

Maternal Matters: Boosting Health Knowledge and Service Access in Zone C of Benue State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Improving women's health through maternal healthcare services presents a significant challenge, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and Nigeria, leading to negative pregnancy outcomes for women of reproductive age. This study aimed to evaluate women's awareness of maternal healthcare services and identify the key services available. Using the Theory of Reasoned Action, a cross-sectional survey was carried out with 400 women who had experienced at least one pregnancy. Participants were selected through a multi-stage sampling technique, and data were gathered via questionnaires and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations, with Chi-square tests applied for inferential analysis using SPSS version 26.0. Qualitative data were subjected to content analysis. The majority of respondents, with average scores of 2.68, 2.79, and 2.38 on a three-point Likert scale, respectively, demonstrated awareness of maternal healthcare services, including prenatal, delivery, and postnatal care, according to the results. The study advocates for enhanced educational efforts from the Nigerian Government, NGOs, community health workers, and religious leaders to promote maternal healthcare utilization. It also recommends the consistent availability of services across health facilities and the abolition of user fees for public maternal health services.

INTRODUCTION

Maternal health serves as a vital measure of a country's overall health status, quality of life, and progress. There is a growing global emphasis on maternal well-being due to its essential role in ensuring the survival of individuals, families, and broader communities. Maternal healthcare services are designed to decrease rates of maternal mortality and morbidity, aiming to enhance the well-being of women throughout their pregnancies, facilitate safe deliveries, and assist in recovery after the physiological changes associated with childbirth. Given that women are integral to childbearing, nurturing, and managing household responsibilities, any loss or serious health impact on a mother is a tragedy that resonates deeply on both personal and societal levels.

As a result, maternal health has become a major area of concern for a wide range of stakeholders, including international organizations, non-profits, government entities, academic institutions, and communities. Although maternal health problems are widespread across various regions, they are particularly worst in low-income and developing countries. Reports indicate that in 2015, over 303,000 women died due to complications related to pregnancy and childbirth, which translates to approximately 830 maternal deaths daily (UNFPA, 2023). The statistics remained grim in 2017, with around 295,000 deaths recorded, averaging about 810 women per day (WHO, 2019). The World Health Organization highlights that maternal mortality rates are strikingly high in developing regions, especially in rural settings. In fact, Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia combined accounted for nearly 86% of global maternal deaths in 2017, with Nigeria alone contributing to 23% of these fatalities (WHO, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

This ongoing challenge of maternal mortality has triggered numerous global efforts aimed at improving women's health during and after pregnancy. One pioneering initiative was the Safe Motherhood Conference in Nairobi in February 1987, which drew attention to the alarming rates of maternal deaths and set a target to reduce maternal mortality rate by half within ten years. Participating nations pledged to enhance maternal healthcare through access to family planning, prenatal care, skilled assistance during delivery, and subsidized antenatal services (WHO, 2005; WHO et al., 2010; WHO, 2015). Subsequent conferences, including the World Summit for Children in 1990, the International Conference on Population and Development, and the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, further strengthened the global focus on maternal health. The Millennium Summit in 2000 marked a notable development in this domain, leading to the creation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which aimed to drastically reduce maternal mortality ratios between 1990 and 2015 while promoting universal access to reproductive health services. These goals evolved into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 3, which emphasizes the health and well-being of women and children by advocating for maternal death rates below 70 per 100,000 live births.

In Benue State, the situation is particularly worrisome, with a reported maternal mortality ratio of 1,189 deaths per 100,000 live births (Bola, Ujoh, Ukah & Lett, 2021). This alarming figure indicates the significant risks pregnant women

face in this region, especially those in rural areas who often lack access to essential healthcare and resources vital for improving their health outcomes.

