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Safer Together Campaign Launched to Uphold Rights, Promote Innovative Approaches to Maternity Care, and Save Lives During COVID-19 Pandemic

April 20, 2020, Washington, D.C. – Amid widespread reports of violations of women’s and newborn’s rights during childbirth, the Global Respectful Maternity Care Council, a multi-sector group comprised of more than 150 organizations across 45 countries convened by White Ribbon Alliance, launched the advocacy and communications campaign, [*Safer Together: Respectful Maternity Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic*](#).

If previous health crises are any indication, the long-term toll of COVID-19 could be catastrophic for maternal mortality rates. Using the Ebola pandemic as an example, [modeling shows the potential for a 31% increase in maternal and newborn deaths in the next 12 months](#) in India, Indonesia, Nigeria and Pakistan – an estimated 766,000 additional deaths in these four countries alone.

From forced medical procedures, to mandatory separation of mother and baby, to lack of personal protective equipment for healthworkers, anecdotal reports from civil society advocacy and consumer groups have documented pervasive violations of women’s and newborns’ rights.

“As the spread of the corona virus grew into a global pandemic, more frequent reports of rights violations came in from RMC Council members around the world. While done in the name of COVID-19, these violations were rarely based on available evidence, nor did they protect patients or healthworkers. It became clear that women, families and healthworkers needed more support,” says Elena Ateva, Advocacy Manager for White Ribbon Alliance and Chair of the Global Respectful Maternity Care Council, also known as the RMC Council.

In the best of times, frontline health workers in resource-constrained settings are confronted with system deficiencies that create conditions which can contribute to the mistreatment of women and the violation of their human rights. In times of crisis, frontline health workers and decision makers may believe that the rights of childbearing women and their newborns are secondary to concerns of security, safety or emergency resource management. But human rights are universal and inalienable and protecting them saves lives and contributes to positive health outcomes.

The current pandemic has highlighted systemic and structural deficiencies both within and beyond the healthcare system. The nearly universal shortage of protective equipment is exposing providers and the people they are caring for to undue risk is greatly compounded in settings where basic water, sanitation and hygiene is lacking. Existing gaps to an adequate maternal and newborn health workforce are exacerbated under the pandemic as many frontline health workers fall ill.

Additionally, women, families and communities are not receiving evidence-based information on how the COVID-19 pandemic might impact their health in pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period. Providers, similarly, might receive partial or conflicting information on the best practices to care for women and newborns during the crisis. This creates a sense of fear and confusion.

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“Among rights violations and confusion, were also stories of innovation, with midwives and other healthworkers finding creative solutions to share factual information and provide quality, respectful care in an unprecedented situation,” continued Ateva. “We realized that as a coalition of advocates, healthworkers, academics and others, we had an important role to play in highlighting the experiences of women and the ingenuity born out of desperation.”

Safer Together: Respectful Maternity Care during the COVID-19 Pandemic is a comprehensive advocacy and communication campaign to equip advocates with targeted asks for governments, health decision-makers, professional associations, non-governmental organizations, media and donors. It includes a suite of simple and clear communication materials to disseminate evidence-based information to women, families and healthworkers. Finally, but perhaps most importantly, the campaign will highlight innovations to providing quality care coming forth from desperate families and dedicated healthworkers, with the goal of helping others adapt to the ever-changing circumstances brought on by the pandemic.

For more information or to join the campaign, visit <https://www.whiteribbonalliance.org/safertogether>.

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