

Midwifery Shortage Contributes to High Maternal Mortality

Malawi, known as the “warm Heart of Africa,” is a picturesque and welcoming country in Central Africa. With a population of 17 million people, every 2 out of 3 people in Malawi is under age 25 and more than 20% of adolescent girls have begun bearing children by age 17. Despite significant gains around the world, Malawi’s maternal mortality ratio is still very high, with 460 women per 100,000 dying in childbirth.

Midwives are vital to reducing maternal and newborn deaths but are severely undervalued and underutilized in Malawi. According to the [UNFPA “State of the World’s Midwifery 2014” report](#), midwives can provide up to 87% of the care needed by women and newborns. Evidence shows that care provided by midwives is cost-effective, affordable and sustainable. According to the [Lancet](#), the “return on investment from the education and deployment of community-based midwives is similar to the cost per death averted for vaccination.”

In Malawi, an overall shortage of midwives, coupled with poor working conditions and a low social status, is affecting the availability of high-quality maternity care for women. The Government of Malawi has made a commitment to strengthen human resources for health, including accelerating training and recruitment of health professionals to fill all available positions in the health sector. But that does not matter unless there are available midwifery positions to fill.



White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood, Malawi (WRA Malawi) recently conducted a nationwide, census-based survey which revealed that 20,217 additional midwives are needed to reach the WHO recommended “population to midwife ratio” of 175:1. There are only 3,420 individuals working as midwives for a minimum of 75% of the time in the entire country, contributing to its maternal, newborn health crisis. Compounding the problem, many recent midwifery graduates are without work, in large part because there are no available positions for them to fill. This census-based survey used multiple data collection methods to achieve its goal of reaching all bedside midwives in every region in Malawi.

Brief History of White Ribbon Alliance in Malawi

WRA Malawi was established in 2002 to support the reduction of maternal and newborn mortality, which was understood even then to be

connected to the overall shortage of midwives. A group of mostly volunteer advocates, WRA Malawi is dedicated to holding the Government of Malawi to its commitment to strengthen human resources for health, including accelerating training and recruitment of health professionals to fill all available positions in the health sector and add new positions when necessary.

In 2013, WRA Malawi launched a campaign called “Happy Midwives for Happy and Healthy Mothers” to draw attention to the poor status and substandard working conditions of midwives and the impact these conditions have on the availability of high-quality maternal and newborn care. The campaign has two main objectives:

1. Increase the number of midwives and available positions and advocate for recognition of the midwife profession.
2. Advocate for Respectful Maternity Care (RMC) to be included in pre-service and in-service curricula to ensure high-quality midwifery care for mothers and babies.

Citizen Journalist Training Supports Midwives, Equips Advocates

As part of their campaign, WRA Malawi recruited 30 midwives representing 19 districts to participate in a citizen journalist training in 2016. The training used participatory methods to equip midwives with the skills and confidence to communicate their experiences and the experiences of those in their care when appropriate, with the ultimate goal to make their voices heard in order to elevate midwifery as a profession and position midwives as vital to maternal and newborn health outcomes.



The citizen journalist midwives have lent their voices both locally and globally to advocate for improved maternal and newborn health, and have become valuable partners in multiple ways. They have been and continue to be the inspiration and/or source for countless stories appearing throughout Malawian media and many use social media to connect directly with colleagues and community members. They’ve regularly attended and spoken out at citizen hearings, high-level policy meetings and other venues where their unique professional perspective informed efforts across the health sector. They’ve advocated for increased midwife positions and promoted respectful maternity care for mothers and babies. They’ve also conducted Maternity Open Days in their communities, opening the facility for everyone to see, helping women and families feel more comfortable accessing the facility when the need arises.

In September 2016, George Nkhoma, a citizen journalist midwife from the remote district Chitipa in northern Malawi, shared his personal experience as a midwife at the United Nations General Assembly side events. Among other events, he was a panelist at the *Lancet’s* global

A Campaign with Results

launch of its Maternal Health Series, alongside high-level participants from the European Commission, USAID and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. His story was also shared widely as part of a WRA Global Secretariat's year-end series about its work.

Tinkhani Lungu, another citizen journalist midwife, has been engaged with Ufulu radio, a local radio station where, in collaboration with Dr. Taulo, an obstetrician and Professor at the Malawi College of Medicine, and Lennie Kamwendo, a veteran midwife, have an hour-long program on Saturday mornings where they talk about women rights in pregnancy and childbirth. They explain and discuss the [Respectful Maternity Care \(RMC\) Charter](#) so that women know their rights when seeking maternity care at the health facilities.

"In my district of Chitipa, most health centers operate with just one midwife per facility. It is shocking how much our profession is understaffed. I know that it is by raising awareness of the realities of midwives in Malawi and around the world that lives can be saved."

- **George Nkhoma, midwife, Malawi**

Beyond the many contributions to WRA Malawi's campaign, citizen journalist midwives were also instrumental in conducting interviews for a multi-partner, global campaign to ensure quality, equity and dignity for every woman and newborn, everywhere. They conducted approximately two dozen interviews with women in Mangochi and Salima Districts, gaining a better understanding of what women want and need to access the services that will improve their health and the health of their children.

As a result of the campaign led by WRA Malawi, now all midwives who graduated in the last two years have been employed. In areas with critical shortages, like Dowa, Zimba and Chitipa, more midwives were deployed, especially if there was only one midwife at the facility. This change was brought about as a result of the alarming state of midwifery in Malawi revealed by the bedside midwives' survey. It was packaged into an easily understandable factsheet that was developed and disseminated by the citizen journalist midwives, and its findings were amplified by media houses. Nearly 75% of the country's radio stations, television houses and newspapers wrote about the critical shortage of midwives in the health facilities. The survey generated huge interest and the report was officially presented to the Minister of Health in November of 2016. The Minister himself acknowledged the great need highlighted in the report and agreed to incorporate Respectful Maternity Care into the pre-service education curricula for midwives. The report was also presented to the Technical Working Group on Human Resources of the Ministry of Health and to the chair persons of parliamentary committees.

This is just the beginning, as WRA Malawi and the citizen journalists are continuing to push for changes needed. For example, all of the articles written by the citizen journalists have been presented to the editor of Nation newspaper and WRA Malawi is working with him to see how they can have a page in the newspapers to publish these articles, to ultimately give voice to midwives and find solutions for the women, children and communities of Malawi.