



Exploring Maternal Health Programs and their Effects on the Well-Being of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review

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Abstract

This desk review brings together existing literature to examine how maternal health programs affect the well-being of women in Sub-Saharan Africa. The region faces significant challenges, including high maternal mortality rates, limited healthcare access, and socio-cultural barriers. This review looks at the effectiveness of key interventions such as antenatal care, skilled birth attendance, emergency obstetric and newborn care, and postnatal care, as well as community-based initiatives. It emphasizes the positive impact these programs have on reducing maternal mortality, enhancing physical and mental health, and empowering women. However, it also highlights the need to strengthen health systems, tackle social determinants of health, and ensure that programs are culturally sensitive. The findings indicate that successful maternal health programs play a crucial role in improving women's overall well-being by reducing health risks and promoting empowerment, which in turn positively affects child health outcomes. Future research should focus on assessing the long-term sustainability and scalability of these programs, with an emphasis on context-specific strategies that cater to the diverse needs of women throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: *Maternal Health, Sub-Saharan Africa, Program Impact, Women's Well-being, Health Systems.*



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1. INTRODUCTION

Maternal health in Sub-Saharan Africa is a pressing public health issue, characterized by alarmingly high maternal mortality rates and significant inequalities in access to quality healthcare (World Health Organization (WHO, 2019). Sub-Saharan Africa carries a staggering share of maternal deaths worldwide. In 2020, this

region was responsible for about 70% of global maternal deaths. According to UNICEF, there were 545 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in Sub-Saharan Africa that year—a stark contrast to the rates seen in developed countries. The World Health Organization reported that the maternal mortality ratio in the African Region was estimated at 531 deaths per 100,000 live births in

2020 (WHO, 2023). Several factors contribute to this alarming rate, including limited access to quality healthcare particularly in rural areas., shortage of skilled birth attendants, poor infrastructure, widespread poverty, cultural and social barriers and weak healthcare systems. Key Causes include severe bleeding (postpartum hemorrhage), infections, hypertensive disorders (like pre-eclampsia and eclampsia) and complications from unsafe abortions (Ezeh, O. K., et al, 2022). Maternal morbidity refers to a variety of health issues related to pregnancy and childbirth that don't necessarily lead to death. Gathering accurate statistics on maternal morbidity is much more challenging than for mortality. Conditions associated with maternal morbidity include obstetric fistula, severe anemia, puerperal infections, long-term disabilities, mental health disorders. The impact of maternal morbidity is significant, affecting not just the women themselves but also their families and communities. The health of women during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period is not only a basic human right but also a vital factor influencing the health of families and communities (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2020). This review seeks to examine the diverse impacts of maternal health programs on women's well-being in Sub-Saharan Africa, bringing together existing research to pinpoint effective interventions and identify areas that need more focus. Sub-Saharan Africa is responsible for about two-thirds of global maternal deaths, despite comprising only a small portion of the world's population (WHO, 2023). Many of these deaths are preventable and often stem from complications like hemorrhage, infections, unsafe abortions, and hypertensive disorders during pregnancy (Say et al., 2014). A complex mix of socioeconomic, cultural, and healthcare system factors contributes to this troubling situation. Limited access to skilled birth attendants, insufficient emergency obstetric care, and low utilization of antenatal and postnatal services heighten the risks that women face (Campbell & Graham, 2006).

The well-being of women goes beyond just survival; it includes physical, mental, and social aspects that are greatly influenced by the quality and accessibility of maternal health services (UNFPA, 2021). For example, insufficient antenatal care can result in nutritional deficiencies

and a higher risk of complications, while a lack of postnatal support may lead to postpartum depression and other mental health issues (Fisher et al., 2012). Additionally, socio-cultural factors like gender inequality and traditional beliefs often hinder women's ability to make informed decisions about their health, further complicating the situation (Jewkes et al., 2010). To address these issues, various maternal health programs have been launched throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. These initiatives include a wide range of services such as antenatal care, skilled birth attendance, emergency obstetric and newborn care, and postnatal care, along with community-based efforts to enhance access and utilization of these services (Ronsmans & Graham, 2006). However, the success of these programs can differ significantly, making it crucial to have a thorough understanding of their impact on women's well-being to guide policy and practice. This review will take a critical look at the existing literature to evaluate how maternal health programs affect key indicators of women's well-being, such as maternal mortality and morbidity, access to healthcare services, and mental and social health outcomes. It will also investigate how socio-cultural factors and health system limitations influence the effectiveness of these programs. By bringing together evidence from various studies, this review seeks to offer important insights into the strengths and weaknesses of current maternal health interventions and to identify strategies for enhancing the well-being of women in Sub-Saharan Africa.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the introduction of various maternal health programs throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, maternal mortality rates remain alarmingly high thus 545 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births (approximately 70% of global maternal deaths)., and there are still significant disparities in access to and use of quality maternal healthcare services. This review aims to tackle the ongoing issue of the gap between the intended positive effects of maternal health programs and the actual health outcomes for women in the region. The core of the problem lies in the inadequate understanding of the intricate relationship between program design, implementation, socio-cultural influences, health system limitations, and their impact on women's

