

Respectful maternity care

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Every woman has the right to receive respectful maternity care (RMC). The concept of “respectful maternity care” has evolved and expanded over the past few decades to include diverse perspectives and frameworks.¹ Respectful maternity care is “the care organised for and provided to all women in a manner that maintains their dignity, privacy, and confidentiality, ensures freedom from harm and mistreatment, and enables informed choice and continuous support during labour and childbirth”.² The availability of RMC is essential for promoting timely care-seeking behaviour, and eventually ensuring the health and well-being of mothers and their babies. Disrespectful and abusive care has been recognised as one of the barriers to seeking timely maternity health services.³

A landscape analysis undertaken in 2010 defined seven key areas of disrespect and abuse in childbirth as: physical abuse, non-consented care, non-confidential care, non-dignified care, discrimination based on specific patient attributes, abandonment of care, and detention in facilities.⁴ In 2015, mixed-methods systematic

review of qualitative and quantitative evidence was conducted including 65 studies from 34 countries on the experiences and perspectives of women and health care providers related to mistreatment during childbirth in facilities.⁵ From these studies, a comprehensive typology of the mistreatment of women during childbirth was developed which include: physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, stigma and discrimination, failure to meet professional standards of care, poor rapport between women and providers, and health system conditions and constraints.⁵ While a number of interventions have aimed to address this issue, many women around the world continue to experience disrespectful and abusive care during childbirth.¹ As facility-based birth and the use of skilled birth attendants continue to rise, a focus on quality and RMC remains critical for improving global maternal health.

All pregnant women have the right to be free from harm and ill-treatment. Information, informed consent and refusal, respected for their choices and preferences, including the right to choose their birth companion; privacy and confidentiality be treated with dignity and respect, equality, freedom from discrimination and equitable care; health care and to the highest attainable level of health liberty, autonomy, self-determination, and freedom from coercion.⁶

The key components of RMC are: being free from harm and mistreatment; having privacy and confidentiality; dignified care; receiving information and being supported in the process of informed consent; continuous access to family and community support; high-quality physical environment and resources; equitable maternity care; effective communication; having choices and the opportunity to make decisions; availability of competent and motivated human resources; and receiving efficient, effective, and continuous care.⁶

Respectful maternity care is not only a crucial component of quality of care; it is a human right.¹ In 2014, WHO released a statement calling for the prevention and elimination of disrespect and abuse during childbirth,

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stating that every woman has the right to the highest attainable standard of health, including the right to dignified, respectful care during pregnancy and childbirth.⁶ Respectful and inclusive care is a key element of the provision of quality maternity care. Women who feel safe, supported, respected and able to participate in shared decision-making are likely to have more positive childbirth experiences.⁷ Respectful maternity care is not merely the absence of mistreatment, it is a care that is respectful, inclusive and of good quality.

In October 2018, the Government of Nepal adopted the Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Rights Act of Nepal. The legislation marks the first time that respectful maternity care has been included in national legislation and paves the way for the provision of high-quality, respectful care for mothers and babies in public and private health facilities in the country.⁸ In a study conducted in Nepal, only 17% women perceived respectful maternity care.⁹ In another study, all women

reported at least one category of disrespect and abuse during labor and delivery, the most common being non-consented care (100%), non-dignified care (72.2%) and non-confidential care (66.6%).¹⁰

Nepal has one of the highest Maternal mortality rates (239/100,000 live births) in Asia. The institutional delivery rate in Nepal is only 59.3%.¹¹ The government of Nepal has focussed on institutional delivery to reduce maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality. It has to reduce MMR to 70 per 100,000 live births by the year 2030 to meet sustainable development goal (SDG) 3. Realising the importance of universal access to skilled birth attendance as a crucial strategy to reduce maternal and neonatal mortality, Nepal has the target of achieving institutional birth to 90% by 2030 to reach the SDG goal.¹² One of the crucial ways of increasing institutional deliveries is providing respectful maternity care. Women will be motivated to facility-based delivery only when they get respectful care during labour and delivery.

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