



embrace

The Movement for Mothers

# LEARNING COMMUNITY



## MODULE SIX MOBILISATION

Join the movement  
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# 06

## MOBILISATION

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The previous five learning themes have looked at different aspects of motherhood in South Africa. It's now time to think about what we do with this knowledge. When we mobilise around a shared goal, we are able to achieve so much more than when we go it alone. The sad reality is that in South Africa, there isn't a lot of mobilisation around the challenges that mothers face.

Mothers are some of the most vulnerable people in the country, but no one is looking out for them. We want to change that, and we need your support!

By the end of this module you should:

- ☒ Understand and empathize with mothers who experience challenges related to their birthing, breastfeeding, sense of belonging and their identity
- ☒ Realize that every mother's experience is unique but there is something shared in being a mother and we can build community based on that
- ☒ Be inspired to take action to support mothers and families in South Africa
- ☒ Know how to take action that will effect meaningful change for mothers in communities across the country

# INSPIRE & CONNECT

A different motherhood requires a different society.

- Nazaret Castro

Motherhood can be lonely. Being at home alone with a baby and being responsible for keeping their little body alive is hard. Trying to look after that baby as best as you know, hearing advice from so many different people and not knowing what to do – it can be overwhelming. Even when mothers are surrounded by other people, they can feel isolated and under pressure to show that they are happy with being a mother.

Mothers need to know that someone sees them, without judging them. They need someone to witness their journey, to say to them: "I see you, I hear you, I'm here for you." There should not be any conditions to being a witness. A witness is not there to give advice, or to criticise. A witness is there to be present, visible and reachable to the mother. A witness is there to reassure the mother that she is making progress, day by day. When a mother has a witness to her experience, she feels comforted, less alone, and connected to another person. She feels safe and secure and knows that she has someone to turn to when she needs help.

## Theresa's Story

*When Theresa gave birth to her first child, she expected to feel instant love and a deep connection to her baby. The first few days spent recovering in a private hospital were difficult: she was not offered and did not know to ask for help learning how to breastfeed. She left the hospital tired and worried about her son, who seemed to feed constantly. At home, her husband, mother-in-law and extended family were incredibly supportive, bringing meals, caring for the baby so she could sleep and shower and eat. In spite of this, she was struggling with healing from a C-section, and figuring out breastfeeding, and she found herself feeling incredibly lonely and isolated. Everything and everyone around her – the strong social support, the access to good healthcare and services – should have made her feel supported, but she still felt very alone, and like she would be alone in this indefinitely. Although her family was incredibly supportive, they would make her feel that she could only express her positive emotions about the baby and motherhood.*



# SUPPORTED MOTHERHOOD

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## Aisha's Story<sup>1</sup>

*When Aisha was pregnant, she began to struggle with anxiety. She suffered a series of panic attacks and would spend days in bed in the dark. She told everyone she was sick, but felt this was a lie and was ashamed. Aisha also felt ungrateful, and like something was wrong with her as she could not celebrate being pregnant. As she was about to become a single parent, she felt a lot of responsibility to 'pull her socks up' and be a strong mother-to-be. She attended free antenatal counselling services through a non-profit organisation. The counselling helped Aisha accept her feelings and not feel guilty about taking time to rest and take care of herself. After birth, she was happy to finally meet her baby and felt utterly connected and in love with her baby boy. Once she was back home with the baby, things changed. It suddenly hit her that she was solely responsible for a completely new life. Aisha also struggled with breastfeeding.*

*Distressed, she reached out to a friend, Quaneeta. Quaneeta and Aisha met in hospital, as their babies were born just hours apart, and their beds were next to each other in the ward. They bonded over their status as new moms. When Aisha told Quaneeta how she was feeling and what she was battling with, Quaneeta shared her own feelings, including how she felt guilty about struggling to breastfeed. Quaneeta put Aisha in touch with a lactation consultant from the hospital where they gave birth, and Aisha saw her at her six-week check-up. The lactation consultant assured Aisha that what she was going through was a normal process and told her that the first couple of weeks are rough for most new mothers. When Aisha was feeling stronger, she shared her story on social media and with other mothers. She felt that, in sharing her story, she could make it easier for moms out there who didn't know that what they were feeling was very common, and they were not alone.*

Theresa and Aisha both had difficulty with becoming a mother. While Theresa had many people around her, they were not offering her the support that she needed. For Aisha, the weight of being a single-mom was heavy. She had struggled for so long alone. When she did reach out to her friend, who listened to her without judging, she received the support that she needed to feel in control of her journey into motherhood.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from <https://bakedonline.co.za/aishas-experience-with-postnatal-depression/>

# SUPPORTED MOTHERHOOD

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In South Africa, we want to reach a point where all mothers feel supported. Thabisa, an Embrace member, explains what supported motherhood looks like.