physical, mental, and social well-being. This gap obstructs the creation of effective, context-specific interventions that could sustainably enhance maternal health outcomes and improve the overall well-being of women in Sub-Saharan Africa.

3. NEED FOR THE REVIEW

The need for this review arises from several important factors that highlight the urgency of enhancing maternal health outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa, including the ongoing High Maternal Mortality. Despite global initiatives, Sub-Saharan Africa still faces a significant number of maternal deaths. This calls for a detailed assessment of current maternal health programs to pinpoint weaknesses and create more effective strategies. There are notable disparities in the access to and use of quality maternal healthcare services throughout the region. It is essential to understand the reasons behind these disparities to ensure fair access and improve health outcomes for all women. **Complex Interplay of Factors:** Maternal health outcomes are shaped by a complex mix of socioeconomic, cultural, and health system factors. This review seeks to compile existing evidence to offer a thorough understanding of these interactions and their effects on women's well-being (Arthur, E. et al 2017). **Need for Evidence-Based Interventions:** There is a pressing need for interventions based on evidence that cater to the specific needs and contexts of women in Sub-Saharan Africa. This review will highlight effective program components and strategies that can be expanded and replicated throughout the region. **Focus on Women's Holistic Well-being:** Maternal health goes beyond mere survival; it includes physical, mental, and social well-being. This review will explore the diverse effects of maternal health programs on women's overall well-being, providing a more rounded understanding of their impact. **Informing Policy and Practice:** The insights gained from this review will be invaluable for policymakers, program managers, and healthcare providers, helping them to create and implement more effective maternal health programs and policies.

Improving maternal health plays a crucial role in advancing multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). This review aims to support the global

initiative to meet these objectives. Additionally, this review will gather and summarize current knowledge on maternal health programs in Sub-Saharan Africa, ensuring that it reaches a broader audience and promoting the sharing of effective practices.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE REVIEW

- To synthesize and analyze the existing literature on the design, implementation, and impact of maternal health programs in Sub-Saharan Africa. This objective emphasizes the importance of gathering and critically evaluating the current knowledge base regarding maternal health interventions in the region.
- To assess the effects of maternal health programs on key indicators of women's well-being, such as maternal mortality and morbidity, access to healthcare services, and mental and social health outcomes. This objective aims to both quantify and qualify the impact of these programs across various aspects of women's health.
- To identify and examine the socio-cultural and health system factors that affect the effectiveness of maternal health programs in Sub-Saharan Africa. This objective seeks to understand the contextual elements that can either support or obstruct the success of these initiatives.
- To provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing maternal health programs and improving the well-being of women in Sub-Saharan Africa. This objective focuses on translating the review's findings into practical strategies for policymakers, program managers, and healthcare providers.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the essential components and strategies for implementing maternal health programs currently operating in Sub-Saharan Africa, and how effective are these programs in decreasing maternal mortality and morbidity?
- In what ways do maternal health programs influence the overall well-being of women in Sub-Saharan Africa, including physical, mental, and social health outcomes beyond merely reducing mortality?

- Which socio-cultural and health system factors play a significant role in determining the accessibility, utilization, and effectiveness of maternal health programs for women in Sub-Saharan Africa?
- Drawing from the existing literature, what evidence-based recommendations can be made to enhance maternal health programs and improve the overall well-being of women in Sub-Saharan Africa?

6. OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

To ensure clarity and consistency throughout this review, the following operational definitions will be used:

- **Maternal Health Programs:** This term refers to organized interventions and services designed to enhance the health and well-being of women during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period. This includes programs that offer antenatal care (ANC), skilled birth attendance (SBA), emergency obstetric and newborn care (EmONC), postnatal care (PNC), and community-based maternal health initiatives.
- **Well-being of Women:** This concept encompasses the overall state of women's health, including physical, mental, and social aspects related to their maternal experiences. It will be measured by:
 - ❖ **Physical Well-being:** Maternal mortality rates, maternal morbidity rates (such as obstetric fistula and infections), rates of pregnancy complications, and nutritional status.
 - ❖ **Mental Well-being:** The prevalence of postpartum depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders associated with pregnancy and childbirth, as well as perceived levels of emotional support.
 - ❖ **Social Well-being:** Access to social support networks, perceived levels of empowerment, and autonomy in decision-making regarding reproductive health.
- **Sub-Saharan Africa:** This term refers to the geographic region of Africa located south of the Sahara Desert. The review will include studies conducted in countries that

are explicitly classified as part of Sub-Saharan Africa by the United Nations or the World Bank.

- **Access to Healthcare Services:** This refers to the ability to obtain healthcare services when needed.
- **Community Health Workers (CHWs):** They are frontline public health workers who have a close understanding of the community they serve. This trusting relationship enables CHWs to act as a liaison between health services and the community to facilitate access to healthcare services, improve the quality and cultural competence of service delivery, and promote health and wellness.
- **Socio-cultural Factors:** This encompasses the social norms, cultural beliefs, and practices that shape women's health-seeking behaviors and their access to maternal healthcare.
- **Health System Constraints:** This highlights the limitations and shortcomings within the healthcare system that hinder the provision of quality maternal healthcare.

7. METHODOLOGY

This review utilized a systematic, desk-based approach to gather and analyze existing literature on maternal health programs and their impact on the well-being of women in Sub-Saharan Africa. The following methodological steps were taken:

- **Search Strategy:** A thorough search strategy was crafted to locate relevant studies in electronic databases such as PubMed, MEDLINE, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search included various combinations of keywords related to "maternal health," "Sub-Saharan Africa," "program impact," "women's well-being," "antenatal care," "skilled birth attendance," "postnatal care," "emergency obstetric care," and "health systems." Additionally, gray literature, including reports from organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and other pertinent NGOs, was incorporated. The search was restricted to studies published in English.

- **Inclusion Criteria:** Studies that concentrate on maternal health programs and their effects on women's well-being in Sub-Saharan Africa. Studies that present quantitative or qualitative data related to maternal health outcomes. Studies published in peer-reviewed journals, reports, and other relevant documents.
- **Exclusion Criteria:** Studies that do not specifically address Sub-Saharan Africa. Studies that are not related to maternal health programs or women's well-being. Studies published in languages other than English. Opinion pieces, editorials, and conference abstracts lacking full text.

8. FINDINGS

Based on the synthesis of thirty-five existing literature, several key findings have emerged regarding maternal health programs and their effects on the well-being of women in Sub-Saharan Africa:

- **Impact of Maternal Health Programs on Mortality and Morbidity:** Maternal health programs have played a crucial role in lowering maternal mortality rates in Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, efforts aimed at enhancing healthcare delivery systems and involving community health workers have yielded encouraging results. Skilled birth attendance (SBA) and emergency obstetric and newborn care (EmONC) have consistently shown significant reductions in maternal mortality rates. Antenatal care (ANC) is crucial for the early detection and management of pregnancy complications, which leads to decreased morbidity. However, access to these services is uneven, with rural and marginalized populations facing significant disparities. Also, initiatives that improve access to quality healthcare, like antenatal care and skilled birth attendance, have resulted in better health outcomes for women. It's essential to increase funding and support for maternal health services to achieve these advancements. Gaps in care quality, including shortages of trained personnel and essential supplies, limit the effectiveness of these programs.
- **Effects on Women's Holistic Well-being:** Integrated approaches that merge

maternal health programs with other health initiatives, like nutrition and vaccination efforts, have demonstrated encouraging outcomes. These strategies can effectively tackle the complex issues surrounding maternal health in the region.

In addition to reducing mortality, maternal health programs positively impact physical well-being by improving nutritional status and lowering the risk of complications. The integration of mental health services into maternal care is still limited, but there is a growing recognition of the need to address postpartum depression and anxiety. Programs that encourage community engagement and women's empowerment enhance social well-being by increasing autonomy and access to support networks. Family planning services also positively affect women's autonomy. Also, digital health technologies present a chance to enhance maternal health outcomes by tackling issues like restricted access to face-to-face medical consultations and qualified birth attendants. Nonetheless, it is crucial that these programs are developed with an emphasis on equity to guarantee that every woman and girl receives the support they need.

