

Midwives and community health

For thousands of years, since long before there were doctors or hospitals, midwives have been helping women stay healthy, helping babies into the world, and helping families grow. Ask a woman why she prefers the care of a midwife and she will tell you that midwives are knowledgeable, patient, and respectful of her traditions.



Why are midwives such important and valued health workers?

- Midwives trust in the safety of pregnancy and birth, and have confidence that women can work together to protect their own health.
- Midwives often live in the communities they serve, so the families they help know and trust them.
- Many midwives spend more time with the women they care for than a doctor or clinic worker would. This helps midwives to better understand women's needs, and to see danger signs.
- Most midwives are women. Many women feel more comfortable talking to a woman health worker.
- Midwives charge lower fees than most doctors or hospitals — valuing service to the community over the pursuit of money or power.
- In poor communities where there are few health services, midwives are often the only health workers.

For all these reasons, in most of the world midwives are the first and sometimes the only health workers women go to for help in birth or for any health problem. But midwives face a number of challenges in this important work.

Challenges

Perhaps the biggest struggle for midwives (and for all health workers) is fighting sickness and death in women and their babies. Every year, hundreds of thousands of women die in pregnancy and during labor. Millions more are injured or disabled. Most of these deaths and injuries happen to women who are poor — who do not have enough food, or safe homes, or adequate medical care.

Most of the midwives of the world live in poor communities, and many are themselves not paid a livable wage. The people of each community must show midwives how important their work is by supporting them in the ways that they can. Local governments would also be wise to invest in midwives. These governments rarely provide midwives with adequate education or supplies, yet they rely on midwives to care for the many women who have no access to other medical care.

Along with being underpaid, midwives may struggle to receive the respect they deserve for their work. Doctors and others too often dismiss the contributions of midwives. When midwives are not treated as valued health workers — part of a community of health care providers who all share the same goals — their ability to care for women is hindered. Midwives may actually be locked out of the health system when a woman who has a health emergency is not allowed to bring her midwife with her to the hospital.

I work in a restaurant 6 days a week, and then go home to care for my family. I'm tired all the time and my husband asks me to stop attending births.

But I continue because it is what I am good at, what I love, what I am called to do.

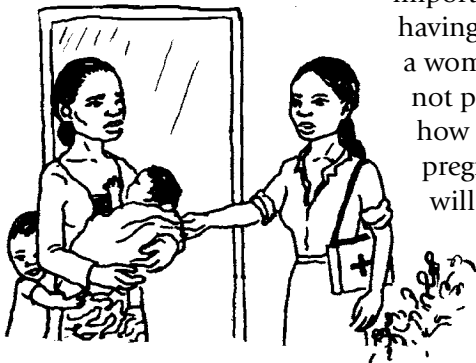


Traditional midwives (sometimes called TBAs) face particular problems. Many professional health workers, including professional midwives, see traditional midwives as incompetent or old-fashioned. These traditional midwives may be very knowledgeable about birth and skilled with plant medicines, gentle massage techniques, or other safe, effective practices. As more people leave their villages for cities, these midwives may be some of the only people preserving the knowledge and customs of their communities, and they may work for little or no pay. Like other midwives, they do their work because they love women and babies, because they want to contribute to their communities, or because they are spiritually called to.

How *A Book for Midwives* can help

Midwives need accurate information to help them protect the health and well-being of women, babies, and families. They need strategies to fight poverty and the unequal treatment of women, and for working together and with other health workers towards health for all. We wrote *A Book for Midwives* with these needs in mind. In this edition of *A Book for Midwives*, you will find:

- revised and updated information needed to care for women and their babies during pregnancy, labor, birth, and in the weeks following birth, because this is the primary work of most midwives.
- skills for protecting a woman's reproductive health throughout her life, because a woman's health needs are important whether or not she is having a baby, and because a woman's health when she is not pregnant affects how healthy and safe her pregnancies and births will be.



- safe, effective methods from both traditional midwifery and modern, Western-based medicine, because good health care in labor and birth uses the best from both Western medicine and the traditions of midwifery.
- discussion of the ways that poverty and the denial of women's needs affect women's health, and how midwives can work to improve these conditions, because changing these conditions can make a lasting improvement in health.
- suggestions for how midwives can and should work with each other, with other health workers, and with the larger community, because working together strengthens everyone's knowledge and makes action to improve women's health more effective.

