

ACTORS, ISSUES, AND OPPORTUNITIES: ASSESSING THE POLICY ENVIRONMENT

“While developing countries need policies, they also must have the will to implement them. They need money, other resources, and operational policies to make implementation possible.”

Cross et al., 2001

Supplemental Introductory Material

Safe motherhood is not considered a priority in many settings, and too often high-level officials do not believe that maternal health is a serious social and economic problem for their countries. Lack of action may be due to diversion of resources to other equally urgent public health problems, such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, or tuberculosis. High-level support is critical in order to improve the policy environment for maternal health.

Most developing countries now have some national family planning/reproductive health law, policy, or strategy. In some cases, safe motherhood is included as a component of the broader reproductive health policy. Where countries have not addressed safe motherhood explicitly, a comprehensive stand alone policy and program is an important step. Such a mechanism will facilitate program coordination and help eliminate inconsistencies in programs or policies.

Where maternal health laws and policies do exist, they are often fragmented, and operational barriers may impede the implementation of a national policy or plan. For example, regulatory barriers may exist for midwives. These barriers, such as skilled attendants not being able to suture vaginal tears after delivery (even though they can suture episiotomies), can cost women their lives or result in debilitating injuries. Lifting these barriers and allowing trained midwives to perform such procedures not only requires a change in policy but also requires advocates to bring such discrepancies to the attention of decision makers. To ensure country standards are updated with current scientific information on maternal and reproductive health, some international communities have recognized the need to promote the development of not only safe motherhood but also overall reproductive health guidelines.

Streamlining Reproductive Health Protocols

A survey in Ghana found more than 15 different sets of guidelines, standards, or protocols for reproductive health. The standards were hard to enforce or may even have been contradictory. This information was used to persuade the Ministry of Health to develop a revised and comprehensive set of Reproductive Health Service and Policy Standards.