

Building a health  
workforce to  
meet the needs  
of women,  
newborns and  
adolescents  
everywhere

THE STATE  
OF THE  
**World's  
Midwifery  
2021**

Dedicated to all health  
workers who have lost  
their lives to Covid-19



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### ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

<b>BEmONC</b>	basic emergency obstetric and newborn care	<b>PPE</b>	personal protective equipment
<b>DHS</b>	Demographic and Health Surveys	<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>DSE</b>	dedicated SRMNAH equivalent	<b>SRMNAH</b>	Sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn and adolescent health
<b>ICM</b>	International Confederation of Midwives	<b>SoWMy</b>	State of the World's Midwifery
<b>ICN</b>	International Council of Nurses	<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>ISCO</b>	International Standard Classification of Occupations	<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>MEAP</b>	Midwifery Education Accreditation Programme	<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>MLCC</b>	midwife-led continuity of care	<b>UHC</b>	universal health coverage
<b>MMR</b>	maternal mortality ratio	<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>NHWA</b>	National Health Workforce Accounts	<b>YML</b>	Young Midwife Leader
<b>PMD</b>	percentage met demand		
<b>PMN</b>	potential met need		
<b>PMNCH</b>	The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health		

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**Cover photo:** Portrait of Rabiyyat Tusuf with her son, Umar Husseni (1 week), at the Dikumari Health Center in Damaturu, Yobe State, Nigeria. © Gates Archive/Nelson Owoicho.

# Contents

<b>FOREWORD</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: MIDWIVES: A VITAL INVESTMENT</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3: EDUCATION AND REGULATION OF MIDWIVES TO ENSURE HIGH-QUALITY CARE</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: NEED FOR AND AVAILABILITY OF MIDWIVES AND OTHER SRMNAH WORKERS</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5: EQUITY OF ACCESS TO THE SRMNAH WORKFORCE</b> .....	<b>43</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6: ENABLING AND EMPOWERING THE SRMNAH WORKFORCE: GENDER MATTERS</b> .....	<b>49</b>
<b>CHAPTER 7: PROGRESS SINCE 2011 AND LOOKING FORWARD TO 2030</b> .....	<b>57</b>
<b>GLOSSARY</b> .....	<b>63</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>65</b>

## BOXES

1.1: Previous <i>State of the World's Midwifery</i> reports.....	2
2.1: Midwife-led continuity of care.....	8
2.2: Investment in midwives in Cambodia and the Netherlands.....	10
3.1: The Government of India's Midwifery Initiative.....	14
3.2: The ICM Midwifery Education Accreditation Programme.....	15
3.3: Key data on quality of education from WHO's global midwifery educator survey.....	17
3.4: Identifying and addressing the needs of midwives during Covid-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean.....	23
3.5: Midwives contribute to national Covid-19 responses in Malawi and Namibia.....	24
4.1: The challenges of data collection and how these are being addressed in South-East Asia.....	26
5.1: National-level estimates can mask geographical and occupational variations: the case of Ghana.....	44
5.2: Respectful maternity care.....	45
5.3: SRMNAH care: global campaign reveals what women want.....	46
6.1: Building the next generation of midwife leaders.....	53
6.2: The importance of social dialogue.....	55
6.3: Salary variations between SRMNAH professionals: the cases of Morocco and Tunisia.....	56

## TABLES

1.1: Occupation groups considered to be part of the SRMNAH workforce.....	3
3.1: Percentage of countries with legislation recognizing midwifery as distinct from nursing and with an association specifically for midwives, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019–2020.....	18
3.2: Percentage of 79 countries in which midwives are authorized to provide BEmONC signal functions, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019–2020.....	20
3.3: Percentage of 78 countries in which midwives are authorized to provide contraceptive products, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019–2020.....	21
4.1: Number (thousands) of SRMNAH workers in 192 countries, 2019 (or latest available year since 2014).....	29
4.2: Size (thousands) and density of wider midwifery workforce in 160 countries, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019 (or latest available year since 2014).....	30
4.3: Potential met need estimates in 157 countries, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019 (or latest available year since 2014).....	35
6.1: Percentage of 80 countries with midwives in leadership positions, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019–2020.....	51

