

# The Midwife's Multi-dimensional Responsibilities in Child Health in Nigeria: A Mini-review

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Maternal and child health is a crucial indicator of the overall health of a population. In Nigeria, there is a high rate of maternal and child mortality, with the majority of these deaths being preventable. Midwives play an essential role in providing care during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postnatal period, and are key to improving maternal and child health outcomes in Nigeria. This mini-review aimed to provide an overview of the role of midwives in child health in Nigeria, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Methods:** A web search was conducted using Google Scholar and PubMed databases. The search terms used were “midwives,” “child health,” “Nigeria,” and “responsibilities,” using Boolean operators. The search was limited to free full text articles published in the English Language between 2010 and 2022. The search yielded a total of 2,927 articles, and after screening the titles and abstracts, 12 full-text articles were used to inform this mini-review using a thematic approach.

**Results:** The articles reviewed indicate that Midwives' responsibilities in child health in Nigeria are diverse and were broadly categorized into nine areas: antenatal care, intrapartum care, postnatal care, promoting community health, family planning, promoting infant feeding and nutrition, providing immunizations, identifying and managing simple childhood illnesses (pneumonia, diarrhoea, and malaria), and promoting maternal and child health education. Midwife responsibilities were also summarised into preventative or curative activities.

**Conclusion:** Midwives are key players in promoting child health in Nigeria. They have a wide range of responsibilities in child health, including providing antenatal care, attending to deliveries, providing postnatal care, promoting infant feeding and nutrition, providing immunizations, and managing childhood illnesses. In addition, midwives play a crucial role in reducing maternal and neonatal mortality through the provision of emergency obstetric and newborn care services. Efforts to improve child health outcomes in Nigeria must include strategies to enhance the role of midwives in the healthcare system.

*Keywords: Child health; midwife; Nigeria; preventive; responsibilities; roles.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Every year there are an estimated 140 million births with 2.6 million stillbirths and 2.9 million infant deaths in the first month of life [1,2]. Inadequate maternal and newborn care is a major contributory factor to these majorly preventable deaths, and continued reductions in maternal and child mortality are needed overall. The Sustainable Development Goals, have been put in place as a wake-up call to ensure commitment by frontline healthcare workers, including midwives to bring about a rapid and dramatic reduction in these distressing statistics [3].

The provision of child health services is significantly aided by nurses, who are often the largest professional group in the healthcare sector [4]. According to Forbes and colleagues [4], nurses offer a variety of services, including preventative, curative, and rehabilitative ones. Midwives are specifically the group of health professionals specifically trained to provide care for women during pregnancy, childbirth and beyond childbirth and play a major role in improving newborn and child outcomes. Midwifery care practice extends from the grass-root including home and Primary Health Centres to the Hospital (secondary and tertiary) settings [5].

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To address the gaps in maternal and newborn health (MNH) research and action in Nigeria, a review employed a unique framework combining the WHO recommendations for MNH, the continuum of care model for maternal health, and the social determinants of health. The review identified gaps in research and action and highlighted the need for midwives to provide care not only during pregnancy and childbirth but also before pregnancy and beyond childbirth [6].

The International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) defines a midwife as a person who has completed a midwifery educational program and acquired the qualifications to be registered and/or legally recognized as a midwife [7]. A midwife is a birthing assistant who stays with a mother during her pregnancy, delivery, and after birth, giving her pre-natal care and support. A midwife is there not only for immediate pre and post-natal care but also for the social, psychological, and spiritual needs of a mother and her family [8].

The multi-faceted role of the midwife includes caring for women during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postnatal period, treating complications due to miscarriages and/or unsafe abortions, providing family planning services, and advocating for women's and children's health rights [9]. Midwives are a lifeline for better maternal health in Nigeria, and it is essential to invest in them to ensure better maternal and child health outcomes [10]. The World Health Organization (WHO) has established situational primary and additional primary levels of midwifery care, which emphasize the need for midwives with selected obstetric and neonatal skills to be available in health centres in the community and outpatient clinics of hospitals [11].

Midwives play a crucial role in maternal and child health in Nigeria. The Midwives Service Scheme (MSS) is a program established by the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Health in 2009 to address the shortage of skilled birth attendants in rural areas of the country [12]. The program was designed to provide skilled midwifery services to pregnant women in underserved communities, with a particular focus on reducing maternal and neonatal mortality rates. The MSS has been relatively successful in increasing access to maternal and child health services in rural Nigeria and has contributed to improved health outcomes for mothers and babies.