I think as mothers, we need to form support groups in our community whereby we can talk about our struggle of being a mother. Whether you're a single mother or you have your partner like who is supporting you or your family because... why? Because I'm saying that is because more especially us Xhosa people say we don't have much to sit down and talk about how we feel about being a mother. I don't see that we support each other, all we do is judge. I think we can have support groups, we can have like we can go online try to research more because, when you look at it, it seems like it's a huge thing. But when you do your research, when you talk to other mothers, when you try to share your story with other people it seems like you are so relieved. It's like the package has been like off-loaded to you. I think praying, working together as mothers, support groups intended that like could work even if you went to a clinic. There they would have sessions about how to care about your child supporting each other, we share those problems, we would solve our problems. Like sisterhood thing. I think that's for me like supporting each other.

- Thabisa, Embrace member



# SETTING THE AGENDA

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If mothers are supported, which means that they have access to the information and services that they need, and they feel able to make decisions without being judged by others, then motherhood can be empowering to them. They won't feel forced into acting a particular way, and they have at least one person actively cheering them on.

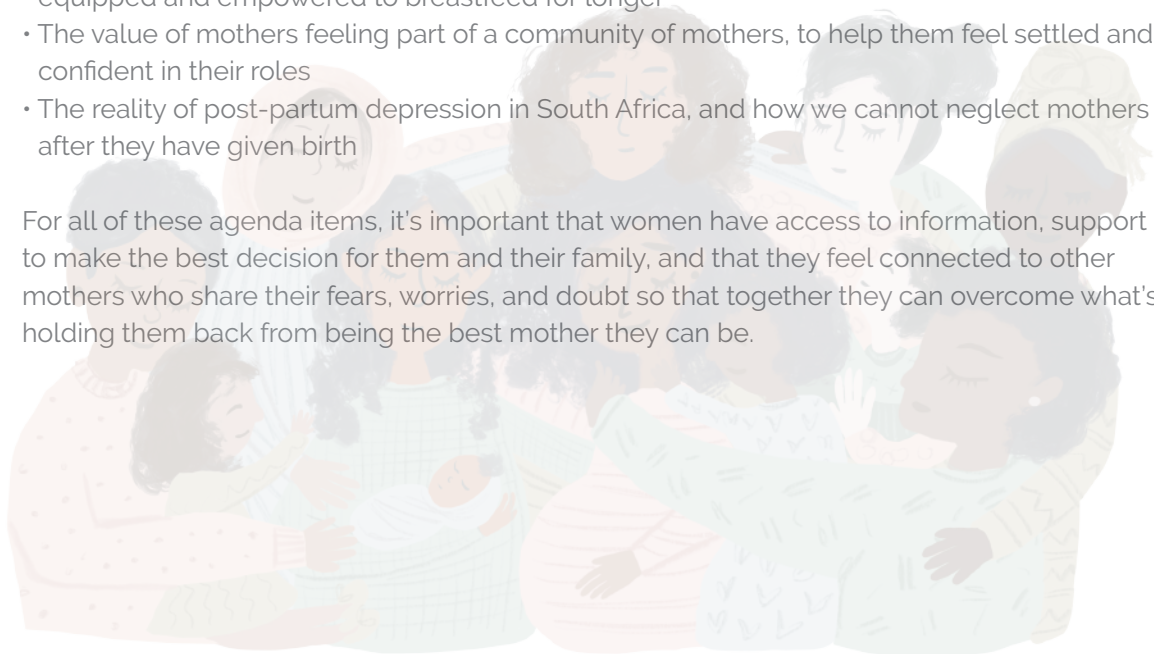
The big question that we face is how best to support mothers, when every mother has a unique and difference experience. How do we support the individual journey of each mother, while acting in the best interests of all mothers? What are the main issues that we need to put on the agenda? And, while we understand that supporting mothers also means supporting children and families, how do we ensure that we keep the focus of motherhood on mothers?

