

## **Christy Turlington Burns and Every Mother Counts: Fifteen Years Advancing Maternal Health**

Christiana Rebelle, PhD

In the fifteen years since Every Mother Counts (EMC) was founded, Christy Turlington Burns has become one of the most visible and influential advocates for maternal health, globally and in the United States. What began as a deeply personal experience has grown into an international movement with a mission to make the maternal health journey before, during, and after childbirth safe for everyone, everywhere. “I became a maternal health advocate the day I became a mother,” Turlington Burns recalls. “That was the day I also became a statistic.” After experiencing a postpartum hemorrhage following the birth of her first child, she discovered that hundreds of thousands of women around the world die each year from similar, preventable complications. Intergenerational awareness also fuels her advocacy, knowing firsthand how the death of a mother reverberates over time in families. She recounts, “My mother’s paternal grandmother died in childbirth. Her husband and children never recovered from that loss.”

Globally, more than 700 women die each day from complications related to pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period, approximately one woman every two minutes (World Health Organization, WHO, 2025). In the United States, the maternal mortality rate is the highest among high-income countries, with approximately two deaths per day (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2025). These outcomes disproportionately impact communities of color, especially Black and Indigenous women. A person is more likely to die from complications of pregnancy and childbirth than their mother was a generation ago, which underscores systemic failures in the United

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*Note.* Christy Turlington Burns talks to Naserian Oletiyo in the postnatal ward at the FAME hospital in Tanzania. (Sarah Waiswa, 2024)

States healthcare, despite its high spending (CDC, 2025). EMC is working to change this. As Turlington Burns points out, “Nearly all of these deaths are preventable.”

In 2010, following the release of her documentary *No Woman, No Cry*, Turlington Burns launched Every Mother Counts. The organization was established to raise awareness, support community-led initiatives, and advocate for systems change to improve maternal health worldwide. Since then, EMC has invested over \$48 million in advocacy, grantmaking, and awareness-raising programs, reaching more than 1.9 million women, families, and healthcare workers (EMC, 2025). “We aim to educate and engage the public so they can be part of the solution,” she explains. “We aren’t waiting for a cure. We know how to save these lives. It’s so clear that women’s lives are safer when the resources are there.” This clarity of purpose drives EMC’s approach, which centers on locally led efforts and prioritizes populations most affected by inequities in care, including Black and Indigenous women, women in rural areas, and displaced individuals. In 2024 alone, EMC supported 49 grantee partner organizations across nine core countries and 16 states. Notably, 96% of grantees in the United States are led by BIPOC women, and 100% serve communities that are uninsured, underinsured, or enrolled in Medicaid (EMC, 2025).

One of EMC’s most visible awareness campaigns centers on distance running, an effort that symbolically mirrors the journeys many pregnant

individuals endure to reach care. “In many countries, pregnant women walk an average of 5k for basic care,” says Turlington Burns. “It’s not uncommon to travel 26 miles to reach emergency services, even while in labor.” Running has become a way for EMC supporters to fundraise and spotlight access issues. “Every time I go out for a run, I think about these women,” she says. “Some of whom I may never meet but know I can help.” To date, Team EMC runners have run thousands of miles, raising more than \$8.5 million that directly fund maternal health programs (EMC, 2025).

As EMC marks its 15-year milestone, the organization has launched the Endurance Fund, a strategy designed to maintain stability in the face of political unrest, climate-related disasters, and shifting funding landscapes. The Endurance Fund ensures that EMC can continue to support partners on the frontlines, respond quickly to crises, and continue to tell the stories that move people to action. Despite political uncertainty and stalled progress in maternal health, EMC remains resolute. Their model, rooted in partnership, advocacy, and storytelling, demonstrates the power of sustained commitment. “I strongly believe that the life of every mother does count,” Turlington Burns says. “Maternal health is a universal issue that affects each of us. Women who are bringing life into the world deserve access to quality care, and every child deserves a healthy mother to love and protect them.”

The maternal health crisis is daunting, but EMC continues to work towards building a world where maternal health is considered a basic human right. Clinicians, researchers, educators, and policy leaders play a vital role in the next phase. “We want anyone who connects to this issue to join us,” says Turlington Burns. “Our long-term success depends on how deeply our community engages.” EMC offers many opportunities to get involved, ranging from supporting grantees and sharing stories to influencing policy and investing in the next generation of leaders. As Every Mother Counts enters its next chapter, the work ahead remains urgent, but not insurmountable. As the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) notes, “Progress [on maternal health] is possible, but concerted action will be needed” (UNICEF, 2024, para. 3). EMC demonstrates how targeted, community-centered interventions, grounded in both passion and empirical data, can advance maternal health outcomes globally. Turlington Burns remains dedicated to the vision that started it all: “I will do what I am doing as long as the work is needed.”

## References

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