Despite various maternal health interventions implemented in Benue State, high maternal mortality and morbidity rates persist. A study by Bola, Ujoh, Ukah, and Lett (2022) revealed that approximately 21.5% of women in the state are at risk for complications related to pregnancy, highlighting the urgent need to investigate the factors contributing to negative pregnancy outcomes. In this light, our present study aims to assess women's knowledge and awareness of available maternal healthcare services and examine how this understanding influences pregnancy outcomes within the Benue Southern Senatorial District (Zone C).

METHODOLOGY

The study used a cross-sectional design, which made it possible to assess various groups of people who differ in the important variable of interest but have similar socioeconomic level, educational attainment, and ethnicity.

This approach enables the collection of data from a wide array of participants at one specific time. As a result, the study aimed to capture the views of women of reproductive age regarding maternal healthcare services and pregnancy outcomes within the Benue South Senatorial District.

The investigation took place in Nigeria's Benue South Senatorial District, which encompasses nine local government areas: Ado, Agatu, Apa, Obi, Ogbadibo, Okpokwu, Ohimini, Oju, and Otukpo. The Apa local government area is located in the northwestern area of Makurdi, the capital city of Benue State. It is bordered by Agatu to the north, Gwer West to the west, Otukpo to the south, and Omala Local Government Area in Kogi State to the east. With an estimated population of over 100,000, it has a density ranging from 200 to 300 individuals per square kilometer. The predominant ethnic group in this area is the Idoma, with a smaller presence of Igalas and other ethnic communities.

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) Overview Introduced by Ajzen and Fishbein in 1967, the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) explores the relationship between people's attitudes and their behaviors. The central idea of TRA is that an individual's intention serves as the key predictor of their behavior. This intention is shaped by two primary factors: the person's attitude towards the specific behavior and the social norms affecting it. As noted by Braxter, Cha, and Kevin (2011), TRA focuses on understanding voluntary actions by investigating the motivations behind them.

According to TRA, the most significant indicator of whether someone will engage in a behavior is their intention (Glanz, Rimer, & Viswanath, 2015). These intentions arise from their attitudes and the subjective norms within their environment (Colman, 2015). Fishbein (1980) defines attitude as a cognitive component involving the evaluation of the possible outcomes of a behavior and their importance. Normative beliefs heavily influence how individuals perceive the social acceptability of certain actions, subsequently impacting their intentions to act or refrain from acting (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

When applying TRA to the use of maternal healthcare services by women in Benue South, it suggests that their community norms, attitudes, and intentions play a crucial role in their choices. If maternal healthcare services are positively perceived within the community, women are more likely to form favorable attitudes towards these services. On the other hand, negative perceptions can lead to unfavorable attitudes, resulting in lower usage rates. This relationship indicates that a positive community outlook can enhance a woman's perception of control and her intention to seek maternal healthcare.

However, TRA does have its criticisms and limitations. One significant critique is its inability to effectively predict behaviors related to access to necessary resources that may not be readily available. For example, if women are unaware of the existence of maternal healthcare options or if such services are scarce in their area, assessing their attitudes and behaviors toward these services becomes problematic. To address these limitations, the study will also consider the Social Cognitive Theory as a complementary perspective.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Knowledge of women on maternal healthcare services in Benue South (Zone C).

Results about women's awareness of maternal health care services are shown in this section. The findings were summarized and presented on Table 1.

Table 1. Knowledge of Women on Maternal Healthcare Services in Benue Zone C

S/N	Variables on knowlede	Aware	Unsure	Unaware	Mean	Std.Deviation
1	Aware of antenatal care services	301	29	46	2.68	.682
2	Aware of delivery care services	321	31	24	2.79	.548
3	Aware of post natal care services	201	118	57	2.38	.735

