preparing themselves for childbirth with the help of their families.
- More women are delivering their babies with trained birth attendants.



## What Can We Do?

Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment is central to improving maternal health. With strong political will and adequate resources we can change the attitudes and institutions that limit women's ability to care for themselves and their children.

### We Must:

- Make long-term commitments to empower women and girls. Donors must be willing to support flexible and innovative programs that work to tackle the root causes of poor health, such as gender inequality.
- Support programs that explicitly involve men and boys and mobilize the larger community. Women's empowerment is not solely about women and girls. Engaging men and boys and mobilizing communities to take action are critical strategies to overcoming entrenched attitudes and achieving better maternal health outcomes.



## ISOFI – Men & Gender

CARE's local implementing partners and the government's village health workers facilitated discussions that allowed men to explore values and beliefs on issues of domestic violence and women's mobility. Raising these sensitive topics empowered men to make significant changes in their own behaviors, and carry the message to other men in the community.

**“My neighbor doesn't get along with his wife. I explain to him, ‘She's new in your house. Give her time. Treat her well. It shouldn't be that you eat and don't bother about her.’”**

**—Village Health and Sanitation Committee member**

Improving maternal health means addressing social and cultural barriers in communities. CARE is leading the way to help communities shift the cultural norms that devalue women and girls and limit men's role as caring husbands and fathers.

Through lasting, sustainable solutions CARE is helping more people see women as important, valued members of society. That means healthier women, children and families.



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