

Description

Haitian Midwives: Advocating For Change Amid Turmoil

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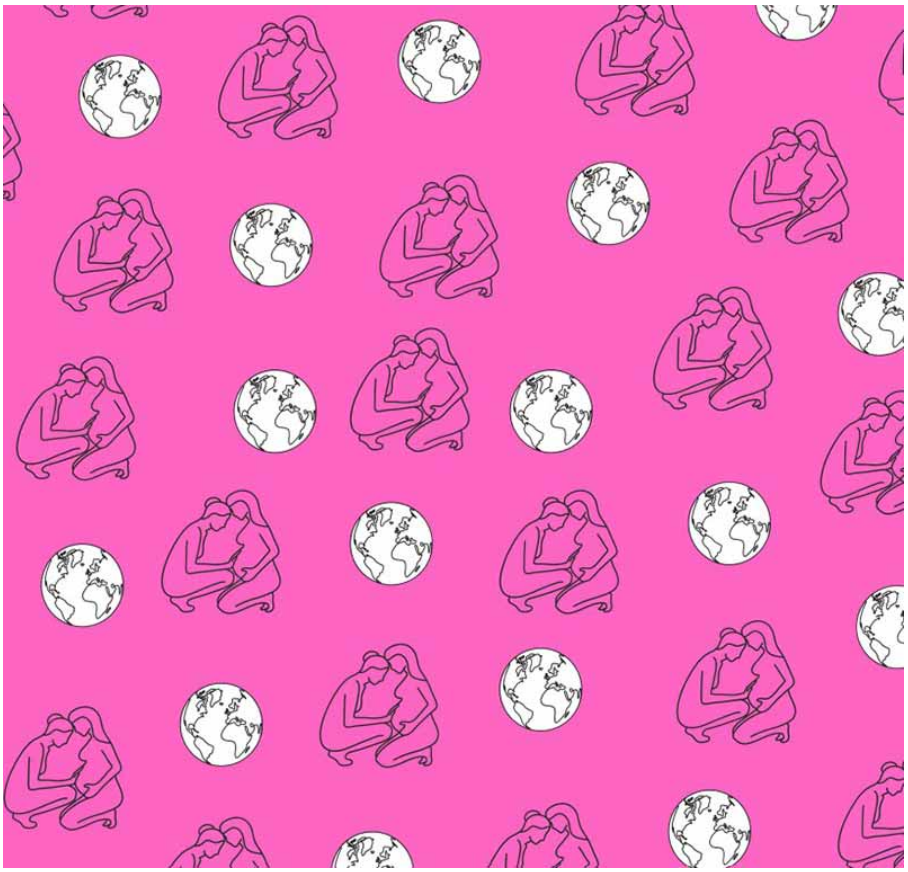
Summary

Haiti's midwifery profession faces severe challenges, including high maternal mortality, political instability and violence. Despite this, midwives and the Association des Sages-Femmes d'Haiti (ASFH) have made significant progress in education, advocacy and care delivery. Key initiatives include a revised curricula and expanded training centres. However, limited funding, lack of recognition and ongoing insecurity hinder further development. Future efforts must prioritise sustainable financial support, stronger policies and innovation in service delivery. ASFH's unwavering dedication highlights the critical role of midwives in transforming maternal and reproductive health, offering hope for a brighter future in Haiti despite disturbing obstacles.

Global conflict and crises series



Global conflicts and crises challenge maternity care worldwide. This series shares experiences from midwives and birth workers, addressing the profound impact on women, families and healthcare providers. We invite midwives, birth workers, researchers, educators and families to share research, personal stories and strategies for improving care during crises. By contributing, you can help elevate global conversations, support marginalised communities and advance midwifery practice in times of turmoil. Together, let’s support continued learning, sharing and caring across our community.



Introduction

Haiti faces significant challenges in midwifery, a profession established 24 years ago in response to high maternal mortality rates. With the highest maternal mortality in the Western Hemisphere, deaths increased from 359 in 2013 to 529 per 100,000 live births in 2016.[1,2] Midwives in Haiti have tirelessly advocated for their recognition and the adoption of the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) International Definition and Scope of Practice of Midwifery.[3] However, the nation's worsening socio-political crisis has severely hindered progress. Haiti's fragile health system, once barely functional, is now in a state of collapse, with hospitals unable to operate and many health workers, including midwives, fleeing the country. Despite these adversities, midwives remain committed to improving maternal health outcomes. This article examines the evolution of midwifery in Haiti, the impact of the political crisis on the profession as well as the maternity services, and the potential for leadership and innovation to drive progress.

The progress of midwifery in Haiti

The midwifery profession in Haiti is built on two critical pillars: midwifery training and the midwives' association. Together, they have played a significant role in advancing the profession.

Strengthening midwifery education in Haiti: progress amidst challenges

Haiti's high maternal mortality rate is due mostly to a lack of skilled birth attendants. The Ministry of Public Health launched the National Nurse-Midwives School in 2000, initially training nurses in maieutics and producing eight nurse-midwife cohorts. In 2013, a direct-entry midwifery program began, allowing high- school graduates to enroll in a three-year curriculum. Renamed the Institut National Supérieur de Formation de Sages-Femmes, the institute revised its curriculum in 2021 with the united Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Canadian Association of Midwives (CAM) support, extending training to four academic years and one year of social work. Two new training centers opened in2022 to meet maternal and neonatal health needs but remain reliant on external funding due to limited governmentsupport. However, political crises have worsened the situation, with armed men burning the main midwifery trainingcenter recently, further hindering workforce expansion.