My grandmother is a midwife. She uses plant medicines and massage to help pregnant women.



I went to school in the city to become a midwife myself, and I've been able to teach my grandmother some new ways to sterilize tools, watch for danger signs, and make birth safer.

But I'm still learning the old ways from her. So many of them still work better than the new ways.

The basics of midwifery care will never change.

Women and families will always need compassionate and respectful care before, during, and after birth. And because midwives always benefit from learning more, we hope that the expanded and updated information in this book will help midwives everywhere learn new and lifesaving skills, and apply those skills for the good of the women, babies, and families they serve.

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Words to midwives



To work for the health and well-being of women and babies — that is, to be a midwife — you must be willing to learn, to treat people with respect and compassion, and to work together with others to meet the health needs of the community.

Learning is lifelong

The first step on the path to becoming a midwife — or any kind of health worker — is learning from others. And even the most experienced midwives continue to learn and gain new skills throughout their whole lives.

Midwives learn from experience and from books and classes. Each way of learning is important. All midwives should find a balance between study and practice.

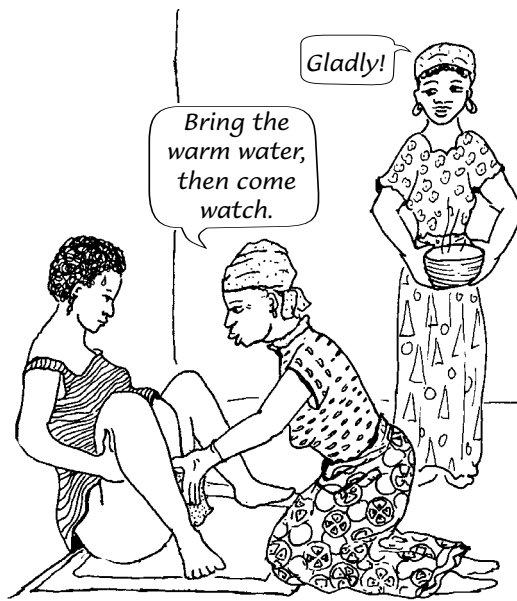
Books and study help midwives understand a broad range of information.

But practice is the only way to learn the skills needed to care for women and babies.



Experienced midwives continue to learn

There is always more to know about birth and about health. Every birth is different, medical information changes, and there are new skills to learn. So:



- **Watch** how other midwives, health workers, and doctors do things, and watch training videos.
- **Ask** the women and families you work with what they like and do not like about the care that you give.
- **Read** books or online materials. Keep helpful books with you so you can look up information you do not use regularly or remember. Use the Resources found on pages 503 to 506.
- **Learn** new skills. If you can get the training and tools to do new procedures safely, do not be afraid to learn. This will allow you to help more people and become a better midwife.

Midwives learn from teachers, books, other midwives and health workers, and from mothers and families. Mostly they learn safe ways to practice. But as any midwife gains more experience, she will discover that some of what she learned is not the safest or most effective way to care for women.

Midwives must be willing to change their ideas when they learn new ways of practicing so they are always giving the best care they can. Midwives must look honestly at their practices to be sure they are working well — whether they learned these practices from doctors, traditional healers, or anyone else.

Asking “why?”

Asking “why” is important because it helps you do more than just remember what you have been told or what you have read. When you know why, you can make decisions even when there is no person or book to tell you exactly what to do. You can also adapt a treatment or tool to be of use in a way that others may not use it. Finally, asking “why” is important for understanding the causes of problems — to treat problems effectively, and to prevent them from happening again.

Share what you know

Along with learning from books and teachers, midwives learn much of what they know from each other and from the families they care for. And midwives can improve health by sharing what they know with the community.

Share what you know with other health workers and midwives

Midwives can work together to help each other. If one midwife becomes sick or cannot work, another midwife can help the women she was caring for. Midwives can also learn from and teach each other. In some communities, midwives and other health workers share information with each other, talking honestly about their work. Some midwives come together to meet every few months, compare information, and share resources. At midwife meetings you can:

- **take turns telling stories about births you have attended.**

Be sure to share the difficult births and mistakes. Admitting mistakes is difficult, but it is a great gift when there is an opportunity to learn from them. Other midwives can explain what they would have done the same or differently. To protect the mother's privacy, do not share her name. Do not shame midwives who work differently.



