

Extended Abstract

Community perceptions of socio-cultural factors that influence maternal mortality and their perspectives on how it could be prevented in Southeast Nigeria

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Nigeria has one of the highest rates of maternal deaths during pregnancy, childbirth and after childbirth in the developing world. The worst rates are seen in rural Nigerian communities. The major contributor to such high rates in rural Nigeria is the underuse of maternal services in health facilities. Instead, many rural Nigerian women use traditional services that are unsafe and not based on scientific evidence. With the traditional influence of community elders' perceptions and opinions on reproductive health decisions, such as the decision to seek delivery care in a hospital, it is important to understand what they think is causing underuse of health facilities and death during maternity, and to identify potential solutions for their communities. Underutilization of formal maternal care services and accredited health attendants is a major contributor to the high maternal mortality rates in rural communities in Nigeria. Perceptions of a poor quality of care and inaccessible services in health facilities strongly influence the low use of formal maternal care services. There is therefore a need to understand local perceptions about maternal health services utilization and maternal death. This study thereby aims to explore perceptions and beliefs about the underutilization of formal care and causes of maternal death, as well as to identify potential solutions to improve use and reduce maternal mortality in rural Nigeria. Maternal mortality is a global health issue with developing countries, such as Nigeria having an unacceptably high occurrence and levels of maternal death especially in the poor and rural communities (UNDP, 2015). Globally, Nigeria and India have been reported as the two countries which are hardest hit by maternal mortality. This research is an investigation of the socio-cultural factors that influence maternal mortality in a South Eastern Nigerian community, and what members of this community perceive to be the best approaches to improve maternal health to help reduce maternal mortality. The databases which were searched for a review of previous empirical research on maternal mortality included Interim, the UK's largest online database for midwifery articles, MEDLINE, CINAHL, Science Direct, Web of Science and Google scholar. The databases were explored using the following keywords: Maternal death/mortality, pregnancy, childbirth, culture, belief, death of women, prevention. The study used a qualitative methodology, which included focus group discussions and in-depth one-to-one interviews as the methods of data collection. The sample consisted of 39 participants included were traditional birth attendants, midwives, women, doctors, the village head, religious leader, and the youth leader. Initial findings suggest that, cultural beliefs and religious activities about childbirth as an obligation which every woman must obey, female genital mutilation, spiritual powers (Ogbanje), and also the position of women in the society influence the outcomes of pregnancy and increase the potential for maternal mortality. Thus, an understanding of the impact of cultural dynamics and influences on maternal health is needed for effective public health intervention to improve maternal health in Nigeria. This is because culture plays a vital role in the health of the individual, the family and the community.