



Position statement: Respectful care, the commitment of midwives in South Africa

Background

Pregnancy and childbirth are significant events in the lives of women and families but it also represents a time of intense vulnerability. Safe motherhood is usually restricted to physical safety, but childbearing is also an important rite of passage, with deep personal and cultural significance for a woman and her family. Because motherhood is specific to women, issues of gender equity and gender violence are important considerations in maternity care. The notion of safe motherhood must be expanded beyond the prevention of morbidity or mortality to encompass respect for women's basic human rights, including respect for women's autonomy, dignity, feelings, choices, and preferences during maternity care.

The relationship between the woman and maternity care providers and the maternity care system during pregnancy and childbirth is vitally important. These encounters establish the opportunity for essential and potentially lifesaving health services. Furthermore, women's experiences with caregivers at this time have the impact to empower and comfort or to inflict lasting damage and emotional trauma, adding to or detracting from women's confidence and self-esteem and her ability to mother her newborn. The memories of their childbearing experiences stay with women for a lifetime and are often shared with other women, contributing to a climate of confidence or doubt around childbearing.

A growing body of research evidence, experience, and case reports collected in maternity care systems from the wealthiest to the poorest nations worldwide paints a disturbing picture. Disrespect and abuse of women seeking maternity care is becoming an urgent problem and creating a growing community of concern, especially within the midwifery profession.

Position

SOMSA believes that all childbearing women need and deserve respectful care and protection of their autonomy and right to self-determination; this includes special care to protect the mother-baby dyad as well as women in a context of marginalization or heightened vulnerability. Interpersonal care that is disrespectful and abusive to women before, during, and after birth is appalling because of the high value societies attach to motherhood and because we know the intense vulnerability of women during this time. As midwives we believe that midwives and women should have a relationship based on respect and form a partnership to improve maternal and child healthcare. SOMSA believes women have a right to a midwife as the most appropriate care provider in most situations and midwives have a right to obtain adequate education, regulations to foster their practice and associations to forward their mission.

In accordance with the above SOMSA pledge that midwives should commit to care that conforms to the following:

1. Every woman has the right to be free from harm and ill-treatment and has the right to security of her body.
2. Every woman has the right to information, informed consent and refusal, and respect for her choices and preferences, including companionship during maternity care.

3. Every woman has the right to privacy and confidentiality.
4. Every woman has the right to be treated with dignity and respect and to be respected as a person of value and worth.
5. Every woman has the right to equality, freedom from discrimination, and equitable care and has a right to be free from any form of discrimination.
6. Every woman has the right to healthcare and to the highest attainable level of health.
7. Every woman has the right to liberty, autonomy, self-determination, and freedom from coercion.

Furthermore, SOMSA believes that women and midwives have collective rights, that if maintained, would improve their partnership to improve maternal and child health. These are:

Women's and Midwives' Rights

1. Midwives and women have the right to a system of regulation that will ensure a safe, competent and autonomous midwifery workforce for women and their babies.
2. Midwives and women have the right to national midwifery workforce planning to ensure sufficient midwives to meet the needs of women and babies within an enabling environment.
3. Women and midwives have the right to be respected by governments and government institutions for health and education.
4. The midwifery profession has the right to be recognised as a separate and distinct profession.

Recommendations

SOMSA advocates for all midwives to render care to women in keeping with the relevant policies and guidelines for promotion of respectful care. Respectful care should be the practice way of educating midwives and other healthcare workers in maternal and child health.

Additional reading and sources

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