## FIGURES

1: Summary of investments needed to enable midwives to achieve their potential.....	vii
1.1: Key global SRMNAH workforce and midwifery milestones, 2011–2020.....	4
2.1: Change in % of births attended by midwives and nurses in 18 low- and lower-middle-income countries that reduced their maternal mortality ratio by more than 50% between 2000 and 2017.....	9
3.1: Duration of direct-entry midwifery or combined nursing and midwifery education programmes in 63 countries, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019–2020.....	15
3.2: Average % of midwife educators who are themselves midwives in 70 countries, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019–2020.....	16
3.3: Highest level of midwifery qualification available in 74 countries, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019–2020.....	17
3.4: Midwife regulation system in 78 countries, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019–2020.....	19
3.5: Midwife licensing system in 73 countries, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019–2020.....	19
4.1: Percentage of SRMNAH worker time needed at each stage in the continuum of care, 189 countries, 2019.....	27
4.2: Percentage of SRMNAH worker time needed at each stage in the continuum of care, 189 countries, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019.....	28
4.3: Percentage of wider midwifery workforce headcount in each occupation group in 161 countries, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019 (or latest available year since 2014).....	31
4.4: SRMNAH workforce: headcount versus dedicated SRMNAH equivalent (DSE) in 192 countries, 2019 (or latest available year since 2014).....	32
4.5: Composition of midwifery, nursing and SRMNAH doctor workforce, 192 countries, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019 (or latest available year since 2014).....	33
4.6: Relative percentages of the wider midwifery workforce aged 55+ years and under 35 years, 75 countries, 2019 (or latest available year since 2014).....	38
4.7: Projected potential met need in 157 countries, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019, 2025 and 2030.....	39
4.8: Projected supply compared with projected demand in 143 countries, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2030.....	41
4.9: Projections of potential met need and percentage met demand for SRMNAH workforce in 143 countries, by World Bank income group, 2030.....	42
5.1: Percentage of SRMNAH workers who are women in reporting countries, by WHO region and World Bank income group, 2019 (or latest available year since 2014).....	47
6.1: Existence of national or subnational policies or laws in 164 countries for the prevention of attacks on health workers, 2019, by WHO region and World Bank income group.....	54

# Foreword

The Covid-19 crisis has prompted changes in how we think about health care and support: when and where it should be delivered, who should be involved, and what human and other resources should be prioritized. One important lesson is that even the most robust health systems can suddenly become fragile. We have seen during the crisis that women and girls have been affected in many ways, including increased gender-based violence and reduced access to essential sexual and reproductive health services, leading to increases in maternal mortality, unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions and infant mortality.

Much of the evidence and analysis underpinning the *State of the World's Midwifery 2021* refers to the pre-Covid-19 era. The positive impact of high-quality midwifery care on women and families across the globe is richly detailed. The findings demonstrate the importance and effectiveness of midwives as core members of the sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn and adolescent health (SRMNAH) workforce. They have been instrumental in helping to drive tangible progress towards several goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In the face of Covid-19-related restrictions and overburdened health systems, midwives have become even more vital for meeting the sexual and reproductive health needs of women and adolescents. Midwives deserve to be celebrated for their courageous and often dangerous work during the crisis, which has helped to reduce the risk of virus transmission among pregnant women and their infants by enabling many births away from hospitals, either at home or in a midwifery unit or birth centre. Giving birth safely, comfortably and conveniently at home or in specialized community midwifery clinics is likely to be an increasingly popular option for pregnant

women and their families in much of the world. Policy-makers are increasingly recognizing the overall efficiencies to be gained from investing in midwives and the infrastructure that sustains and supports them.