- **ask other health workers to meet with your group.** For example, an herbalist could come talk about local plants that can help with sleep or fight infections. Or a midwives group could talk with nurses from a local maternity center about how midwives and nurses can work together.



- **share educational books (including this one!) and websites and apps with other midwives.** If no one has much money, perhaps a group of midwives can put their money together to buy a book to share.

- **practice helping women with different problems by acting them out**

(**role play**). For example, one person can pretend to be a pregnant woman who is not eating enough healthy food. Another person can pretend to be her midwife — listening and giving advice. Afterwards, each actor can explain how she felt, and the others in the group can offer suggestions for what they would do differently. Make sure everyone has a chance to play one of the roles.



- **make use of different midwives' skills.** If one midwife knows how to read, she can read aloud from books to the other midwives. A midwife who knows how to sterilize tools can teach the others in the group.

Share what you know with the community

As a midwife, you give advice, treat problems, even save lives. But the overall health of those around you is not in your hands alone. In part, this is because people decide for themselves how to eat, how to do their work, and what choices they make. By teaching and sharing information, midwives can help people to make their own choices more wisely. This is why your first job as a midwife is to teach.

Teaching can happen anywhere and anytime. During a checkup, when you explain to a woman why you are asking each question, you are teaching her. When you show a woman's husband why family planning is his responsibility too, you are teaching him. Even at the market, at a community gathering, or anytime you meet with others, you have the chance to teach.

Group prenatal care and other classes

You can hold meetings for pregnant women and families to teach about health in pregnancy, treating discomforts, preparing for birth, and caring for mothers after birth. People in your community might also like to learn about other topics, such as:

- how the body works
- how to choose and use family planning
- how to have a healthy diet when you have less money
- what to do when there is an emergency during birth

Teaching is a skill, and it takes practice. A good start is to listen. By listening you can find out what people already know and then help them build on that knowledge. Listening helps you learn from those you are teaching and also shows others the importance of listening to each other. In a group, people can help each other with problems.

Your ears are
2 of your most
important tools.



For example, if a group of women wants to learn about sexually transmitted infections (STIs), you can first ask each person to share what she knows about STIs. Women may know about STIs from books or classes, from talking to other women, or from having had infections themselves.

After people have shared their knowledge, find out what questions they have. People in the group may be able to answer each other's questions. You can probably add some important medical information and point out when people have incorrect beliefs too. By encouraging the group to talk, you find out what they really need to know — and help them understand how much knowledge they already have. A person who feels confident that she understands a problem is more able to work to solve it.

Show respect for the people you teach, and be sure that what you say is meaningful to their lives.

- **Sit in a circle with everyone on the same level.** This puts you in the same place as everyone else, and shows that you are not the only one with knowledge.
- **Be prepared.** Think about what you want to share before you start teaching.
- **Use many methods to teach.** People learn differently, and everyone learns better when the same information is presented in a variety of ways. After you talk with the group about STIs, the group could act out a play about them. Or make posters about STIs to share with the community.



Asking questions will help you understand what people already know, what they want to learn, and what obstacles they face.

Remember, some people are used to speaking up in groups. Others may be afraid. Encourage women, those who have little schooling, or anyone who usually keeps quiet to share his or her thoughts. For more ideas on how to teach so people can truly learn, see *Helping Health Workers Learn*.

Share your knowledge with the people you care for

With accurate information, each woman has the ability to understand her body and to make wise decisions about her health. Each time you meet with a woman during pregnancy or for other care, explain what you are doing and why. Answer any questions the woman has about her body or her health.

Admit what you do not know

No one knows every answer. Some problems have no easy answer! Admit what you do not know, and people will trust the knowledge you do have.

Respectful and compassionate care

Everyone deserves to be treated with respect. As a health worker, the way you treat a woman is particularly important.

Midwives are often trusted authorities. A kind or encouraging word from you can go a long way in giving a woman confidence in her ability to care for herself. An unthinking or cruel remark can cause hurt that lasts many years in a woman.

I worried about you when you did not come last month. Was something wrong?

I'm glad she is not yelling at me. Now I can explain that I missed my checkup because my other child was sick.