- **Influence of Socio-cultural and Health System Factors:** Even with advancements, substantial challenges and obstacles remain in enhancing maternal health in Sub-Saharan Africa. Socio-economic issues, including poverty and insufficient education, persist in obstructing access to vital healthcare services.
- Socio-cultural factors, such as gender inequality, traditional beliefs, and cultural practices, significantly affect women's healthcare-seeking behaviors and access to services. Health system challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, shortages of healthcare workers, and weak supply chains, hinder the delivery of quality maternal healthcare. Financial barriers, such as user fees and transportation costs, remain major obstacles for many women, especially those living in poverty.
- The quality of interpersonal communication between healthcare workers and women significantly influences the women's willingness to engage with the healthcare system.

Therefore, empowering women and ensuring they have access to education are crucial for enhancing maternal health. Research indicates that when women are empowered and educated, they tend to adopt healthier behaviors and experience better outcomes during pregnancy and childbirth.

- **Evidence-Based Recommendations:** It is essential to strengthen health systems by investing more in infrastructure, workforce development, and supply chain management.
- Implementing culturally sensitive interventions that tackle socio-cultural barriers and encourage community involvement is vital.
- Integrating mental health services into standard maternal care and offering psychosocial support can enhance women's overall well-being.
- Addressing financial obstacles through methods like conditional cash transfers and health insurance programs can improve access to services.
- Increasing the number of community health workers and enhancing their training is important.
- Improving the training healthcare workers receive on interpersonal communication is crucial.

9. CONCLUSIONS

This review emphasizes the vital importance of maternal health programs in enhancing the well-being of women in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although there has been notable progress in lowering maternal mortality rates through initiatives such as skilled birth attendance and emergency obstetric care, significant challenges still exist. Ongoing disparities in access to quality care, the impact of socio-cultural factors, and the limitations within health systems continue to hinder progress. Key takeaways from this review include:

- Maternal health programs clearly contribute to improved maternal survival and physical health. However, their effectiveness is constrained by inconsistent access and service quality gaps.
- The overall well-being of women, which includes mental and social aspects, needs

more focus. Integrating mental health services and fostering women's empowerment are essential for comprehensive care.

- Socio-cultural and health system factors are closely tied to the success of these programs. It is crucial to address these issues through culturally sensitive interventions and strengthening health systems.
- Evidence-based recommendations highlight the necessity for integrated, context-specific strategies. Enhancing health systems, encouraging community involvement, and tackling financial obstacles are critical.
- A sustained emphasis on increasing the number and improving the quality of community health workers is essential.
- Enhancing the interpersonal communication skills of healthcare workers is vital for building trust and encouraging the use of services.
- Maternal health programs in Sub-Saharan Africa have achieved notable progress in enhancing the well-being of women. Nevertheless, ongoing efforts are essential to tackle the socio-economic challenges and guarantee fair access to healthcare services. By promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and community-focused research, these programs can become more culturally appropriate, sustainable, and effective.
- Ultimately, advancing maternal health in Sub-Saharan Africa demands a multifaceted strategy that considers the complex interplay of factors influencing women's well-being. Ongoing investment, collaborative partnerships, and a dedication to equity are crucial for achieving meaningful and lasting change. Future research should focus on assessing the long-term effects of integrated programs and investigating innovative solutions to address ongoing challenges.

10. SUGGESTIONS/WAY FORWARD

Based on the findings and conclusions of this review, the following suggestions and a way forward are proposed to enhance maternal health

programs and improve the well-being of women in Sub-Saharan Africa:

10.1. Strengthening Health Systems:

- Invest in developing and enhancing healthcare facilities to make sure they are adequately equipped to manage maternal health cases. This involves supplying essential medical resources, equipment, and ensuring that facilities are accessible to rural and underserved communities thus Increase investment by allocating sufficient resources to bolster health infrastructure, including facilities, equipment, and essential supplies.
- **Workforce Development:** Focus on training and retaining skilled healthcare providers, especially midwives and community health workers. Implement ongoing training and capacity-building initiatives for healthcare professionals, such as midwives and community health workers, to ensure they are equipped to deliver high-quality maternal care.
- **Supply Chain Management:** Improve supply chain management to ensure a steady availability of essential medicines and supplies. Make use of digital health technologies like telemedicine and mobile health apps to offer remote consultations, health education, and timely information to pregnant women, particularly those in remote areas (WHO,2016).
- **Data Systems:** Enhance data collection and monitoring systems to track program performance and pinpoint areas needing improvement.

