

Birth rights

New approaches to safe motherhood



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At least 525,000 women still die every year from complications relating to pregnancy. Most of these are in the developing world – for every woman who dies in the North, 99 will die in the South. Many millions more experience pregnancy-related complications which can lead to illness or disability. And the tragedy is that almost all the deaths and illnesses are preventable.

The Safe Motherhood Initiative was launched by the World Health Organisation and others in 1987. It aimed to halve deaths by the year 2000. Some countries have met with limited success but globally little has changed. The Initiative's current goal is to reduce maternal deaths by 75 per cent by 2015.

During the 1990s there has been a parallel movement for change which sees failures to secure women's reproductive health not solely as a health issue but as a question of social injustice. Advances in the scientific evaluation of what kinds of care actually work have also given fresh impetus to efforts to improve the well-being of all women who become pregnant, whether or not they experience complications.

This report outlines the reasons why women are suffering, and puts them firmly on the human rights agenda. It shows that effective strategies do exist to secure women's well-being. It argues that change is possible, often within existing resources. And it stresses the importance of informed public, professional and political voices in creating that change.

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