

Thematic side-event to the 47<sup>th</sup> Session of the  
Commission on Population and Development

***The Role of Professional Midwives in Promoting  
Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights***

Monday April 7, 2014, 1:15-2:30 pm - *a light lunch will be served*

Conference Room D in the Conference Building

**Limited space – Please RSVP to [sandra.lyngdorf@gov.se](mailto:sandra.lyngdorf@gov.se)**

Great gains have been achieved in reducing maternal mortality since 1994. However, an estimated 800 women in the world still die every day from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth. Many of these deaths could have been prevented through increasing access to quality reproductive health services such as antenatal care, skilled attendance at birth and contraception, services that are offered in many countries by professional midwives. At the same time there is an acute shortage of skilled health workers, including midwives. If 58 countries with 91% of the world's maternal mortality burden doubled their number of trained midwives, they could reduce these deaths by up to 20%.<sup>1</sup> The importance of strengthening professional midwifery competence has been highlighted by the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM).<sup>2</sup>

In Afghanistan around 327 women die per 100,000 live births as a result of complications in pregnancy and childbirth<sup>3</sup>. The Government of Afghanistan has put significant efforts and resources into developing a professional midwifery cadre in order to address maternal and child mortality. Up to now more than 3,500 midwives have been trained through the midwifery education system. Afghanistan is now investing in a new 2-year "bridging" training for community-based midwives and as well as a new 4-year "direct-entry" program. The Afghan Midwives Association, which has existed since 2005, has the goal of reducing maternal and child mortality and to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. The association consists of over 3,000 members and is currently working with the government and UNFPA to create guidelines for the accreditation and regulation of midwives in the country.

Sweden has a unique history regarding the role of midwives in the health system. Swedish midwives have been formally recognized for 300 years and organized since 1886. The dramatic reduction in maternal mortality in Sweden in the last century has been partly attributed to this role. This has been achieved through their involvement in all aspects of

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations. *State of the World's Midwifery, 2011*. New York: UNFPA:2011

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. *State of the World's Midwifery, 2011*. New York: UNFPA:2011

<sup>3</sup> Afghanistan Maternal Mortality Survey 2010

women's sexual and reproductive health, including prevention of unwanted pregnancies, pre- and post-natal care, skilled delivery at birth, provision of safe abortions, and health education. Swedish midwives have a unique level of autonomy in the Swedish health system, which includes prescribing contraception and administering medical abortions. They also work in over 250 youth SRH clinics around the country.

One of the key mandates of UNFPA is promoting maternal health services in the context of sexual and reproductive health services for women and for adolescents. Through the Maternal Health Thematic Fund (MHTF), UNFPA supports programs that build up human resources for maternal health and needs assessments that provide countries with up-to-date data in the area of obstetric and neonatal care. UNFPA has partnered with the International Confederation of Midwives to address the critical gap in midwifery availability. The Midwifery Program is now operational in some 30 MHTF supported countries, with a focus on improving and expanding midwifery training and strengthening national midwifery associations and regulations. *The H4+ High Burden Countries Initiative* was created to support the United Nations Secretary-General's Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health. The initiative is led by the United Nations "health" agencies and works directly with Ministries of Health, Health Care Professional Associations and other key government and development partners in eight countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, India, Mozambique, Nigeria and the United Republic of Tanzania) – representing nearly 60% of global maternal and newborn deaths – in conducting comprehensive midwifery workforce assessments. An important part of the initiative is helping governments to “cost” midwives into national budgets. Lately, the MHTF is investing in first time young mothers to ensure they deliver with health workers with midwifery skills and have access to other reproductive health services such as contraceptives and STI prevention including HIV.

This thematic side event will highlight the role of midwives in achieving the spirit of the ICPD Program of Action through the promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Representatives from the Swedish and Afghani governments, and from their respective midwifery associations, will present best practices from their midwifery programs as an inspiration for other governments wishing to promote this important professional group in their societies.

#### Panelists:

- Ms. Tanja Rasmusson, State Secretary for Development Cooperation, Sweden
- Dr. Ahmad Jan Naeem, Deputy Minister of Public Health, Afghanistan
- Ms. Mursal Musawi, Executive Director of the Afghan Midwives Association
- Ms. Anna Nordfjell, Chair of the Swedish Midwifery Association
- Dr. Sennen Hounton, Senior Advisor, UNFPA, on behalf of H4+