

Call for more midwives as millions die in childbirth

LONDON, UK (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Midwives are routinely "overlooked and ignored despite saving millions of lives a year, the United Nations said on Wednesday, urging the world hire more women and safeguard new life.

By [Sonia Elks](#) 6 May 2021



Nurses attach a ventilator to a newborn baby in the nursery at the Juba Teaching Hospital in Juba 3 April 2013.

Source: REUTERS/Andreea Carpeanu

In a joint report compiled with medics, the UN said urgent investment was needed to plug a global shortfall of some 900,000 midwives, with the added benefit of boosting jobs for women.

Two in every three deaths in childbirth could be prevented by 2035 if the world starts recruiting and training now, the UN said in its "State of World's Midwifery 2021" report.

"Midwives are continually overlooked and ignored," said Franka Cadee, president of the International Confederation of Midwives, which co-authored Wednesday's report with the World Health Organisation and the United Nations agency UNFPA.

"It's time for governments to acknowledge the evidence surrounding the life-promoting, life-saving impact midwife-led care," Cadee said in a statement.



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Almost one in five women gives birth without a skilled health provider, exposing both mothers and babies to risk, said the report, which analysed care in 194 countries.

Latest estimates put stillbirths at about 2 million a year, along with an estimated 2.4 million new-born deaths and some 295,000 maternal deaths, either during or soon after pregnancy.

The report said about 1.1 million more sexual, reproductive, maternal, new-born and adolescent health workers were needed - most of them midwives in Africa - and they should have a greater say over healthcare in their communities.

Progress on boosting the number of midwives is slow, it found, with a growing gap between rich and poor nations set to widen existing health inequalities still further.

The lack of midwives is driven by gender inequality, with countries overlooking sexual and reproductive health and under-estimating the value of a female-dominated workforce.



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Fixing the gaps in provision could save an estimated 4.3 million mothers and babies a year, cutting two in three needless deaths by 2035, said analysis conducted for the report published in *The Lancet* medical journal last December.

The report urged governments to put money into boosting midwife numbers, improving training and offering midwives a greater role in health policy and maternal healthcare.

"Midwives play a vital role in reducing the risks of childbirth for women all over the world," said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who runs the WHO.

Increasing their numbers will "deliver a triple dividend in contributing to better health, gender equality and inclusive economic growth," he added in a statement.

Source: [Thomson Reuters Foundation](#)

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