Governments and their partners should use the *State of the World's Midwifery 2021* to guide them on how and where attention and resources should be allocated to make this possible. The report reveals a global need for the equivalent of 1.1 million more full-time SRMNAH workers, mostly midwives and mostly in Africa. It also says that all countries need to improve the education and deployment of these occupation groups to meet demand by 2030. Decisions should also be informed by other important research findings, such as the fact that when fully educated, licensed and

integrated in an interdisciplinary team, midwives can meet about 90% of the need for essential SRMNAH interventions across the life course. Currently, however, midwives comprise just 8% of the global SRMNAH workforce. Boosting that percentage, as well as the overall number of midwives, could be transformative. Universal coverage of midwife-delivered interventions could avert two thirds of maternal and neonatal deaths and stillbirths, allowing 4.3 million lives to be saved annually by 2035.

There is no better incentive to make midwives more central to all health systems and to ensure that they are educated, protected and treated as the valued professionals they are.



**Amina Mohammed**

**Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations**

# Executive Summary

Sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn and adolescent health (SRMNAH) is an essential component of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Improving SRMNAH requires increased commitment to, and investment in, the health workforce. This report focuses primarily on midwives because they play a pivotal role within the wider SRMNAH workforce.

Following the universality principle of the SDGs, *State of the World's Midwifery 2021* (SoWMy 2021) represents an unprecedented effort to document the whole world's SRMNAH workforce. This approach acknowledges that not only low-income countries struggle to meet needs and expectations, especially in these difficult times, and that there are many paths to better SRMNAH: examples of good practice can be found in all countries, and all countries should be held to account.

The development and launch of SoWMy 2021 was led by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM), with the support of 32 organizations. It builds on previous reports in the SoWMy series in 2011 and 2014, and includes many countries not previously tracked.

## The global SRMNAH worker shortage

In many countries, workforce planning and assessment of the workforce's ability to meet the need for health-care services is hampered by poor health workforce data systems. Based on the available data, SoWMy 2021 estimates that, with its current composition and distribution, the

world's SRMNAH workforce could meet 75% of the world's need for essential SRMNAH care. However, in low-income countries, the workforce could meet only 41% of the need. Potential to meet the need is lowest in the African and Eastern Mediterranean WHO regions.

The SoWMy 2021 analysis indicates a current global needs-based shortage of 1.1 million "dedicated SRMNAH equivalent" (DSE) workers. There are shortages of all types of SRMNAH workers, but the largest shortage (900,000) is of midwives and the wider midwifery workforce. Investment is urgently needed to address this shortage.

At current rates, the SRMNAH workforce is projected to be capable of meeting 82% of the need by 2030: only a small improvement on the current 75%. The gap between low-income countries and high- and middle-income countries is projected to widen by 2030, increasing inequality.

To close the gap by 2030, 1.3 million new DSE worker posts (mostly midwives and mostly in Africa) need to be created in the next 10 years.

Lucia Sumani, a student midwife stationed at Balaka District Hospital, Malawi, conducts an antenatal check.  
© Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation/Paul O'Driscoll.



At current rates, only 0.3 million of these are expected to be created, leaving a projected shortage of 1 million DSE posts by 2030, of which 750,000 will be midwives..

In addition to these shortages, the evidence points to the need to invest in improving quality of care and reducing the incidence of disrespect and abuse towards SRMNAH service users.

### Why invest in midwives?

Since the first SoWMy report in 2011, the body of evidence demonstrating the return on investment in midwives has grown. It indicates that investing in midwives facilitates positive birth experiences and safe and effective comprehensive abortion services, improves health outcomes, augments labour supply, favours inclusive and equitable growth, facilitates economic stabilization, and can have a positive macroeconomic impact.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shone a light on the importance of investing in primary health care for meeting population health needs. Midwives are essential providers of primary health care and can play a major role in this area

as well as other levels of the health system: in addition to maternity care, they provide a wide range of clinical interventions and contribute to broader health goals, such as addressing sexual and reproductive rights, promoting self-care interventions and empowering women and adolescent girls.

