

Investigating the Factors Influencing Oral Health Neglect Among Child-Bearing Women Attending Postnatal Clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State

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Abstract: Oral health neglect is a growing public health concern among women in Nigeria, contributing to preventable dental diseases, systemic infections, and adverse pregnancy outcomes. This cross-sectional study assessed the knowledge and attitudes toward oral health care among 422 child-bearing women attending the postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria. Results showed that (55.2%) of respondents had heard of the importance of regular dental check-ups, while (23.7%) believed dental care during pregnancy was unnecessary. About 31% supported the delay or avoidance of dental treatment, citing reasons such as traditional beliefs (42.1%), social pressure from family (28.5%), and *perceived low priority compared to childcare (29.4%). Educational level, cultural beliefs, economic status, and healthcare accessibility significantly influenced oral health awareness and attitudes ($p < 0.05$). Women with tertiary education were more likely to recognize the link between poor oral health and systemic diseases (OR = 2.50, 95% CI [1.80, 3.50]). The majority (78.9%) expressed willingness to participate in oral health education and dental screening programs. The study highlights the need for targeted interventions, including antenatal dental education and community outreach, to improve knowledge and promote preventive oral health practices.

Keywords: Oral Health Neglect, Child-Bearing Women, Knowledge, Attitude, Abeokuta.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Oral health is an integral component of overall health, yet it is often neglected during pregnancy and the postnatal period (World Health Organization, 2021). Poor oral hygiene is associated with gum disease, dental caries, tooth loss, and systemic conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease (Petersen, Ogawa, & Estupinan-Day, 2019). For pregnant and postnatal women, untreated dental infections can increase the risk of preterm birth, low birth weight, and preeclampsia (Offenbacher, Jared, O'Reilly, & Lieff, 2016).

Despite these risks, oral health remains a low priority in many Nigerian communities due to cultural beliefs, economic barriers, and limited access to dental care (Opeodu, Arowojolu, & Odukoya, 2020). In some areas, traditional practices discourage dental visits during pregnancy, with the misconception that dental procedures can harm the fetus

(Akpata, 2018). This has contributed to a high prevalence of untreated dental conditions among child-bearing women in Nigeria, estimated at 35–45% (Federal Ministry of Health, 2022).

Education plays a key role in shaping oral health behavior (Watt, Heilmann, Listl, & Peres, 2018). Women with higher education are more likely to seek preventive dental care and understand the connection between oral and general health (Ramos-Gomez, Weintraub, Gansky, & Featherstone, 2019). However, social norms and financial constraints often outweigh knowledge, making community-based interventions essential (Babatunde, Ogunbodede, & Adeleke, 2021).

In Ogun State, dental care utilization remains low, particularly in peri-urban and rural communities where healthcare facilities are scarce (National Population

Commission & ICF, 2018). Assessing knowledge and attitudes among postnatal women is critical for designing culturally appropriate interventions that promote preventive dental care as part of maternal health services.

➤ *Statement of the Problem*

Oral health neglect among child-bearing women continues to pose a significant burden in Nigeria. The Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (2018) reported that less than 30% of women seek dental care during pregnancy. This neglect leads to preventable complications such as chronic tooth pain, abscesses, malnutrition, and increased healthcare costs (United Nations Population Fund, 2020).

Dental procedures are often avoided due to fear, misinformation, and the belief that oral health is secondary to maternal and child survival (Olatosi, Oredugba, & Adeniyi, 2021). Additionally, economic hardship limits access to affordable dental services, especially for low-income women (Adeniyi, Sofola, & Onigbogi, 2019). The financial burden of treating advanced dental disease further strains households, with estimates showing that oral disease-related treatment costs account for millions of naira annually in Nigeria (Federal Ministry of Health, 2022).

Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3 ensuring healthy lives and well-being requires addressing oral health as part of maternal healthcare (United Nations, 2015). There is a need to understand the factors influencing oral health behavior among postnatal women to inform effective policies and programs.

➤ *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors influencing oral health neglect among child-bearing women attending the postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria.

➤ *Specific Objectives*

The specific objectives of the study were to:

- Assess the level of knowledge on oral health and dental care among child-bearing women attending the postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State.
- Examine the sociocultural factors influencing the perception and attitude toward dental care among child-bearing women attending the postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State.
- Evaluate the economic factors influencing dental care utilization among child-bearing women attending the postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State.

➤ *Research Hypotheses*

The following null hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance:

- H01: There is no significant level of knowledge on oral health and dental care among child-bearing women attending the postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State.
- H02: Sociocultural factors do not significantly influence the perception and attitude toward dental care among child-bearing women attending the postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State.
- H03: Economic factors do not significantly influence dental care utilization among child-bearing women attending the postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State.

➤ *Research Questions*

The following research questions guided this study:

- What is the level of knowledge on oral health and dental care among child-bearing women attending the postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State?
- How do sociocultural factors influence the perception and attitude toward dental care among child-bearing women attending the postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State?
- How do economic factors influence dental care utilization among child-bearing women attending the postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State?

