

# 6

## ADVANCING SAFE MOTHERHOOD THROUGH HUMAN RIGHTS

---

## SESSION 6

# ADVANCING SAFE MOTHERHOOD THROUGH HUMAN RIGHTS

---

### Aims

- To enable students to understand the importance of human rights related to protecting, respecting, and fulfilling women's rights to safe motherhood.

### Objectives

On completion of Session 6, students will be able to:

- Describe the human rights that are relevant to safe motherhood.
- Explain the actions that governments need to take to promote safe motherhood as a human right.
- Describe how midwives could become involved in human rights approaches to safe motherhood.

### Plan

Modified lecture (1 hour).

Group work, feedback, discussion (1½ hours).

### Resources

*Reduction of maternal mortality: a joint WHO/UNFPA/UNICEF/World Bank statement.* Geneva, World Health Organization, 1999.

*Advancing safe motherhood through human rights.* Geneva, World Health Organization, 2001 (WHO/RHR/01.05).

## INTRODUCTION

---

*Begin the session by presenting the following general information about human rights.*

Many of the human rights currently acknowledged in national constitutions, and in regional and international human rights treaties, can be applied to safe motherhood. These are based on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>1</sup> Although the Universal Declaration itself was not proposed as a legally enforceable instrument, it has gained legal acceptance and can be legally enforced through a series of international human rights conventions (also called treaties, covenants or charters). The main recent human rights treaty concerning woman's rights is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women<sup>2</sup> which expresses the values implicit in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

## HUMAN RIGHTS RELEVANT TO SAFE MOTHERHOOD

*Present and discuss the following information with students. As you do so, ask them to consider each of the four categories in the context of their own lives, communities and places of work.*

The human rights that are relevant to safe motherhood can be grouped into the following four main categories:

1. **Rights relating to life, liberty and security of the person**, which require that governments ensure that women have access to appropriate health care during pregnancy and childbirth and that they have the right to decide whether, when, and how often they become pregnant. This means that governments must address factors within economic, legal, social, and health systems that do not allow women these fundamental rights.

*Ask students the following questions. If they answer **no** to the questions, ask them how the situation can be changed.*

*Do women in the communities where they live and work have access to appropriate health care during pregnancy and childbirth?*

*Do women have the right to decide whether, when, and how often they become pregnant?*

---

<sup>1</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights. New York, United Nations, 1948 (United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/217 A (III)).

<sup>2</sup> Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. New York, United Nations, 1979 (United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/4/180).

2. **Rights relating to the foundation of families and of family life**, which require that governments provide access to health and other services that women need to have a family and enjoy family life.

*Ask students the following question. If they answer **no**, ask them how the situation can be changed.*

*Do women in the communities they live and work in have access to health care and other services they need, to have a healthy family and enjoy family life?*

3. **Rights relating to health care and the benefits of scientific progress, including health information and education**, which requires that governments provide access to good quality sexual and reproductive health care, including appropriate referral systems. Primary health care can serve as the means of ensuring safe motherhood, regardless of a particular country's level of economic development. At the core of these rights is the information about various reproductive health issues, including family planning, abortion, and sex education.

*Ask students the following questions. If they answer **no**, ask them how the situation can be changed.*

*Is there information and education about reproductive health issues such as family planning, abortion and sexuality provided in the communities where they live and work?*

*Do adolescents in particular have access to this information and education?*

4. **Rights relating to equality and nondiscrimination**, which require that governments provide access to services such as education and health care in the absence of discrimination relating to sex, marital status, age, and socioeconomic status. Discriminatory policies include those that (a) require women to have the consent of their husbands to use certain health care services, (b) require parental authorization that impacts on girls but not on boys, and (c) include laws that criminalize medical interventions that only women need. Governments violate their obligations when (a) they do not implement laws that protect the interests of women and (b) they do not allocate health resources to meet the needs of women for safe pregnancy and childbirth. At the core of these rights is the right to be treated at all times with dignity and respect, including during health treatments, receiving care and for women especially, during pregnancy and childbirth.

