





ISTOCK

The Charter addresses the issue of disrespect and abuse among women seeking maternity care and provides a platform for improvement by

- Raising awareness of childbearing women's inclusion in the guarantees of human rights recognized in internationally adopted United Nations and other multinational declarations, conventions, and covenants;
- Highlighting the connection between human rights language and key program issues relevant to maternity care;
- Increasing the capacity of maternal health advocates to participate in human rights processes;
- Aligning childbearing women's sense of entitlement to high-quality maternity care with international human rights community standards; and
- Providing a basis for holding the maternal care system and communities accountable to these rights.

A broad group of stakeholders representing research, clinical, human rights, and advocacy perspectives came together in a community of concern to develop this charter. The campaign to promote respectful maternity care is led by the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood, with support from USAID through the Health Policy Project.

**Join Us: Help ensure that every woman's right to respectful maternity care is upheld.**



To find out more, visit:  
[www.whiteribbonalliance.org/respectfulcare](http://www.whiteribbonalliance.org/respectfulcare)

**RESPECTFUL  
MATERNITY CARE:**  
THE **UNIVERSAL**  
**RIGHTS** OF  
CHILDBEARING  
WOMEN

A stylized, light-colored illustration of a woman holding a child, positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page. The woman is shown from the waist up, with her arms around the child. The child is depicted as a simple, rounded shape. The illustration is composed of smooth, flowing lines and is set against a background of a gradient from light yellow to orange.

**As we speak  
out and demand  
respectful care,  
we make it  
safe for women  
everywhere to  
do so too.**

## ASSERTION OF THE UNIVERSAL RIGHTS OF CHILDBEARING WOMEN

All childbearing women need and deserve respectful care and protection; this includes special care to protect the mother-baby pair as well as women in a context of marginalization or heightened vulnerability (e.g., adolescents, ethnic minorities, and women living with physical or mental disabilities or HIV).

**Disrespect and abuse during maternity care are a violation of women's basic human rights.**

## PROMOTING RESPECTFUL MATERNITY CARE

### The Distinctive Importance of the Childbearing Period

Pregnancy and childbirth are momentous events in the lives of women and families everywhere and also a time of intense vulnerability. “Safe motherhood” usually suggests physical safety, but childbearing is also an important rite of passage with deep personal and cultural significance. Because motherhood is specific to women, gender equity and gender violence are also at the core of maternity care.

The campaign to promote respectful maternity care focuses specifically on the interpersonal aspects of care received by women seeking maternity services. A woman's relationship with her maternity providers is vitally important. Not only are these encounters the vehicle for essential lifesaving health services, but women's experiences with caregivers can empower and comfort or inflict lasting damage and emotional trauma. Either way, women's memories of their childbearing experiences stay with them for a lifetime and are often shared with other women, contributing to a climate of confidence or doubt around childbearing.

**Safe motherhood is more than the prevention of death and disability: It is respect for every woman's humanity, feelings, choices, and preferences.**



Human rights are fundamental entitlements due to all people, recognized by societies and governments and enshrined in international declarations and conventions. Until now, no instrument has specifically delineated how human rights are implicated in the childbearing process or affirmed their application to childbearing women as basic, inalienable rights.

**In seeking and receiving maternity care**

EVERY WOMAN HAS THE RIGHT TO

**BE FREE FROM HARM AND ILL TREATMENT**

**NO ONE CAN PHYSICALLY ABUSE YOU**

ARTICLE I

EVERY WOMAN HAS RIGHT TO

**INFORMATION, INFORMED CONSENT AND REFUSAL, AND RESPECT**

**FOR HER CHOICES AND PREFERENCES, INCLUDING COMPANIONSHIP DURING MATERNITY CARE**

**NO ONE CAN FORCE YOU OR DO THINGS TO YOU WITHOUT YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND CONSENT**

ARTICLE II

EVERY WOMAN HAS THE RIGHT TO

**PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

**NO ONE CAN EXPOSE YOU OR YOUR PERSONAL INFORMATION**

ARTICLE III

EVERY WOMAN HAS THE RIGHT TO

**BE TREATED WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT**

**NO ONE CAN HUMILIATE OR VERBALLY ABUSE YOU**

ARTICLE IV

Seven rights are drawn from the categories of disrespect and abuse identified by researchers and rights advocates in the current literature. By drawing on relevant extracts from established human rights instruments, the Charter demonstrates the legitimate place of maternal health rights within the broader context of human rights.

**re before, during, and after childbirth:**

**5** ARTICLE V EVERY WOMAN HAS THE RIGHT TO  
**EQUALITY,  
FREEDOM FROM  
DISCRIMINATION,  
AND EQUITABLE CARE**  
**NO ONE CAN DISCRIMINATE  
BECAUSE OF SOMETHING THEY  
DO NOT LIKE ABOUT YOU**

**6** ARTICLE VI EVERY WOMAN HAS THE RIGHT TO  
**HEALTHCARE  
AND TO THE HIGHEST  
ATTAINABLE LEVEL  
OF HEALTH**  
**NO ONE CAN PREVENT YOU  
FROM GETTING THE  
MATERNITY CARE YOU NEED**

**7** ARTICLE VII EVERY WOMAN HAS THE RIGHT TO  
**LIBERTY, AUTONOMY,  
SELF-DETERMINATION,  
AND FREEDOM  
FROM COERCION**  
**NO ONE CAN DETAIN YOU OR YOUR  
BABY WITHOUT LEGAL AUTHORITY**

All rights are grounded in established international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; the Declaration of the Elimination of Violence Against Women; the Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on preventable maternal mortality and morbidity and human rights; and the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing. National instruments are also referenced if they make specific mention of childbearing women.

For more information, visit:  
[www.whiteribbonalliance.org/respectfulcare](http://www.whiteribbonalliance.org/respectfulcare)



WHITE RIBBON ALLIANCE

## Growing Evidence of Disrespect and Abuse

Imagine the personal treatment you would expect from the health worker entrusted to help you or a woman you love give birth. We envision a relationship characterized by gentle, effective communication, support, kindness, and respect. Unfortunately, too many women experience care that does not match this image. A growing body of research evidence, experience, and case reports collected in maternity care systems from the wealthiest to poorest nations worldwide paints a different and disturbing picture.

Bowser and Hill (2010) described seven major categories of disrespect and abuse that childbearing women encounter during maternity care. These categories occur along a continuum from subtle disrespect and humiliation to overt violence:

- **Physical abuse**
- **Non-consented clinical care**
- **Non-confidential care**
- **Non-dignified care (including verbal abuse)**
- **Discrimination based on specific patient attributes**
- **Abandonment or denial of care**
- **Detention in facilities**

Disrespect and abuse of women seeking maternity care is becoming an urgent problem and creating a growing community of concern that spans the domains of healthcare research, quality, and education; human rights; and civil rights advocacy.

**Disrespect and abuse during maternity care are a violation of women's basic human rights.**