Source: Field Survey, 2023

The results of the quantitative data were also available online along with the participant replies from the interviews. A 29-year-old female saw that: I am well aware of the maternal health care services that are offered in medical facilities, such as prenatal care and delivery services, but I am not well informed on the availability or nature of postnatal care. I used to believe that if a woman went to antenatal care, or even if she doesn't, but gives birth in a hospital, she will be taken care of right away and the baby will be born safely. Maternal care ends at that point. After that, she goes back to her regular activities and only sometimes visits the clinics to get her kid vaccinated – not for herself, since she will be well by then. (KII. Adoka-Ehaje, 7/8/2023)

A 33year old woman on the other hand stated that: I am aware that antenatal care and deliveries are examples of maternal health care services. One can easily see that prenatal care and delivery services are for women who become

pregnant, begin regular checkups, and then give birth to their babies when the time is right. I also have some knowledge of postnatal care, which involves cleaning both the mother and the newborn after delivery. However, I believe that postpartum care is about ensuring that children have the right vaccinations. I am aware of postpartum care, but I don't believe it is specifically designed for women. I believe the purpose is to vaccinate the infants. Thus, I claim to be well-versed in postpartum health care services for women. (KII. APA 17/8/2023)

A 44 years old female health personnel during an interview session also observed that women were aware of the maternal health care services available but however stressed on antenatal and delivery services. She stated: We have maternal health care services in this health facility available for women and in many other facilities distributed in communities. Besides this health facility which is a primary health care facility there is a general hospital here, among other private health care facilities and the women are much aware of this.(KII. Okpokwu 10 /8/2023

Another participant a 35 years old woman observed that: I am aware that medical establishments offer maternity healthcare services. For example, I have visited maternal health care facilities for services and am aware of antenatal services, where expectant mothers go for regular checkups during pregnancy. However, I think a lady visits the clinic for antenatal care when she is experiencing pregnancy problems. (KII. Otukpo, 10/8/2023

A 49 years old male health personnel during an interview in one of the health centres noted that: We typically try our best to inform the ladies in this community about the maternal care services that are offered at our various facilities, and a considerable percentage of them are aware of them. Additionally, there have been notable advancements in comparison to a few years ago. Since women are now aware that some of them regularly attend prenatal care, the majority do not; occasionally, they skip prenatal care only to attend when they begin to experience problems during birth or at other times during their pregnancies. However, I would argue that the majority of them are aware of the existence of services. (KII. Obi, 14/8/2023)

In an interview, a 34-year-old woman stated: Many women are aware that maternal healthcare services are available at many of the medical facilities in my town. Even though some women are aware of the hospitals and clinics, they choose not to approach them. Women in my neighborhood frequently discuss maternity care services these days; even those who don't attend hear about them from others and are aware of them. (KII. Otobi 20/8/2023).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Benue State Government should prioritize making all critical maternal healthcare services accessible in public health facilities within communities. Improving accessibility will help remove obstacles that currently preclude women from taking advantage of these essential services.

Although women in the study area are aware of maternal healthcare offerings, awareness by itself does not lead to their utilization. Therefore, it is essential to provide further education on the importance of these services and

their positive impact on pregnancy outcomes. The Nigerian Government, along with NGOs, healthcare providers, medical sociologists, and faith leaders, should intensify efforts to educate women regarding the importance of maternal healthcare, including the risks associated with not using such services for both mothers and their children. This can be achieved through community outreach efforts utilizing various channels such as mass media, announcements in places of worship, talk shows, and informative billboards that emphasize the benefits of accessing maternal healthcare services. Such initiatives will enhance awareness, correct misconceptions, and encourage more women to engage with maternal healthcare services.

Maternal healthcare services are critical for achieving positive health outcomes for women of reproductive age. However, findings from this study indicate that the utilization of these services in communities faces several challenges, influenced by various factors. Low usage of maternal healthcare services can have detrimental effects not only on pregnancy outcomes but also on families, communities, and society as a whole. Given that the primary goal of maternal healthcare is to ensure that women have healthy pregnancies and births, it is crucial to improve the availability of health facilities, specifically maternal health services that are easily accessible to women, thereby promoting greater utilization.

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