As Embrace, we believe that by addressing the difficulties that mothers face regarding Birth, Breastfeeding and Belonging, we're able to accommodate a diversity of motherhood experiences, while also prioritizing issues that are important for most mothers. We have set our agenda to align with the idea of supported motherhood.

Looking back on the previous learning modules, some of the items on our agenda have been:

- The challenges of lone motherhood and teenage motherhood and the special support that we need to offer these mothers
- The importance of antenatal care for pregnant women and the support services and information that soon-to-be moms are able to access
- The role that a birth companion can play in championing the interests of mothers in the delivery room
- The respect that all birthing mothers deserve from healthcare providers
- The necessity for mothers to have support from their family, friends, employers and broader society in order to breastfeed successfully
- The barriers to breastfeeding that we need to take down so that mothers are better equipped and empowered to breastfeed for longer
- The value of mothers feeling part of a community of mothers, to help them feel settled and confident in their roles
- The reality of post-partum depression in South Africa, and how we cannot neglect mothers after they have given birth

For all of these agenda items, it's important that women have access to information, support to make the best decision for them and their family, and that they feel connected to other mothers who share their fears, worries, and doubt so that together they can overcome what's holding them back from being the best mother they can be.



# THE ABCS OF ACTION

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At the end of this learning journey, you probably understand the challenges faced by new mothers, but do you know how best to help them? How can you be an ally, a friend, a witness to moms who need you? How can you get involved when the challenges facing mothers are so widespread?

## CONNECT:

Find a mom group to join in your neighbourhood, or start your own! Invite mothers and mother-supporters in your community or at your workplace, place of worship, or activity group to join you in coming together to talk about the highs and lows of motherhood. Be honest about your own journey, and encourage others to share their experiences.

Join the Embrace Movement by signing-up to our community. At Embrace, we strive to be a network-driven movement that is open to any individual, group or organisation passionate about making mothers and motherhood matter in South Africa, in benefit of women who mother and the children they raise. [Click here](#) to get connected to a network of mothers who share your dreams and fears for the future.

## INSPIRE:

Inspire others by sharing your own story of motherhood. Everyone's story matters and you don't know how your story will change the life of someone else. Sharing your story empowers you, and makes others feel less alone. Share your story with the Embrace community, by submitting it over [email](#), [WhatsApp](#) or on [Facebook](#).



*Click on the icons below*

TO SHARE YOUR STORY WITH US



# THE ABCS OF ACTION

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## MOBILISE:

Become an Embrace ambassador by sharing what you have learnt here with others. Share the memes, quotes, stories and stats with your social and professional circles. Ask questions of your workplace and of your local healthcare facility, and find out the support and resources that exist in your community for mothers to tap into.

We know that it can be daunting to find a way to make change happen. We suggest you start by reflecting on asking yourself the following:

- We know from module 2 that mothers often get a raw deal. Why is there not much noise about this?
- How can mother-supporters show up for mothers?
- How could mothers be given a louder voice or a bigger platform, in the way issues like #FeesMustFall are?
- What would justice for the mothers of South Africa look like?
- If we could write a bill of mothers' rights, what would be in it?

Embrace is also deeply committed to working towards mother-centred change. Nothing about mothers can change without involving mothers. We recommend that anyone mobilizing for and about motherhood check that they meet one or more of the following criteria:

- Your initiative is proudly pro-mother;
- The initiative owned by or involves community-embedded leaders or groups;
- The initiative is directed and informed (or interested in being directed and informed) by the experiences and voices of mothers on the ground;
- The focus is on matters of importance related to early motherhood priority areas, i.e. birth, breastfeeding and belonging; and the work will
- Will drive change for mothers in South Africa.

Do not underestimate the contribution that you, as one person, can make to a mother. What you do matters, and we're here to guide you as you grow into a mother-supporter who believes in making South Africa the best place to mother!

**Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much.**

-Helen Keller