

Improving Maternal Healthcare: Combating Obstetric Fistula

Educate your FMLA/affiliate and campus community about real threats to reproductive and maternal health services around the globe. Screen and discuss the video “Love, Labor, Loss” which highlights a problem facing young women across the globe—obstetric fistula. Raise student consciousness about the real life consequences of unequal access to healthcare for millions of mothers both in the United States and around the globe.

Partnering Organization and Contact:

Zap Mama and Governess Films, www.lovelaborloss.com

Contact your Campus Organizer for more information about obtaining the film.

Background Information:

According to the WHO (World Health Organization), it is estimated that more than 2 million women in the developing world suffer from obstetric fistula. Obstetric fistula occurs when a woman’s pelvis is too small, her fetus is too big, or the fetus is poorly positioned and she does not have access to basic health services. Unable to give birth to the full-grown fetus, a woman may struggle for days to push it through the birth canal. Because many women live in remote areas without access to skilled birth attendants or the possibility of a caesarean section, a woman with an obstructed pregnancy may be in labor for 6 days or more. During the obstructed labor, the pressure of the fetus’ head prevents blood from reaching the woman’s pelvic tissue. The tissue between the woman’s vagina and bladder or her vagina and rectum, or both, dies, leaving a fistula, or hole, that leaks urine and/or feces uncontrollably. The stench and wetness that accompanies the condition often prompts her husband, family, and community to shun her, leaving the woman physically and socially exiled. If she is left untreated, she may suffer nerve damage in her legs, making it difficult for her to walk. She may also face a slow, premature death from infection and kidney failure.

Although a woman of any age can get fistula, it is more prevalent in young women in poor regions of the world. For example, cultural norms in sub-Saharan Africa often dictate that girls/women marry at an early age. In many cases, their bodies are not mature enough when they become pregnant, and they often suffer from poor nutrition and lack fundamental prenatal care.

Most fistulas can be repaired with a simple surgical procedure. However, in the regions where fistula is common, there are few surgeons trained in fistula repair and few facilities equipped to respond to the demand. The cost of a fistula repair operation is only a few hundred dollars, but it is beyond the means of the usually impoverished victims of fistula.

Take Action to Improve Global Maternal Healthcare!

The documentary “Love, Labor, Loss” profiles women in Niger living with obstetric fistula. Produced by Governess Films and supported by the Feminist Majority Foundation, this feature-length film captures the stories of women living with fistula at the Niamey National Hospital and the medical team of Nigerian and Western doctors working together to repair the women’s fistulas. The film explores the reintegration process that occurs after a woman has been treated and returns to her community.

Watch for “The Woman Tour,” Coming to a City Near You

In an effort to raise awareness about obstetric fistula, recording artist Zap Mama will be heading “The Woman Tour” in Fall 2005. Zap Mama and Governess Films will travel to cities and college campuses across the United States to both screen the film and educate about what students in the U.S. can do to help eradicate this problem. Visit www.lovelaborloss.com for more information or contact your FMF Campus Organizer at 1.866.444.FMLA.

Host a screening and discussion of “Love, Labor, Loss” on Your Campus

If the tour is not coming to a city near you, your group can still educate on this issue by **requesting the “Love, Labor, Loss” organizing kit** and advocacy materials.

- For \$75, your group can receive the Video Packet which includes:
 - A VHS or DVD copy of the 15-minute Advocacy Video narrated by Tony Award-winning actress Tonya Pinkins, with music by Zap Mama
 - A one-hour VHS or DVD version of the final film
 - A discussion guidebook to help facilitate screenings and supplemental informational materials on obstetric fistula and safe motherhood
- For \$30, the group can receive the stand-alone Advocacy Video.

Set up a Table or Host a Discussion Forum on the Status of Global Maternal Healthcare

Highlight the ways in which high levels of maternal mortality are a symptom of the neglect of women's most fundamental human rights. Use resources from the **White Ribbon Campaign for Safe Motherhood** (www.whiteribbonalliance.com) to raise awareness about the consequences of inadequate healthcare for mothers in the United States and around the world. Make the connection between maternal health and issues such as violence against women and unequal access to healthcare for the world's poor.