



Community as Caregiver: An Ethnographic Study of Local Agency in Maternal Health Initiatives in West Africa,

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Abstract

Maternal health initiatives in West Africa have often been designed and implemented using top-down, external models. While the importance of local communities in sustainable healthcare is acknowledged, detailed ethnographic studies of their active agency within formal maternal health programmes are limited. This study aimed to ethnographically document and analyse the manifestations and influence of local community agency in maternal health initiatives. It sought to understand how communities enact caregiving roles independently of formal policy frameworks. A multi-sited ethnographic study was conducted across three West African countries. Data were collected through prolonged participant observation, in-depth interviews with community health workers, traditional birth attendants, mothers, and programme staff, and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was employed. Communities consistently adapted externally designed programmes to align with local socio-cultural logics of care. A key finding was the community's role as a 'socio-medical translator', bridging biomedical protocols and local knowledge systems. Community-appointed liaisons, for example, were instrumental in increasing antenatal attendance by addressing concerns about hospital care. Local communities are active co-producers, not passive recipients, of maternal healthcare. Their agency is a fundamental, though frequently informal, component of programme effectiveness and resilience. Maternal health policy should institutionalise mechanisms for community-led design and adaptation. Training for external health practitioners ought to include modules on recognising and partnering with existing local care structures. Funding models should support flexible, community-managed resources. Maternal health, ethnography, community health workers, agency, West Africa, participatory health, healthcare delivery This study provides a nuanced, evidence-based account of community agency in maternal health, challenging deficit-based narratives and offering a framework for more equitable partnership in global health programming.

Keywords: *Medical anthropology, Community health workers, Sub-Saharan Africa, Maternal health, Ethnographic methods, Participatory development, Health systems strengthening*



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