A study found that increasing coverage of midwife-delivered interventions could avert a significant number of maternal, neonatal, and stillbirth deaths, saving 2.2 million lives by 2035 [13]. However, the perceptions of stakeholders about the feasibility of using community midwifery to address the high maternal and newborn mortality within the Nigerian healthcare system were mixed [14]. A better understanding of the roles of midwives within the health system is desirable as they are a key component in the delivery of safe and effective sexual, reproductive, and maternal health services and could improve the cost-effectiveness of the delivery of these services [15].

Community midwifery has been identified as a feasible and effective approach for addressing the high maternal and newborn mortality rates in Nigeria. The introduction and use of community midwives have been shown to be effective in reducing maternal and neonatal mortality rates, especially in rural and hard-to-reach areas [14]. Midwives are trained to provide care during pregnancy, labour, and childbirth, but their role extends beyond these functions to include care before pregnancy and beyond childbirth. The Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria has the primary objective of ensuring high-quality nursing and midwifery education, maintaining high standards of professional nursing and midwifery practice, and enforcing discipline within the profession [16].

Understanding their roles and investing in them is essential for improving maternal and child health outcomes in Nigeria. The modern midwife must have humanitarian qualities and a scientific turn of mind, including the ability to collect, present, and interpret simple research data [17]. This mini-review, therefore aimed to provide an overview of the role of midwives in child health in Nigeria, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2. METHODS

A web search was conducted using the search terms "midwives child health, Africa responsibilities" in Google Scholar and PubMed databases. The search terms used were "midwives," "child health," "Nigeria," "responsibilities," using Boolean operators. The search was limited to full text articles published in the English language between 2010 and 2022. The search yielded a total of 2,927 articles, and after screening the titles and abstracts, 12 full-text articles were used to inform this mini-review using a thematic approach.

**Inclusion:** All national working documents or policies or local studies that enumerate or highlight roles or responsibilities of the Nigerian midwife throughout the antenatal, intrapartum and postpartum periods were selected.

**Exclusion criteria:** Studies or policy documents conducted outside Nigeria and unrelated to the roles or responsibilities of the midwife and child health.

### 3. RESULTS

Midwives' responsibilities in child health in Nigeria are diverse and can be broadly categorized thematically into nine areas: Antenatal care, intrapartum care, postnatal care, promoting community health, family planning and promoting infant feeding and nutrition, providing immunizations, identifying and managing simple childhood illnesses (pneumonia, diarrhoea, and malaria), and promoting maternal and child health education.

Furthermore, the findings of this mini-review on the responsibilities of midwives in Nigeria are schematically represented in (Fig. 1) using the Forbes and colleagues [4] conceptual framework. This attempts to demonstrate that their responsibilities can also be grouped into preventative and curative practices.

### 4. DISCUSSION

The review utilizes a thematic narrative summary of the severally identified responsibilities of

midwives in Nigeria to elaborate on their scope of care:

**1. Providing antenatal care [18]:** Midwives are responsible for providing antenatal care to pregnant women, including conducting prenatal assessments, providing health education, and identifying and managing complications. During the antenatal period, the midwife's responsibility as regards the child's health is primarily preventative and would indirectly impact the growing foetus. As displayed in Fig. 1, health education and health promotion are a priority to the midwife and include educating pregnant women on the importance of being registered and the need to adhere to follow-up visits to enable early detection of any aberrations from normalcy. Mothers will also be educated on the importance of the use of insecticide-treated nets for the prevention of malaria in pregnancy. The midwife also advises mothers to ensure the intake of nutritionally balanced diets with recommended supplementations during; Routine promotion of the benefits of breastfeeding and peer support to promote breastfeeding initiation is emphasized as well as nipple inspection, to adequately prepare mothers to develop a breastfeeding plan and address breastfeeding challenges early [19]; Health promotion of iron and folic acid supplementation for both pre-pregnant and pregnant women  $\leq 12$  weeks of gestation to prevent neural tube defects and anaemia. In other words, the midwife's responsibility in the antenatal period is to prevent the occurrence or limit significantly the occurrence of preterm mishaps or foetal wastages thereby improving child health.

