

The prevention and elimination of disrespect and abuse during facility-based childbirth

WHO statement

Every woman has the right to the highest attainable standard of health, which includes the right to dignified, respectful health care.



photo: UNICEF

Many women experience disrespectful and abusive treatment during childbirth in facilities worldwide. Such treatment not only violates the rights of women to respectful care, but can also threaten their rights to life, health, bodily integrity, and freedom from discrimination. This statement calls for greater action, dialogue, research and advocacy on this important public health and human rights issue.

Background

Ensuring universal access to safe, acceptable, good quality sexual and reproductive health care, particularly contraceptive access and maternal health care, can dramatically reduce global rates of maternal morbidity and mortality. Over recent decades, facility delivery rates have improved as women are increasingly incentivized to utilize facilities for childbirth, through demand generation, community mobilization, education, financial incentives or policy measures.

However, a growing body of research on women's experiences during pregnancy, and particularly childbirth, paints a disturbing picture. Many women across the globe experience disrespectful, abusive or neglectful treatment during childbirth in facilities. (1-3) This constitutes a violation of trust between women and their health-care providers and can also be a powerful disincentive for women to seek and use maternal health care services. (4) While disrespectful and abusive treatment of women may occur throughout pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period, women are particularly vulnerable during childbirth. Such practices may have direct adverse consequences for both the mother and infant.

Reports of disrespectful and abusive treatment during childbirth in facilities have included outright physical abuse, profound humiliation and verbal abuse, coercive or unconsented medical procedures (including sterilization), lack of confidentiality, failure to get fully informed consent, refusal to give pain medication, gross violations of privacy, refusal of admission to health facilities, neglecting women during childbirth to suffer life-threatening, avoidable complications, and detention of women and their newborns in facilities after childbirth due to an inability to pay.(5) Among others, adolescents, unmarried women, women of low socio-economic status, women from ethnic minorities, migrant women and women living with HIV are particularly likely to experience disrespectful and abusive treatment.(5)

Every woman has the right to the highest attainable standard of health, which includes the right to dignified, respectful health care throughout pregnancy and childbirth, as well as the right to be free from violence and discrimination. Abuse, neglect or disrespect during childbirth can amount to a violation of a woman's fundamental human rights, as described in internationally adopted human rights standards and principles.(6-9) In particular, pregnant women have a

right to be equal in dignity, to be free to seek, receive and impart information, to be free from discrimination, and to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, including sexual and reproductive health.(10)

Despite the existing evidence that suggests women's experiences of disrespect and abuse during facility-based childbirth are widespread,(1-3,5) there is currently no international consensus on how disrespect and abuse should be scientifically defined and measured. Consequently, its prevalence and impact on women's health, well-being and choices is not known. A considerable research agenda exists to better define, measure and understand disrespectful and abusive treatment of women during childbirth, and how it can be prevented and eliminated.

To achieve a high standard of respectful care during childbirth, health systems must be organized and managed in a manner that ensures respect for women's sexual and reproductive health and human rights. While many governments, professional societies, researchers, international organizations, civil society groups and communities worldwide have already highlighted the need to address this problem (11-14) in many instances policies to promote respectful maternal care have not been adopted, are not specific, or have not yet been translated into meaningful action.



photo: World bank

In order to prevent and eliminate disrespect and abuse during facility-based childbirth globally, the following actions should be taken:

1. Greater support from governments and development partners for research and action on disrespect and abuse

Greater support from governments and development partners is needed for further research on defining and measuring disrespect and abuse in public and private facilities worldwide, and to better understand its impact on women's health experiences and choices. Evidence on the effectiveness and implementation of interventions in different contexts is required to provide the necessary technical guidance to governments and health-care service providers.

2. Initiate, support and sustain programs designed to improve the quality of maternal health care, with a strong focus on respectful care as an essential component of quality care

Greater action is needed to support changes in provider behaviour, clinical environments and health systems to ensure that all women have access to respectful, competent and caring maternity health care services. This can include (but is not limited to) social support through a companion of choice, mobility, access to food and fluids, confidentiality, privacy, informed choice, information for women on their rights, mechanisms for redress following violations, and ensuring high professional standards of clinical care. The focus on safe, high-quality, people-centered care as part of universal health coverage can also help inform action.

3. Emphasizing the rights of women to dignified, respectful health care throughout pregnancy and childbirth

International human rights frameworks highlight disrespect and abuse during childbirth as an important human rights issue, (6-8,15) and can aid women's health advocates in raising awareness and developing policy initiatives on the importance of respectful maternal care. Rights-based approaches to organizing and managing health systems can facilitate the provision of respectful, quality care at birth.

4. Generating data related to respectful and disrespectful care practices, systems of accountability and meaningful professional support are required

Health systems must be accountable for the treatment of women during childbirth, ensuring clear policies on rights and ethical standards are developed and implemented. Health-care providers at all levels require support and training to ensure

that childbearing women are treated with compassion and dignity. Those health services that already provide respectful maternity care, promote participation of women and communities and have implemented processes to track and continuously improve respectful care need to be identified, studied and documented.

5. Involve all stakeholders, including women, in efforts to improve quality of care and eliminate disrespectful and abusive practices

Ending disrespect and abuse during childbirth can only be achieved through an inclusive process, involving the participation of women, communities, health-care providers, managers, health professional training, education and certification bodies, professional associations, governments, health systems stakeholders, researchers, civil society groups and international organizations. We call upon these entities to join in efforts to ensure that disrespect and abuse is consistently identified and reported, and that locally appropriate preventative and therapeutic measures are implemented.

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This statement is endorsed by:

American Refugee Committee
Averting Maternal Death and Disability, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University
Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE)
Center for Reproductive Rights
Center for the Right to Health (CRH)
Commonwealth Medical Trust (Commat)
Family Care International
Human Rights in Childbirth
Human Rights Watch
International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO)
International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research, Al Azhar University
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