Do not judge

Some women are used to being treated disrespectfully. When you begin to work with a woman who is often treated with disrespect because of her age, the work she does, her ethnicity or religion, how much money she has, having a disability, or for other reasons, she may expect you to treat her badly as well. You can only overcome this fear by showing her that you are there to listen and help her — not to judge or criticize.

Follow your own advice

People are more influenced by what you do than what you say. And because midwives are respected by their communities, the things you do may encourage others to care for themselves. If you breastfeed your children, other women in the community may be more likely to breastfeed. If you do not smoke, other women may follow your example and not smoke, or may stop smoking. Live your own life as you would advise others to do.

Help people help themselves

Everyone has the right to decide what happens to her own body. And people can and should take the lead in their own care. In this way, they can become actively responsible for their own health and the health of their communities.

**Listen more than you talk**

A woman often needs someone who will listen to her without judgment. And as she talks, she may find that she has some of the answers to her problems.

Talk openly about difficult subjects

Some women feel shy, ashamed, confused, or private about their problems. This is especially common with family problems and sex. A midwife who talks honestly and openly about these subjects will discover that many women share the same problems. By speaking directly and comfortably to women about their families, sexuality, and sexual health, you will help women feel less alone, and you may help them solve problems that have a large effect on their health.

Keep things private (confidential)

Never tell anyone about someone else's health or care — unless the person says it is OK. And when you talk to women about their health, do it in a private place where others cannot hear.

In particular, respect a woman's privacy about subjects that may be sensitive to her, such as sexually transmitted infections, miscarriages and abortions, and family problems. You should never share this type of information without a woman's permission.

I will never tell anyone what you've shared with me.



Thank you. It's a relief to be able to speak freely.



There is only one time when it is OK to share information about someone's health: if another health worker is caring for the woman during an emergency, the health worker will need to know the woman's health history in order to provide safe and effective care.

A midwife must keep what she knows about a woman private.

Work to improve women's health

Midwifery is not just about treating health problems as they arise. Health problems have many causes. Some are physical, some are social, economic, or political. By treating social, economic, and political causes, you can prevent many health problems — and protect more women in the community.

Working to treat social causes and to improve women's health is not something one midwife can do alone. She must work with the whole community. Understanding causes and finding solutions is more possible when people work together. See page 23 for ideas about working with others to make change.

People who affect a woman's health

A woman's health is affected by many people. To care for a woman, you must work with those people too.

Some of the people that affect a woman's health are:

- her husband, children, parents, and other family members
- the people she works with, or works for
- her neighbors and friends
- community leaders — including spiritual leaders, government officials, and village heads
- other health workers — like traditional healers, doctors, and community health workers



A woman's health can be protected — or hurt — by the whole community.

Anyone who influences the way a woman works, eats, has sex (or does not have it), or cares for her daily needs has an effect on a woman's health. Sometimes the effect is good — it protects or improves the woman's health. Sometimes it is bad — the woman's health and well-being are endangered.

For example, it may not help to tell a pregnant woman to eat more if her husband always eats first and there is not enough left for her. She herself may believe her husband's and children's hunger is more important than her own. Who else could you involve to try to improve a woman's nutrition, when she does not have enough to eat? Consider:

- the woman's husband, who is eating first. Perhaps you could talk to him about how much food a pregnant woman needs.

- the men of the community, who all expect to eat first. The woman's husband may be more likely to change if other men do too. You could have a meeting of men and women and discuss why pregnant women must eat more to be healthy. If one man in the community agrees that women must have as much or more healthy food as men, this opens the door for others.
- children, who will soon grow up to be mothers and fathers. Each time a man eats first and most, and a woman eats last and least, their children see and learn that a man's hunger is more important than a woman's. By talking to groups of schoolchildren or by changing the way your own family eats, the next generation may grow up to value men and women more equally.

Who could you involve to make sure there is enough food for everyone?

Men can care for women's health

Whenever you can, encourage men to be partners in improving women's health. Husbands, fathers, sons, community leaders, spiritual leaders, bosses, and other men all play a role in how healthy women will be. If the men of the community feel responsible for the health of women, the whole community will benefit. Midwives can help men be involved.