## A Summary of the Midwife's Responsibilities in Child Health in Nigeria [20–23]

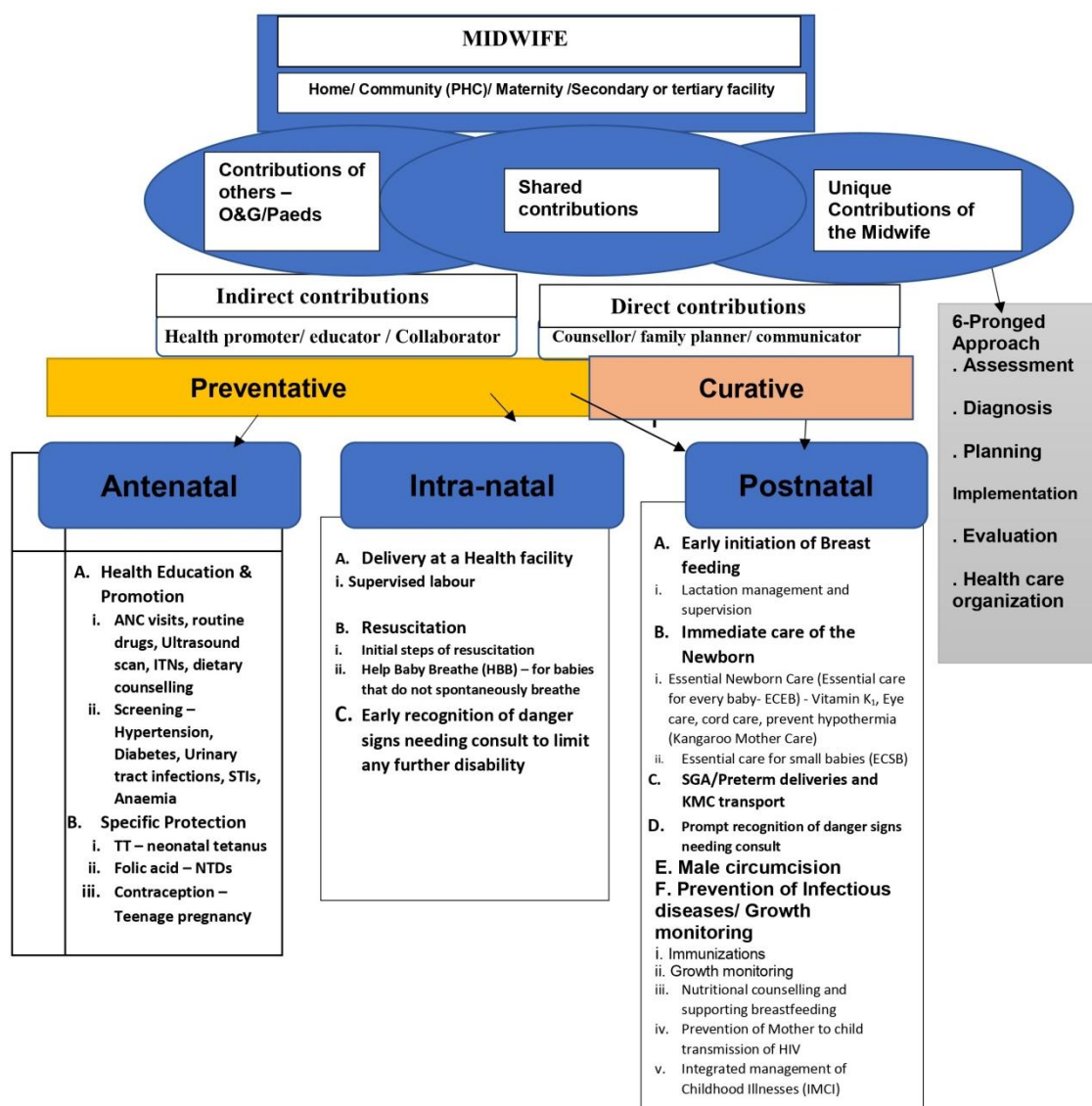


Fig. 1. An illustrative schema of the midwife's responsibilities in child health in Nigeria

**2. Intra-natal care [24–26]:** During the intra-natal period, the midwife's responsibility as regards the child's health is primarily preventative but may occasionally be curative and would directly impact the newborn. As displayed in Fig. 1, the midwife's responsibility is to ensure the child is safe by being present at birth - being a skilled birth attendant and should be preferably at an approved Health facility. Midwives are responsible for ensuring that delivery environments are clean, safe, and

equipped with the necessary equipment and supplies. The midwife supervises the labour process and limits cord accidents or birth trauma. If the baby fails to breathe spontaneously, active resuscitation is performed by the midwife using the Help Baby Breathe (HBB) protocol and is performed within the golden minute to enable the baby to breathe spontaneously. The midwife also promptly recognizes danger signs that require referral to limit any further disability [20].