10.2. Addressing Socio-cultural Barriers:

- **Community Engagement:** Engage communities in the design and implementation of maternal health programs to ensure they are culturally relevant and acceptable. Develop health programs that engage local leaders and community members. These initiatives can increase awareness about the significance of maternal health and motivate women to access healthcare services.
- **Gender Equality:** Foster gender equality and empower women through education and community-based initiatives.

- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Create and implement culturally sensitive interventions that address traditional beliefs and practices that may obstruct access to care or implement culturally sensitive strategies that tackle socio-cultural obstacles to maternal health by collaborating with communities to confront harmful practices and encourage positive health behaviors.
- **Male Involvement:** Encourage men to participate in maternal health initiatives to promote shared responsibility and support for women.

10.3. Improving Access and Quality of Care:

- **Financial Accessibility:** Develop strategies to lower financial barriers, such as conditional cash transfers, health insurance schemes, and eliminating user fees or create and enforce policies aimed at lowering the financial obstacles to maternal health services. This might involve offering free or subsidized maternal healthcare, providing health insurance options, and establishing social protection programs for at-risk communities.
- **Geographical Accessibility:** Increase access to services in rural and remote areas through mobile clinics, outreach programs, and deploying community health workers. Promote greater political commitment and policy backing for maternal health. Involve policymakers, stakeholders, and international organizations to ensure that maternal health is a top priority in national and regional agendas.
- **Quality Improvement:** Launch quality improvement initiatives to ensure that all women receive respectful, evidence-based care.
- **Integrated Services:** Combine maternal health services with other essential health services, such as family planning, HIV/AIDS care, and nutrition programs.

10.4. Enhancing Mental and Social Well-being

- **Mental Health Integration:** Incorporate mental health screenings and services into standard maternal care practices.

- **Psychosocial Support:** Offer psychosocial support to women during pregnancy and after childbirth, including counseling and support groups.
- **Empowerment Programs:** Create programs that encourage women's empowerment and their ability to make health-related decisions. Concentrate on educational initiatives that equip women with knowledge regarding maternal health, family planning, and their rights. When women are educated and empowered, they are more inclined to pursue healthcare services and make informed choices about their health.
- **Support Networks:** Strengthen social support systems for women, involving family and community assistance. Encourage collaboration among various sectors, including health, education, finance, and social services, to develop comprehensive and integrated maternal health programs that tackle the complex challenges associated with maternal health.

10.5. Focus on Community Health Workers (CHWs):

- **Increased Number:** Increase the number of CHWs, especially in underserved regions.
- **Enhanced Training:** Provide thorough and ongoing training for CHWs, focusing on interpersonal communication and mental health support.
- **Improved Supervision and Support:** Establish effective supervision and support systems for CHWs.
- **Adequate Compensation:** Ensure that CHWs receive fair compensation for their efforts.

10.6. Improving Interpersonal Communication:

- **Training for Healthcare Workers:** Offer training for healthcare workers on effective interpersonal communication skills, such as active listening, empathy, and cultural sensitivity.
- **Patient-Centered Care:** Encourage patient-centered care that honors women's autonomy and preferences.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Create feedback systems to evaluate and enhance the

quality of communication between healthcare providers and women.

10.7. Future Research Directions:

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Carry out longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term effects of maternal health programs on women's well-being.
- **Implementation Research:** Conduct research to discover effective strategies for scaling and sustaining evidence-based interventions. Develop strong data collection and monitoring systems to assess the progress and effectiveness of maternal health programs. This information can help pinpoint gaps, track results, and guide evidence-based policy decisions.
- **Context-Specific Interventions:** Design and assess interventions tailored to meet the unique needs of various populations.
- **Cost-Effectiveness Analyses:** Perform cost-effectiveness analyses to guide resource allocation and program development. Enhancing maternal health in Sub-Saharan Africa demands a comprehensive strategy that tackles the structural, socio-economic, and cultural obstacles to obtaining quality healthcare. By improving healthcare infrastructure, empowering women, leveraging digital health technologies, and promoting collaboration across sectors, maternal health initiatives can greatly improve the well-being of women in the area.

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