



**OBSTETRIC VIOLENCE AND
STRUCTURAL GENDER INEQUITY
IN SRI LANKA**

GLOBVAC conference, 14 March, 2017

PAPER AND BACKGROUND

Perera, D., R. Lund, K. Swanberg, B. Schei, J. Infanti (submitted to *BMC Women's Health*). When helpers hurt': women's and midwives' stories of health care abuse in the labor rooms of public health care institutions, Colombo district, Sri Lanka.



Based on Dinusha Perera's MD study's qualitative data.

This paper uses an intersectionality approach.



BACKGROUND

- ❑ This paper explores how age, social position or class, and linguistic and cultural background intersect and place women in varying positions of control and vulnerability to obstetric violence in state health institutions in Colombo district, Sri Lanka.
- ❑ Obstetric violence occurs during pregnancy, childbirth and the immediate postpartum period; hence, it is violence that is structural and directly affects women.



WOMAN ON DELIVERY EXPERIENCE

No one wants to be humiliated or beaten by health staff [like I was], especially when we go for delivery. We expect love and care. We are helpless there. I think it is important to raise the staff's awareness. I don't know how to do that, but this would be the only way of changing them. I never wished to tell this story to anyone else, but today I told you everything because I want to help others to not have to face such unpleasant situations. (Tamil woman, 32 years)



AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

- ❑ Crenshaw's (1994) concept of intersectionality posits that social contexts are created by the intersections of systems of power (e.g. race, class, gender, and sexual orientation) and oppression (e.g. prejudice, class stratification, and gender inequality), and colors the meaning and nature of violence, including how it is experienced by the self and responded to by others, and how it can be personal and/or imply social consequences in public spheres.



METHODOLOGY

- ❑ Five focus group discussions were held with 28 public health midwives who had prior experience working in labor rooms.
- ❑ Six focus group discussions were held with 38 pregnant women with previous childbirth experience.
- ❑ 10 of the 38 women, whom felt they had experienced excessive pain, fear, humiliation, and/or loss of dignity as patients in labor, participated in individual in-depth interviews.
- ❑ The intersectional framework was used to group the qualitative data into categories and themes for analysis.



WOMEN ABOUT OBSTETRIC VIOLENCE

All the time, she [the nurse] was blaming me, telling me that I was a headache to her. As I understand, I didn't do anything wrong.

We very rarely say anything about these things to others or we do not complain about these things to anyone [at all].

Although we experience things, we keep quiet. We do not argue back.

I bore it [the violence]. It was my fate.

I was shocked. One of his hands was on my breast



WOMEN ON BEING POOR

Poor women felt emotionally and physically violated by the labor room nurse and midwife:

To start, when I went to the labor room they were not happy about my clothes. They were too big for me [because] I was wearing what I was given by a friendly woman.

We are poor people. Where else can we go [for childbirth]?



TAMIL WOMEN ON VIOLENCE, LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

The most fitting term for how she [the midwife] spoke to me is that she 'barked' at me. She asked me very impolitely whether I had come to make changes in the hospital, and she was cursing at me, telling me that they had already done enough for Tamils (hospital nurse to Tamil woman).

We respect and [are in] awe [of] these respectable people, but some changes in their attitudes are needed.



MUSLIM WOMEN ON VIOLENCE, LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

You are the people who bring headaches to us. We are the people who always face trouble because of you ... You will produce children year by year starting from 19 [years], but we have to resolve all your headaches [hospital nurse to a Muslim woman].

I went to the ward in a shalwar. That nurse looked at me from top to toe. In front of the other women, she scolded me for my dress and asked me to go and put on a cloth and a bed jacket. She laughed at me telling me that I can't give birth to a child covered in clothes from head to toe.



WHAT DO THE MIDWIVES SAY?

I will not try to safeguard my colleagues. Yes it is happening ... and not only in the hospital ... Also, some of us in the field are responsible for certain occurrences of abuse.

I asked the woman the reason she was asking for a permanent [family planning] method ... At last she came out with the true story ... tell ... [She] had been hit in the hospital ... She didn't want any more children [because of what Had happened].

Most at risk are: those who scream unnecessarily, those who are not ready to tolerate pain, very young patients who do not comply with commands to strain and push during labour, experienced patients [who] behave like they know everything, [women who have] unnecessary questions .

The PHMs also mentioned many incidences of unwanted pregnancies; 'we have To be stern and firm with these girls'.



RESULTS

- ❑ Obstetric violence appears to intersect with systems of power and oppression linked to structural gender, social, linguistic and cultural inequities in Sri Lanka.
- ❑ Younger women, poorer women, and minority women who do not speak Sinhala seemed to experience more obstetric violence than those with relevant social connections and better positions.
- ❑ The women rarely reported obstetric violence to legal or institutional authorities, nor within their informal social support networks. Instead, they sought obstetric care, particularly for childbirth, in other hospitals in subsequent pregnancies.



CONCLUSIONS

- ❑ The quality of obstetric care in Sri Lanka needs improvement.
- ❑ Policies and practices are required to sensitize health workers about the existence of obstetric violence, and repercussions are required for abusive or discriminatory practices.
- ❑ Ethics of care should be further reinforced in the professional training of obstetric health workers.