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The association of midwives of Haiti: a fight for recognition and autonomy

Haiti's first nurse-midwives faced challenges such as professional identity crisis and lack of recognition. In 2004, they founded the Association of Haitian Nurses-Midwives (ASFH), which joined ICM in 2006 to promote professional development and accessible care for women and newborns. Initially operating without premises or resources, the association secured its first office through fundraising by CAM in 2016. Despite limited means, ASFH has led awareness campaigns, mobile clinics and important partnerships. A significant milestone was the 2018 'Midwives for Women' project, which strengthened governance, improved obstetric emergency training, and raised public awareness. Renamed the Association of Haitian Midwives in 2022 to address professional identity crisis, ASFH continues to lobby for professional recognition, as midwifery remains unregulated and not included in official pay scales.

The impact of the current political and social crisis

Haiti is enduring an unprecedented socio-political crisis. Armed gangs have gained control of vast areas, particularly since the assassination of Haiti's last elected president in 2021, leading to uncontrolled violence and power struggles with devastating consequences.[4]

Violence and insecurity now dominate the country, with gangs carving the capital into no-go zones and perpetrating extortion, kidnappings, rapes and murders. Statistics reported a staggering 333% increase in human rights abuses in 2021 alone.[5]

Haiti's fragile healthcare system has been stretched beyond capacity. Hospitals are shuttered, schools abandoned and healthcare professionals, including midwives, operate under constant threat.[6] Compounding the crisis, natural disasters and economic instability have displaced thousands and brought the healthcare system to its knees.

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Impact on women and girls: sexual and reproductive health rights, gender-based violence and maternal health

Haiti's maternal, newborn, sexual and reproductive health is in unprecedented crisis. Women face severe gender-based violence, with over 5,600 cases reported in 2023 and 1,793 more in early 2024.[7] Sexual violence is a tool of power and control, disproportionately targeting women and girls. Pregnant women experience a huge inaccessibility to essential care in a country with the Caribbean's highest maternal mortality rate.[8]

Midwives who are often the sole support for these women risk their lives daily amid gang-controlled roads and unsafe conditions. Moreover, hospital closures, medicine shortages and an exodus of health workers exacerbate the crisis. Additionally, hunger affects half the population, endangering pregnant and breastfeeding women further.[9]

Haiti's latest maternal mortality survey in 2016, to which we referred previously, highlighted alarming conditions for the maternal health, but insecurity and blockades now prevent updated studies, leaving the crisis's full impact unquantified.

The role of leadership in advancing midwifery

The midwifery profession, historically female-dominated, has faced numerous challenges, including limited autonomy and restricted scope of practice. However, through strong leadership skills, midwives can leverage their expertise to advocate, influence decision-making and contribute to policies that improve maternal, sexual and reproductive health outcomes.[10] Midwives have proven to be ideal leaders in advocating for both their profession and maternal health.

Midwives' associations play a crucial role in strengthening the profession by promoting professional growth, addressing workforce shortages and enhancing midwifery's identity. According to the ICM,[11] these associations are key advocates for comprehensive investment in midwives, ensuring access to quality sexual, reproductive, maternal, neonatal and adolescent health services.

In Haiti, the midwifery profession faces immense challenges, including socio-political instability, inadequate funding, lack of recognition and absence of a regulatory body. Despite these barriers, the ASFH serves as a beacon of hope, supporting midwives through continuing education, conferences and webinars, while actively engaging with the ICM. Since 2000, the ASFH has driven significant progress in the profession, empowering midwives and fostering resilience amidst adversity. By addressing systemic barriers and advocating for midwifery, ASFH continues to champion the advancement of maternal and reproductive health in Haiti.

> "Through strong leadership skills, midwives can leverage their expertise to advocate, influence decision-making and contribute to policies that improve maternal, sexual and reproductive health outcomes.[10]"

Perspectives and directions for the future

The global health system is increasingly recognising midwives as pivotal in addressing maternal health gaps through midwife-led models of care. Midwives are pivotal in reducing maternal mortality and improving sexual and reproductive health outcomes, and their essential role is being acknowledged in advancing women's health, ensuring equitable and high-quality care.[12,13]

In Haiti, the midwives face significant challenges, including the urgent need for sustainable financial support to maintain three midwifery training centers and elevate midwifery educators to at least a master's degree level, aligning with global standards. Collaborations with international partners like UNFPA, Word Health Organization and the International Planned Parenthood Federation are vital for securing technical and financial resources.

ASFH must intensify advocacy for full recognition of midwifery, including a regulatory body and integrating midwives into the national pay scale, while ensuring safety against violence. Addressing workforce shortages requires scholarships, mentorships, emotional support for the midwives, stronger community of practice and expanded continuing training, whether onsite or online platforms.

Conclusion

Haiti's midwifery profession stands at a crossroads, navigating immense challenges while demonstrating remarkable resilience and progress. Despite the devastating impact of political instability, economic crises and ongoing violence, midwives in Haiti, led by the ASFH, have made significant strides in improving maternal and reproductive health. Their dedication has brought about advancements in education, advocacy and community care, offering hope amid adversity.

To secure a brighter future, midwives must receive the recognition, support and protection they deserve. This includes sustainable funding for midwifery schools, robust policies to safeguard their practice and integration into the health system with adequate compensation. Strengthening partnerships and fostering innovation will also be essential to overcoming barriers and enhancing care delivery.

The ASFH remains a beacon of hope, proving that even in the most challenging circumstances, midwifery can drive transformative change for women, families and communities across Haiti. **TPM**

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