

# Report on Indigenous Women's Maternal Health in Latin America and the Caribbean Summary

This publication presents a summary of the *Report on Indigenous Women's Maternal Health in Latin America and the Caribbean*, in follow-up to the recommendation made by the 18th session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.<sup>1,2</sup> It includes a description of the situation of indigenous women's maternal health, the tools promoted by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) to integrate the intercultural approach into pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum care services, and the related technical cooperation actions that PAHO has carried out in the last five years in the subregion.

## Situation of indigenous women's maternal health

Every two minutes there is a maternal death somewhere in the world, and there is one per hour in the Region of the Americas. Although the available studies are limited because countries do not include consistently request data by ethnicity and available data quality is poor, the data available indicates that maternal mortality among indigenous women is unacceptably high. A study conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean between 2020 and 2021 shows that 92.2% of maternal deaths associated with COVID-19 were in indigenous and Afro-descendant women.<sup>3</sup>

These figures are unacceptable, especially considering that nine out of 10 of these deaths are avoidable through the application of measures that have proven to be effective: quality maternal care, universal access to contraceptive methods, and combatting inequalities in access to health, among others. Furthermore, fertility rates and early pregnancies are higher among indigenous women, who have limited access to antenatal care and sexual and reproductive health services.

## Tools used by the PAHO to integrate the intercultural approach into maternal health services

PAHO's technical cooperation for the improvement of indigenous women's maternal health is principally framed by the Policy on Ethnicity and Health,<sup>4</sup> adopted unanimously by the Member States of the

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<sup>1</sup> Pan American Health Organization. Report on Indigenous Maternal Health in Latin America and the Caribbean Washington, D.C.: PAHO; [forthcoming].

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. Economic and Social Council. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues [E/2019/43-E/C.19/2019/10]. Report on the 18th session, 22 April-3 May 2019. New York: UN; 2019. Available from: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2019/06/English.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Maza-Arnedo F, Paternina-Cacedo A, Sosa CG, de Mucio B, Rojas-Suárez J, Say L, et al. Maternal mortality linked to COVID-19 in Latin America: Results from a multi-country collaborative database of 447 deaths. *Lancet Glob Health Am*. 2012;12:100269. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lana.2022.100269>.

<sup>4</sup> Pan American Health Organization. Policy on Ethnicity and Health (Document CSP29/7, Rev. 1) 29th Pan American Sanitary Conference, 25–29 September 2017. Washington, D.C.: PAHO; 2017. Available from: [https://www3.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_download&gid=42013&Itemid=270&lang=en](https://www3.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=42013&Itemid=270&lang=en)

Organization, and the Strategy and Plan of Action on Ethnicity and Health 2019–2025,<sup>5</sup> which operationalizes the policy's strategic lines. During the pandemic, PAHO stepped up its efforts to integrate the intercultural approach into health, reproductive, and maternal health services for indigenous women, and to foster their social participation.

PAHO has published two valuable tools that strengthen the intercultural perspective in health facilities. First, the *Knowledge Dialogues Methodology*<sup>6</sup> and the accompanying *Facilitator's Manual*<sup>7</sup> address one of the best developed forms of community participation: dialogues where the parties act on an equal footing and reach agreements on health management. Second, the *Tool for Promoting Culturally Safe Childbirth: Basic Manual* makes it possible to assess the degree to which the intercultural approach is integrated into maternal health care services.<sup>8</sup> Assessments are carried out with indigenous women, health providers, and external observers in order to understand their perceptions regarding a series of quality indicators and good practices.

### **PAHO's Technical cooperation activities**

The Policy on Ethnicity and Health contains five prioritized strategic lines of action to improve the health and well-being of ethnic groups.<sup>9</sup>

1. **Production of evidence:** PAHO is preparing the mid-term report on the indicators of the Strategy and Plan of Action on Ethnicity and Health 2019–2025.<sup>10</sup> With regard to maternal health, the Organization is analyzing the impact indicator "maternal mortality ratio" (number of countries and territories that have reduced the maternal mortality gap by at least 30% in at least one of the following populations: indigenous, Afro-descendant and Roma).
2. **Promotion of policy action:** Progress has been made in some countries whose public health policies have adopted an intercultural and respectful approach to pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum care.
3. **Social participation and strategic partnerships:** PAHO has promoted the knowledge dialogues methodology in several countries, as well as partnerships with different indigenous organizations. These include the Fund for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean (FILAC) and the Network of Indigenous Youth of Latin America and the Caribbean. Furthermore, the tool for promoting culturally safe childbirth was constructed on the basis of intercultural dialogues.

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<sup>5</sup> Pan American Health Organization. Strategy and Plan of Action on Ethnicity and Health 2019-2025. (Resolution CD57/13 Rev. 1), 71st session of the Regional Committee of WHO for the Americas, 30 September to 4 October 2019. Washington, D.C.: PAHO; 2019. Available from: [https://www3.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com\\_docman&view=download&alias=49791-cd57-13-e-strategy-poa-ethnicity&category\\_slug=cd57-en&Itemid=270&lang=en](https://www3.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_docman&view=download&alias=49791-cd57-13-e-strategy-poa-ethnicity&category_slug=cd57-en&Itemid=270&lang=en).

<sup>6</sup> Pan American Health Organization. Knowledge Dialogues Methodology Washington, D.C.: PAHO; 2021. Available from: <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/55670>.

<sup>7</sup> Pan American Health Organization. Knowledge Dialogues Methodology: Facilitator's Manual. Washington, D.C.: PAHO; 2021. Available from: <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/55746>.

<sup>8</sup> Pan American Health Organization. Tool for Promoting Culturally Safe Childbirth: Basic Manual. Washington, D.C.: PAHO; 2022. Available from: <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/56225>.

<sup>9</sup> See Note 4

<sup>10</sup> See Note 5

4. **Recognition of ancestral knowledge and traditional and complementary medicine:** Progress has been made in some countries that have integrated providers of traditional medicine into their national health services, and traditional midwives and birth attendants into maternal health care for indigenous women. In this context, PAHO is also promoting knowledge dialogues to catalyze various related processes (e.g., recognition, respect, integration).

5. **Capacity development at all levels:** This area has shown the most progress at the local level. For example, intercultural facilitators and staff at the first level of care, among others, have received training. Important achievements have been made in terms of communication, signage, and regulations that enable women to be accompanied in childbirth, the vertical position in delivery, and providing the placenta to the mother. Among the instruments promoted by PAHO to integrate the intercultural approach and to plan actions for improvement, the tool to promote culturally safe childbirth has been applied in various contexts in different countries of the subregion (Argentina, Plurinational State of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay, and Peru) and has been requested by several other countries for 2023.<sup>11</sup>

### **Final comments**

PAHO reaffirms its commitment to help countries advance toward meeting indigenous health targets and achieving universal health without leaving anyone behind. To this end, the Organization promotes the social participation of indigenous women, women leaders, and midwives through knowledge dialogues, recognition of ancestral knowledge and traditional medicine, and integration of the intercultural approach into health services that attend the reproductive processes of indigenous women.

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<sup>11</sup> See Note 8