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Author: DOREEN KAURA



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Midwives remain the real unsung heroes

EVERY year on May 5, the world celebrates the International Day of the Midwife, honouring the vital role midwives play in ensuring safe childbirth, and maternal and newborn health. This year, as we commemorated this significant day, it's imperative to recognise midwives not only as guardians of life but also as crucial actors in combating the existential threat that climate change poses to Mother Earth.

This year's theme, "Midwives: A Vital Climate Solution", highlights how midwives in Africa are at the forefront of climate resilience efforts, safeguarding communities and fostering sustainable health-care practices.

Midwifery is often misconstrued as merely a branch of nursing. However, it embodies a distinct profession, rooted in expertise and specialised skills focused on maternal and newborn care. In Africa, where access to comprehensive health care remains a challenge for many, midwives stand as front-line champions, providing essential services indispensable to the well-being of communities.

Across Africa, climate change poses unprecedented challenges, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and threatening the health and livelihoods of millions. In this context, midwives emerge as unsung heroes, embodying a holistic approach to health care that integrates environmental stewardship with maternal and newborn well-being.

First and foremost, midwifery promotes sustainable childbirth practices that minimise environmental impact. From advocating for natural birthing techniques to supporting breastfeeding initiatives, midwives prioritise interventions that align with eco-friendly principles, reducing the carbon footprint associated with childbirth and postnatal care. By emphasising non-invasive, low-resource methods, midwives not only ensure safer deliveries but also contribute to the preservation of natural resources.

Extreme weather events, food insecurity, and the spread of infectious diseases pose significant risks to maternal and child health. Therefore, through education and empowerment, midwives equip women with the knowledge and skills needed to cope with environmental stressors and protect their health and their newborns'.

From teaching sustainable farming techniques to providing family planning services, safe water and sanitation practices, midwives empower communities to build resilience against climate-induced health risks, ultimately fostering sustainable development.

As climate-induced disasters become more frequent and severe, midwives are at the forefront of emergency response, providing life-saving care in the aftermath of floods, droughts, and other environmental crises. Their ability to adapt to challenging conditions, coupled with their intimate knowledge of local communities, makes them indispensable assets in times of crisis.

However, despite their invaluable contributions, midwives in Africa continue to face numerous challenges that hinder their ability to fulfil their potential as agents of change. Limited access to education and training, inadequate resources, and systemic barriers often impede the delivery of quality maternal and newborn care, exacerbating disparities and undermining efforts to promote sustainability.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that prioritises investment in midwifery education, capacity building, and policy reform, ensuring that midwives have the support and resources they need to thrive in their critical role.

Governments, policymakers and health-care stakeholders must prioritise midwifery as a fundamental component of the health-care system and allocate adequate resources to support midwives and communities they serve.

This includes investing in midwifery education, regulation which is not under nursing, and support of midwifery practice through continuous professional development, improving working conditions, and providing access to essential supplies and equipment.

Kaura is an associate professor in the Department of Nursing and Midwifery in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at Stellenbosch University. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the university.