**3. Providing postnatal care [20,21,23]:** During the post-natal period, the midwife's responsibility as regards child health is a combination of

preventative, curative and less often palliative and or rehabilitative and directly impacts the newborn, infant or growing child. As displayed in Fig. 1, the midwife's responsibility is to ensure postnatally, the newborn promptly initiates breastfeeding and supervises lactation and promptly identifies challenges to breastfeeding, proffering solutions. The midwife also performs the immediate essential care of the newborn, providing skin-to-skin contact, eye care with 5% erythromycin ointment and Cord care with 4% chlorhexidine gel for the prevention of eye and cord infection. Vitamin K1 is also administered to prevent haemorrhagic disease of the newborn and prevention of hypothermia through prolonged skin-to-skin contact via Kangaroo Mother Care. If the baby is small for gestation or is a very low birth weight, the baby can be referred to a centre for a Paediatrician/neonatologist and transported in the kangaroo mother care (KMC) position, preventing hypothermia and mortality.

In addition, other responsibilities expected of the midwife to improve child health include male circumcision, and prevention of infectious diseases through coordinating the well-child clinics where growth monitoring and immunizations are supervised and growth faltering and missed opportunities prevented. The benefits of exclusive breastfeeding for at least 6 months and complementary feeding practices are also explained to mothers.

**4. Promoting infant feeding and nutrition [20,26]:** Several studies have highlighted the importance of midwives in supporting positive mother-infant contact and enhancing the developing relationship [27]. Midwives also play a critical role in breastfeeding support, which has been shown to improve infant health outcomes [28].

**5. Supporting family planning:** Midwives are responsible for providing family planning counselling and services to women of reproductive age. They offer health education on contraceptive use by women after childbirth and teenage girls to avoid unwanted pregnancies. In addition to these traditional services, midwives in Nigeria and Africa, are increasingly involved in sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as interventions to improve maternal mental health and wellbeing [15,29].

**6. Providing immunizations [30]:** Midwives are responsible for providing immunizations to

children to prevent vaccine-preventable diseases.

**7. Managing childhood illnesses [12,22]:** Midwives are responsible for identifying and managing certain common childhood illnesses, including malaria, pneumonia, diarrhoea, and malnutrition. This was reinforced through the training in the Integrated Management of Childhood Illnesses (IMCI) course which allowed midwives, especially at the primary health facilities quickly identify symptoms and signs of common tropical childhood diseases.

**8. Promoting maternal and child health education [30,31]:** They can educate communities on the importance of vaccination, nutrition, and sanitation to prevent child illnesses and promote child health. Midwives also promote maternal health to in turn limit newborn morbidity and mortality.

**9. Promoting Community Health:** Midwives not only provide clinical care during pregnancy, labour, and childbirth, but they also serve as change agents in the communities they work in. They mobilize people for health action, promote women and child health care, and conduct home visits [12].

The responsibilities of midwives in child health in Nigeria are critical to reducing both maternal and child mortality rates. However, midwives in Nigeria, as it is, in other parts of Africa face several challenges in fulfilling their responsibilities, including limited resources, inadequate training, poor remuneration and irregular payment of salaries, posted far away from family, and poor working conditions [31–33]. Addressing these challenges and supporting midwives in their roles is essential to improving child health outcomes in Nigeria.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This mini-review highlights the critical role of midwives in promoting child health in Nigeria. Their responsibilities include antenatal care, intrapartum care, postnatal care, promoting community health, supporting family planning and promoting maternal and child health education, promoting infant feeding and nutrition. Midwives are also responsible for providing immunizations and managing minor childhood illnesses. However, challenges such as limited resources and poor working conditions hinder their ability to fulfil these responsibilities.

Addressing these challenges is crucial to improving child health outcomes in Nigeria. Strengthening the capacity of midwives and other child health practitioners through training, mentorship, and adequate resources can improve maternal and child health outcomes in Nigeria.

## CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

It is not applicable.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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