

FEBRUARY 2005

How to reduce maternal deaths: rights and responsibilities

About this note

DFID's strategy for *Reducing maternal deaths*¹ recognises the importance of achieving women's rights in order to accelerate equitable progress towards *the off-track maternal health Millennium Development Goal (MDG 5)*.² This note provides **guidance** on how to put a human rights-based approach into practice. It includes examples, issues to consider and references. Further analysis and case studies are provided in the supporting *Desk Review*.³

This note is primarily for DFID advisers and programme managers working on maternal health. It aims to help them **bring a rights and equity perspective** to work with partners in Government, civil society and international development agencies. It demonstrates how a rights-based approach adds value to public health and health systems approaches. It recognises that reducing maternal deaths is not a purely technical action, but one that challenges the political and social *status quo* and requires actions within and beyond the health sector.

A rights-based approach to maternal health is new and evolving, for DFID as well as many of its partners. There are still large gaps in the evidence base. This note is a **starting point** to help think through how to use human rights to strengthen analysis, policy and programmes to reduce maternal deaths. Country-specific tools may need to be developed, particularly for fragile states.

This note (page 3 onwards) outlines ways to:

- strengthen policy and political support for maternal health;
- apply a rights perspective to strengthening health systems;
- increase women's entitlement and access;
- increase state accountability for maternal health; and
- integrate a rights perspective into aid instruments.

The case for a rights perspective

Over half a million women die unnecessarily in pregnancy and childbirth every year worldwide. There are marked disparities by social group in women's access to skilled birth attendance and to essential obstetric care. Behind these deaths is a failure to assure women's rights: women's low status and lack of power, poor access to information and care, restricted mobility, early age of marriage, and the low political priority and resources given to their health. Related factors include poorly functioning, inequitable health systems; weak legal and policy frameworks; and community beliefs that 'hide' pregnancy and childbirth. ***Achieving MDG5 more equitably will require political, social, legal and economic actions as well as scaling up technical strategies. Traditional public health and health systems approaches must therefore be combined***