*Ask students the following questions. If they answer **no**, ask them how the situation can be changed.*

*Are women in the communities where they live and work, required to have the consent of their husband to access family planning services, for example?*

*Do adolescent girls have access to family planning services without parental consent?*

## **PROMOTING SAFE MOTHERHOOD AS A HUMAN RIGHT**

*Present and discuss the following information with students. Before beginning the session, however, make sure that you have answers to the questions below. For example, before the session find out whether the government has taken any action with respect to reforming laws, implementing laws and applying humans rights with respect to promoting safe motherhood.*

The actions that governments need to take to promote safe motherhood as a human right can be grouped as follows:

- **Reform laws** that prevent women (a) from reaching the best possible levels of health and nutrition necessary for safe pregnancy and childbirth, and (b) from accessing reproductive health information and services. Examples include laws that require women needing health care to obtain authorization from their husbands or other family members to access health services

*In relation to reforming laws, ask students the following questions and write down their answers on the blackboard or on a flipchart:*

*What laws have been reformed?*

*What laws need to be reformed?*

- **Implement laws** that support women's rights to good health and nutrition and protect their health interests. Examples include laws that prohibit child marriage, female genital mutilation, rape, and sexual abuse. It is essential that laws be implemented that encourage childbearing to begin at an appropriate age. Examples include laws that support the education of girls, set a minimum age for marriage, and ensure that women have access to the health care they need during pregnancy and childbirth.

*In relation to implementing laws, ask students the following questions and write down their answers on the blackboard or on a flipchart.*

*What laws have been implemented that support women's rights to good health and nutrition, and support their health interests?*

*Have laws been implemented that prohibit child marriage, female genital mutilation, rape and sexual abuse?*

*Have laws been implemented that support the education of girls, set a minimum age for marriage, and ensure that women have access to the health care they need during pregnancy and childbirth?*

- **Apply human rights** in national legislation and policy to advance safe motherhood.

*Ask students the following question and write down their responses on the blackboard or on a flipchart.*

*How have human rights been applied to national legislation and policy to advance safe motherhood?*

## **HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACHES TO SAFE MOTHERHOOD**

*Now present the following information and ask students to consider how they might apply the suggested approaches to their own lives, communities and places of work.*

*Health care providers who are aware of their own human rights and those of their patients/clients, can provide services in ways that protect and promote these rights. A human rights approach enables health care providers, as well as administrators, to:*

- **work respectfully together** with colleagues, in their own and other fields, to determine how best to advance safe motherhood through human rights
- **develop understanding** of how laws, policies and practices accommodate the rights of women to safe motherhood
- **discover which human rights** might be more easily achieved with respect to advancing safe motherhood
- **encourage governments** to work towards respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights relevant to safe motherhood

## **GROUP WORK**

*The purpose in this group activity is to provide students with an opportunity to discuss and decide how they can incorporate a human rights approach in their lives and work.*

*Divide students into small groups and review with them the Instructions for Group Work, included at the end of the session. Make sure that students understand what is expected of them. Allow one hour for each group to complete the activity. Spend some time with each group to help facilitate. Allow 5–10 minutes for each group to provide feedback on the outcome of the group activity.*

**Feedback and discussion**

*As the groups report back, consider how realistic their ideas and suggestions are. Provide guidance where necessary.*

*Summarize the session and answer any remaining questions.*

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR GROUP WORK

This activity is designed to provide you with an opportunity to discuss and decide how to incorporate a human rights approach in your life and work

Discuss and decide how you will:

- **work respectfully together** with colleagues in your own field and with those in other fields, in order to determine how best to advance safe motherhood through human rights.
- **develop an understanding** of how laws, policies and practices accommodate the rights of women to safe motherhood.
- **discover which human rights** might be more easily achieved with respect to advancing safe motherhood.
- **encourage governments** to work towards respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights relevant to safe motherhood.