

What is the Difference Between Professional Associations and Regulatory Bodies in Midwifery?

ICM defines a midwives' association as a professional association of midwives that is the voice for midwives, supporting midwives, building professionalism and representing the interests of midwives to governments and other stakeholders. The ultimate goal of a midwives' association is to enhance personalised, quality sexual, reproductive, maternal and newborn health services through autonomous, responsible and accountable midwives working across their full scope of practice. As an association representing and speaking for midwives, a midwives' association does not regulate the profession, although it may provide standards and professional activities that contribute to regulatory frameworks. Midwives' associations are usually organised as non-profit, civil society organisations, with voluntary membership.

Read more about the role of a professional midwives' association in our Definition of a Midwives' Association article.[ID1]

On the other hand, a midwifery regulatory authority is created by a government, usually through legislation, to ensure public safety by regulating the practice of individual midwives. Registration by a regulatory authority is mandatory for midwives to practise and to use the title 'midwife'. Adherence to regulatory requirements is mandatory for registered and/or licensed midwives.

Regulatory bodies are usually organised as public authorities and midwives pay fees for registration, recertification and/or other regulatory functions. A regulatory authority ensures public safety by setting standards and monitoring adherence of midwives to these standards. In this way a regulatory authority holds midwives to account for their practise. The focus of the regulatory authority is public safety and advocating for midwives would create a conflict of interest. Usually, a country will have a midwives' association and a midwifery regulator authority because they have different roles.

ICM is a professional (midwives') association, and our members are professional (midwives') associations.

Regulatory bodies cannot be full members of ICM but can be affiliate members.

Activities of a regulatory body generally include:

- Defining the scope of practice of a midwife (consistent with ICM's definition and scope of practice)
- Setting standards for pre-registration midwifery education
- Approving pre-registration midwifery education programmes
- Accrediting midwifery education institutions providing the approved pre-registration midwifery education programmes
- Auditing pre-registration programmes and midwifery education institutions
- Setting the criteria for registration and/or licensure and developing standards and processes for registration and licensure
- Maintaining a register of midwives and making it publicly available
- Implementing mechanisms through which midwives regularly demonstrate their continuing competence to practise
- Defining expected standards of conduct and what constitutes unprofessional conduct or professional misconduct
- Investigating, determining and resolving complaints about a midwife's practice
- Imposing, reviewing and removing penalties, sanctions and conditions on practice
- Transparently managing complaints in relation to competence, conduct or health impairment and in accordance with principles of natural justice
- Setting the standards of conduct and ethics for midwives

What are key differences between professional associations and regulatory bodies?

Professional Association	Regulatory Body
Protects the interest of midwives	Protects the safety of the public
Membership is voluntary	Membership and participation in regulatory activities is mandatory
Led by a constitution and board of directors mainly of midwives	Led by legislation that sets the scope of regulatory activity, governed by appointed and elected midwives and lay people
Provides education, networking and other opportunities to midwives to aid them professionally	Develops standards of competence midwives must adhere to
Participates in the policymaking progress to benefit midwives	Participates in the policymaking process to mitigate and address risks to the public
Encourages adherence to codes of conduct and ethics	Sets code of conduct and ethics, with the power to enforce them
Supports midwives through disciplinary processes	Undertakes disciplinary processes and can impose sanctions

Both types of organisations should have transparent processes for selecting the governing group (Board or Council), aligned with the constitution (for associations) or legislation (for regulatory authorities). These mechanisms are often elections and for regulatory authorities some members will be appointed by the Minister of Health or similar function in government.

Professional associations and regulatory bodies have several common goals, including protecting the integrity of the midwifery profession, ensuring midwives' success and maintaining public trust in midwives. However, they have different mandates, purposes and powers.

Their roles are distinct - professional associations exist to advance the interests of their professions and practitioners, while regulatory bodies exist to protect the public.