Build on the roles and skills that men already have. For example, in many communities men are seen as protectors. Help men learn how to protect the health of women.

Encourage men to share the responsibilities of pregnancy and parenting. Men can care for children in the same ways that women do: comforting, bathing, feeding, teaching, and playing with them.



Invite women and men to community meetings, and encourage women to speak up.

Work with men who are sympathetic to women's needs. They can talk to other men who listen more closely to a man than to a woman.

Give practical suggestions. Men who care very much about the health of women in their lives may not know where to start. For example:

- Tell men how they can get tested and treated for sexually transmitted infections. If only a woman is treated, she will quickly be infected again by her partner.
- Explain to a man that his pregnant wife needs help with her daily work.
- During labor, show a man how and where to rub a woman's back to relieve her pain.

Working together to save lives

When midwives work with the whole community, they can find solutions to help the women they care for — or to help everyone in the community. Here is a true story:

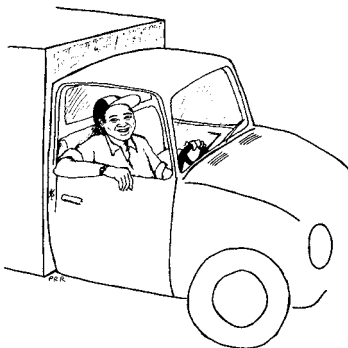
A creative solution

In the small villages of West Africa, when a woman has a problem in labor, it is very hard for her to get to a hospital. Few villagers have cars, and most taxi drivers refuse to take women in labor. When a woman is in danger, there is little her midwife can do.

Some midwives and villagers talked about this problem, and discovered a creative solution. Even though no villagers had cars, they were near a large road. All day and night, trucks drove down the road bringing products to the city. Someone suggested that if a woman needed help in labor, she could ride with a truck driver to the hospital.



For this plan to work, the villagers needed to be sure that truck drivers would agree to stop if they were needed. They talked to someone from the union of truck drivers. The union members were happy to help, and now they have a system that is simple and effective.



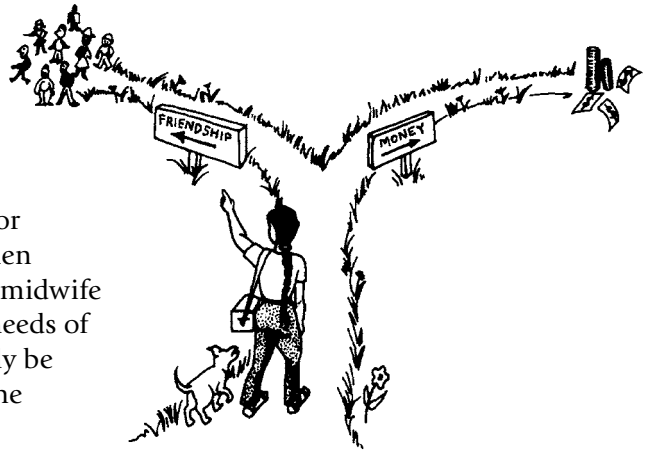
When a woman needs to go to the hospital, the midwife puts a yellow flag out near the road. When a passing truck driver sees the flag, he stops and picks up the woman and the midwife, and takes them to the city hospital.

By working together with each other, other villagers, the truck drivers, and their union, these midwives helped save lives.

Work for the joy of it

If you want other people to take part in improving their lives and caring for their health, you must enjoy such activities yourself. If not, who will want to follow your example?

Most midwives do their work out of love and as a service to the community. Although their work has great value, midwives are rarely paid much (a sad truth for many health workers and women workers in general). Even so, a midwife who works hard and puts the needs of her community first will usually be respected and appreciated by the people she serves.



You may or may not be paid for your work, but never refuse to care for someone who is poor or cannot pay. Everyone deserves your full care and attention.

The work of a midwife is often difficult. Midwives work long hours, lose sleep, strain their bodies, and challenge their minds. Midwives feel an intense responsibility that can cause stress or deep emotional pain. For most midwives, these challenges are all worth facing, because the work of a midwife is also so rewarding. Teaching women and families about their bodies and health, treating serious health problems, and helping welcome new lives into the world are some of the most important and rewarding tasks anyone can do in their lives. Our world needs the valuable work of midwives because midwives make this world stronger, healthier, and safer.

