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Respectful maternity care and its impact on maternal outcomes: A narrative review

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Abstract

Respectful Maternity Care (RMC) is increasingly recognized as a fundamental human right and a key dimension of quality maternal healthcare. Despite advances in obstetric services, disrespect and abuse during childbirth remain pervasive, adversely affecting women's health-seeking behavior and overall well-being. This narrative review synthesizes evidence on the importance of RMC and its impact on maternal outcomes. Literature was reviewed from databases such as PubMed, CINAHL, and Google Scholar (2010-2025). Findings indicate that RMC characterized by dignity, privacy, autonomy, and compassionate communication improves maternal satisfaction, enhances facility-based deliveries, reduces anxiety and postpartum trauma, and promotes better clinical outcomes. Barriers include provider workload, limited training, and inadequate policy enforcement. Obstetric and gynecological nurses play a crucial role in implementing RMC principles through empathetic communication, informed consent, and advocacy. Integration of RMC into nursing education, institutional protocols, and health policies is essential to achieve positive childbirth experiences and improved maternal outcomes.

Keywords: Respectful maternity care, obstetric nursing, maternal satisfaction, childbirth, patient dignity, midwifery

Introduction

Maternal health remains a critical global concern, especially in developing countries where preventable maternal deaths persist. Beyond clinical interventions, the quality of interpersonal care significantly influences maternal outcomes and utilization of health services. Respectful Maternity Care (RMC), as defined by the White Ribbon Alliance (2011), refers to care that upholds women's dignity, privacy, and autonomy while ensuring freedom from harm and mistreatment.

The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes that every woman has the right to the highest attainable standard of health, including dignified maternity care¹. However, studies show widespread disrespect and abuse during childbirth such as verbal abuse, discrimination, neglect, and non-consented care which deter women from seeking institutional deliveries.²

Nurses and midwives are central to promoting RMC, given their continuous presence during labor and delivery. This review explores the concept, principles, barriers, and the impact of RMC on maternal outcomes, with a focus on implications for obstetric and gynecologic nursing practice.

Concept of Respectful Maternity Care

The White Ribbon Alliance^[3] defined RMC as care that maintains dignity, privacy, and confidentiality; ensures freedom from harm; and enables informed choice and continuous support. WHO^[4] outlines RMC as an essential component of quality intrapartum care, integrating both clinical competence and respectful interpersonal interaction.

Key Principles of RMC

According to WHO and UNFPA frameworks, the primary components include:

- Freedom from abuse and neglect
- Informed consent and decision-making
- Privacy and confidentiality
- Equity and non-discrimination
- Effective communication and emotional support
- Presence of a chosen birth companion

RMC therefore merges human rights and professional ethics, creating a holistic model of care that supports physical, emotional, and psychological well-being.

Forms of Disrespect and Abuse

Bohren *et al.* [2] categorized mistreatment during childbirth into seven domains: physical abuse, non-consented care, non-confidential care, non-dignified care, discrimination, abandonment, and detention in facilities. Studies from Ethiopia, Tanzania, and India show that between 30-70% of women report at least one form of mistreatment [5, 6].

Disrespectful experiences undermine women's trust in healthcare providers, resulting in delayed care-seeking, avoidance of institutional births, and increased home deliveries ultimately worsening maternal and neonatal outcomes [7].

Impact of Respectful Maternity Care on Maternal Outcomes

1. Improved Maternal Satisfaction

Maternal satisfaction reflects women's perceptions of the care received. Evidence suggests that RMC significantly enhances satisfaction and future service utilization. Sando *et al.* [8] found that respectful interactions, effective communication, and supportive companionship increased satisfaction rates and willingness to recommend facility-based births.

2. Increased Skilled Birth Attendance

Respectful care positively influences women's decisions to deliver in health facilities. In Ethiopia, implementation of RMC interventions led to a 25-30% increase in institutional deliveries. [9] Women who perceive care as respectful are more likely to return for antenatal and postnatal services.

3. Reduction in Maternal Anxiety and Psychological Trauma

Women's emotional experiences during childbirth have lasting mental health implications. Continuous emotional support and respect reduce anxiety, fear, and postpartum depression. RMC contributes to a positive childbirth experience, mitigating trauma and strengthening maternal-infant bonding [10].

4. Enhanced Clinical Outcomes

Respectful care can indirectly improve clinical outcomes by reducing stress-induced complications and promoting cooperation between women and care providers. Bulto *et al.* [11] found that women receiving RMC had fewer obstetric interventions and better neonatal Apgar scores, likely due to lower physiological stress.

Barriers to Implementation of RMC

Despite policy recognition, RMC remains inconsistently practiced due to multiple barriers:

- **Health system constraints:** Overcrowding, low staffing ratios, and lack of infrastructure. [12]
- **Limited provider training:** Many nurses and midwives lack formal training in communication and ethics.
- **Cultural norms:** Hierarchical provider-patient relationships often normalize disrespect.
- **Weak accountability mechanisms:** Absence of monitoring tools to track violations.

Addressing these barriers requires systemic reforms, continuous training, and community engagement.

Role of Nurses and Midwives

Nurses and midwives are pivotal in operationalizing RMC principles within healthcare facilities. Their responsibilities include:

- Ensuring informed consent and patient participation in decision-making.
- Providing continuous emotional and physical support during labor.
- Upholding privacy and confidentiality at all stages of care.
- Advocating for policy implementation and reporting mistreatment.
- Modeling compassionate and ethical behavior for junior staff and students.

Integrating RMC modules into nursing curricula and pre-service training can strengthen future generations of care providers. [13]

Strategies to Promote RMC

Effective interventions to enhance RMC include:

- Education and sensitization programs for healthcare workers.
- Institutional policies emphasizing patient rights and accountability.
- Inclusion of RMC indicators in quality audits.
- Community-based advocacy, empowering women to demand respectful care.
- Facility redesign ensuring privacy and comfort.

Innovative approaches such as client feedback mechanisms, birth companionship policies, and digital feedback systems have shown promise in promoting accountability [14].

Nursing Implications

For obstetric and gynecologic nurses, RMC is integral to professional ethics and quality care. Implementing RMC principles can:

- Strengthen nurse-patient relationships.
- Enhance trust and compliance with medical advice.
- Contribute to safe, dignified, and satisfying childbirth experiences.
- Improve institutional reputation and maternal outcomes.

Nurses should engage in continuous professional development, participate in RMC advocacy programs, and collaborate with interdisciplinary teams to ensure that maternity care is both technically sound and emotionally supportive.

Conclusion

Respectful Maternity Care is not only a human right but also a determinant of maternal health outcomes. Evidence demonstrates that respectful, compassionate, and patient-centered maternity care improves maternal satisfaction, increases facility utilization, reduces psychological trauma, and enhances clinical outcomes. Obstetric and gynecologic nurses play an essential role in fostering this culture of respect. Institutional commitment, supportive supervision, and policy integration are critical to sustaining RMC in all

healthcare settings. Promoting RMC is therefore indispensable to achieving global and national maternal health targets, including those outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals.

Declaration

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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