The analysis in this report indicates that fully educated, licensed and integrated midwives supported by interdisciplinary teams and an enabling environment can deliver about 90% of essential SRMNAH interventions across the life course, yet they account for less than 10% of the global SRMNAH workforce.

### Bold investments are needed

For midwives to achieve their potential, greater investment is needed in four key areas: education and training; health workforce planning, management and regulation and the work environment; leadership and governance; and service delivery. Figure 1 provides a summary of the investments needed in each of these areas.

These investments should be considered at country, regional and global levels by



A midwife performs an antenatal check at the Primary Health Care Centre in Akwanga, Nasarawa State, Nigeria. © Gates Archive/Nelson Owoicho.

governments, policy-makers, regulatory authorities, education institutions, professional associations, international organizations, global partnerships, donor agencies, civil society organizations and researchers.

The need to invest in the production and deployment of SRMNAH workers is not confined to countries with a needs-based shortage. Many countries, including some high-income countries, are forecast to have insufficient SRMNAH workers to meet demand by 2030.

### The need for midwives and the wider SRMNAH workforce

Globally, 6.5 billion SRMNAH worker hours would have been required to meet all the need for essential SRMNAH care in 2019. This is projected to increase to 6.8 billion hours by 2030. Just over half (55%) of the need is for maternal and newborn health interventions (antenatal, childbirth and postnatal care), 37% is for other sexual and reproductive health interventions such as counselling, contraceptive services, comprehensive abortion care, and detection and management of sexually transmitted infections, and 8% is for adolescent sexual and reproductive health interventions.

Factors preventing the SRMNAH workforce from meeting all of the need include: insufficient numbers, inefficient skill mix, inequitable distribution, varying levels and quality of education and training programmes, limited qualified educators (including for supervision and mentoring) and limited effective regulation.

Covid-19 has reduced workforce availability. Access to SRMNAH services needs to be prioritized, and provided in a safe environment, despite the pandemic. SRMNAH workers need protection from infection, support to cope with stress and trauma, and creative/innovative solutions to the challenges of providing high-quality education and services.

Figure 1 **Summary of investments needed to enable midwives to achieve their potential**



## Equity of access to the SRMNAH workforce

Even where workforce data are available, they are rarely fully disaggregated by important characteristics such as gender, occupation group and geographical location, making it difficult to identify and address gaps in service provision.

Some population groups risk their access to SRMNAH workers being restricted due to characteristics including age, poverty, geographical location, disability, ethnicity, conflict, sexual orientation, gender identity and religion. The voices of service users are essential for understanding the factors that influence their care-seeking behaviour.

“Left behind” groups require special attention to ensure that they can access care from qualified practitioners. The SRMNAH workforce requires a supportive policy and working environment, and education and training, to understand and meet the specific needs of these groups and thus provide quality care that is accessible and acceptable to all.

## Enabling and empowering the SRMNAH workforce

The health workforce is on average 70% women, with gender differences by occupation. Midwives are more likely to be women; they experience considerable gendered disparities in pay rates, career pathways and decision-making power

gender-related barriers and challenges. All countries need policies to prevent attacks on health workers.

A gender transformative policy environment will challenge the underlying causes of gender inequities, guarantee the human rights, agency and well-being of caregivers, both paid and unpaid, recognize the value of health work and of women’s work, and reward adequately.

\*\*\*\*\*

SoWMy 2021 was prepared during the world’s struggle with Covid-19. We gratefully acknowledge the significant efforts made by stakeholders in many countries to provide data in the face of competing priorities, but it is clear that health workforce data systems were a major limitation even before the pandemic. Nevertheless, this report provides valuable new evidence to inform workforce policy and planning.

Since the first SoWMy report in 2011, there has been much progress in midwifery, including greater recognition of the importance of quality of care, widespread accreditation systems for health worker education institutions, and greater recognition of midwifery as a distinct profession. On the other hand, many of the issues highlighted in the two previous SoWMy reports remain of concern, such as workforce shortages, an inadequate working environment, less quality education and training

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