



Defending dignity.
Fighting poverty.

ISSUE BRIEF

FROM AID TO IMPACT

Mothers Matter: Healthy Mothers, Healthy Societies

CARE is at the forefront of a movement to safeguard women's health during pregnancy and childbirth. Along with partners across the globe, we are sharing the resources and knowledge that allow families to grow and thrive.

The campaign's goals are to:

- Create an emergency action plan to ensure universal access to lifesaving health care for mothers in the developing world.
- Increase investment in maternal health programs.
- Make maternal health a development priority.

Success in Peru:

Maternal Deaths Fell 50 Percent

"The mother is the pillar of the family unit. The family unit is the pillar of a society. When we save the life of a mother, we are actually saving a society." – Dr. Max Vega, director, Ayacucho Regional Hospital

In rural Ayacucho, Peru, CARE found that only one-third of women who needed obstetric services actually obtained them. Among women with complications who reached a health center or hospital, one in 60 did not survive. Our approach to this challenge was to work with community leaders, local women and health workers to understand and address the reasons for this high maternal death rate.

We found:

- Reluctance to seek care at a clinic or hospital because of language barriers, poor treatment and rules that didn't take cultural preferences into account.
- Barriers to high quality care, such as: inadequate training, disrespectful attitudes of hospital staff toward subordinates in rural clinics, poor coordination of care, lack of privacy and respect for clients and bureaucratic delays.

CARE strengthened the community's capacity to address maternal health risks by:

- Learning about and addressing the needs of rural women and health workers.
- Convening a broad spectrum of health workers to develop practical emergency obstetric protocols, and providing training and resources to implement them.
- Promoting culturally sensitive treatment and human rights.

Women's lives were saved, and CARE's approach inspired and informed national policy:

- A 50 percent reduction in maternal mortality in the project area.
- The percentage of women with obstetric complications being treated in health centers more than doubled, from 30 to 75 percent.

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- The Peruvian Minister of Health established new national clinical guidelines for obstetric emergencies based on those developed through CARE's project.

This CARE project shows that even very poor communities and stretched health systems can unite to save women's lives. When they do, women play a significant role in lifting their families and communities out of poverty. Worldwide, hundreds of thousands of women die from complications during pregnancy and childbirth each year, and millions more are left with life-altering disabilities. **In some countries, 1 out of every 7 women die in pregnancy or childbirth.** CARE's experience in Peru shows that it doesn't have to be that way.

Issue in Focus

Why are Women Dying?

Maternal death or injury can result from uncontrolled bleeding, infection, seizures, hypertensive disorders, birth obstruction or other complications. Most of these factors are preventable and, ultimately, they are closely linked to the low social status of women in poor countries. In addition, oppression, discrimination and certain cultural practices limit a woman's access to the information and resources necessary to effectively space births and plan her family. Finally, inadequate health systems cannot provide the high-quality, lifesaving care women need for safe, healthy childbirth.

Healthy Mothers are Essential to Poverty Reduction.

When a mother dies, her family breaks down. Her children are less likely to go to school, get immunized against diseases and eat well, and are up to 10 times more likely to die before their second birthday. When a mother is disabled by childbirth injuries, she is less likely to earn



an income, participate in her community and raise healthy children. Healthy mothers create healthy societies.

The Time to Act Is Now.

We know how to save the lives of women and children, but we need the political will and the resources to help us achieve our goal. The time to act is now. We can help women plan their families and survive pregnancy, and ensure that childbirth and the first few weeks of life are not a game of chance. We know what it takes for women to have safe pregnancies:

- Access to voluntary family planning information and services;
- Quality care by a doctor, midwife or nurse during pregnancy;
- Emergency obstetrical care when needed;
- Immediate post-partum care for the mother and newborn; and
- A strong and equitable health system that addresses the social and economic factors that influence women's access to and use of health services.

We don't have to wait for a medical breakthrough to save women's lives. We have the knowledge to prevent nearly all maternal deaths. We need the resources and political will to be successful. **It's time to pass comprehensive legislation that will enhance U.S. leadership in ending the senseless deaths of women and children.** Giving life should be a joyous – and safe – experience for all women.



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