



International Confederation of Midwives

PRESS RELEASE

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India: one billion people – where are the midwives?

The opening events of the 26th Triennial Congress of the International Confederation of Midwives included:

- A moving ceremony of dedication in St Stephan's Cathedral, conducted by representatives of the five faiths - Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism – who prayed together for love, peace, happiness, fruitfulness and hope
- A dance by a group of Hindu women
- Representative midwives from each of 79 countries – many of them striking in national costume – entering the Austria Centre under their country's flag to be greeted by 2,200 colleagues
- Wonderful music from a Vienna women's orchestra and also from the 'No Problem' band – a set of musicians who are all living with the challenge of a disability

The opening keynote speech of the Congress took forward a number of the same themes. Indian midwife Dr M Prakasamma told the Congress participants of the history and current situation of midwives in India.

She described the work of the traditional birth attendants – the *dais* – who have always worked in the villages with women and their families. Then the long years of British influence in India brought changes. Nurses came along with the armed forces and worked in the military hospitals; missionaries came too and many of them, as well as offering religious teaching, provided care for women and families in the rural communities. From these two models arose the 'auxiliary nurse midwife' (ANM) - a health professional who enhanced the practice of midwifery with improved knowledge of hygiene, physiology and the danger signals in pregnancy and labour.

Sadly, the progress in provision of midwifery care failed to advance. The ANMs who had worked successfully in the community alongside the *dais* came under pressure to become general community health workers and soon their midwifery skills were lost.

Although Dr Prakasamma herself has founded a Society of Midwives in India, it is an uphill struggle to advance the status of the profession. The theme of challenge to midwives is certainly present in India: with the help of midwives worldwide – the theme of hope will be there as well.

The ICM is a Confederation of 83 national midwifery associations from 70 countries, founded in 1919. It aims to 'advance world-wide the aims and aspirations of midwives in the attainment of improved outcomes for women in their childbearing years, their newborn and their families wherever they reside'. Major international congresses are held every three years. The 26th Congress currently taking place in Vienna, Austria, includes over 750 presentations. Keynote speeches are given by leading midwives from every region of the world.

For further information contact ICM headquarters or visit the website www.internationalmidwives.org