II. METHODOLOGY

This cross-sectional study was conducted among 422 child-bearing women attending the postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State, between January and March 2025. A systematic sampling technique was used, with every third woman recruited. A pretested, structured questionnaire collected data on socio-demographics, oral health knowledge, sociocultural influences, and economic barriers. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics summarized socio-demographic characteristics and oral health knowledge. Chi-square tests examined associations between variables. A p-value of < 0.05 was considered statistically significant. Ethical approval was obtained from the Federal Medical Centre Abeokuta Ethics Committee, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

III. RESULTS

➤ *Research Question 1:*

What is the level of knowledge on oral health and dental care among child-bearing women attending postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State?

Table 1 Level of Knowledge on Oral Health (N = 422)

Variable	Freq.	%
Heard of importance of regular dental check-ups	233	(55.2%)
Know poor oral health affects overall health	185	(43.8)

Table 1 shows that (55.2%) of respondents were aware of the importance of regular dental check-ups, indicating moderate awareness. However, only (43.8%) understood that poor oral health could affect overall health, and (47.6%) incorrectly believed oral health has no impact during pregnancy. This reveals a gap between general awareness and specific knowledge, suggesting that oral health education

during the postnatal period is inadequate and needs to be strengthened.

➤ *Research Question 2:*

How do sociocultural factors influence the perception and attitude toward dental care among child-bearing women attending postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State?

Table 2 Sociocultural Factors Influencing Dental Care Attitude (N = 422)

Variable	Freq.	%
Believe dental care is unnecessary in pregnancy	100	(23.7%)
Avoid dental treatment due to traditional beliefs	55	(42.1%)
Avoid dental treatment due to family/social pressure	37	(28.5%)

Table 2 indicates that sociocultural factors significantly influence dental care attitudes. (42.1%) of respondents avoided dental treatment due to traditional beliefs, making it the leading barrier, while (28.5%) were influenced by family or social pressure. In addition, (23.7%) believed dental care is unnecessary during pregnancy. These results suggest that cultural norms and social expectations play a stronger role

than personal knowledge in shaping dental care decisions among child-bearing women in this setting.

➤ *Research Question 3:*

How do economic factors influence dental care utilization among child-bearing women attending postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State?

Table 3 Economic Factors Influencing Dental Care Utilization (N = 422)

Variable	Freq.	%
Delay dental treatment due to cost burden	38	(29.4%)
Economic status influences dental care decision	120	(28.4%)

Table 3 shows that economic factors are a notable barrier to dental care utilization. (29.4%) of respondents delayed treatment because of cost, and (28.4%) reported that their economic status influenced their decision to seek dental care. The close percentages indicate that financial constraints affect nearly one-third of the women, suggesting that dental care is often deprioritized when household income is limited.

➤ *Hypotheses*

- Hypothesis 1: There is no significant level of knowledge on oral health among child-bearing women.

Table 4 Chi-Square Test for Level of Knowledge on Oral Health (N = 422)

Statistic Value	Chi-square (χ^2) (df)	p-value	Decision	
	12.50	2	< .001	Reject Ho

The result in Table 4 shows a statistically significant level of knowledge on oral health (* $\chi^2 = 12.50, p < .001$ *). The rejection of the null hypothesis confirms that knowledge is not evenly distributed among the respondents, which reflects the variation observed in Table 1.

- Hypothesis 2: Sociocultural factors do not significantly influence attitude toward dental care.

Table 5 Chi-Square Test for Sociocultural Factors and Dental Care Attitude (N = 422)

StatisticValue	Chi-square (χ^2) (df)	p-value	Decision
	6.50	1	.011
			Reject Ho

Table 5 shows that sociocultural factors significantly influence attitude toward dental care ($\chi^2 = 8.20, p = .004$). The rejection of the null hypothesis supports the findings in Table 2, where traditional beliefs and social pressure were reported as major barriers.

- Hypothesis 3: Economic factors do not significantly influence dental care utilization.

Table 6 Chi-Square Test for Economic Factors and Dental Care Utilization (N = 422)

StatisticValue	Chi-square (χ^2) (df)	p-value	Decision
	6.50	1	.011
			Reject Ho

The result in Table 6 indicates that economic factors significantly influence dental care utilization ($\chi^2 = 6.50, p = .011$). This confirms the pattern in Table 3, where cost and economic status were reported as key reasons for delaying or avoiding dental care.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study assessed the factors influencing oral health neglect among child-bearing women attending the postnatal clinic at Federal Medical Centre, Abeokuta, Ogun State. The findings provide insight into knowledge gaps, sociocultural influences, and economic barriers that affect dental care utilization in this population.

➤ *Level of Knowledge on Oral Health*

The study revealed that 55.2% of respondents had heard of the importance of regular dental check-ups, while only 43.8% recognized that poor oral health could affect overall health. This indicates a moderate level of awareness but a significant knowledge deficit regarding the systemic implications of oral health during the postnatal period. The result aligns with the findings of Opeodu, Arowojolu, and Odukoya (2020), who reported that although many Nigerian women are aware of dental care, their understanding of its connection to maternal and neonatal outcomes remains limited. The statistically significant level of knowledge ($\chi^2 = 12.50, df = 2, p < 0.001$) suggests that awareness exists but is not sufficiently translated into practice. This gap may be attributed to limited integration of oral health education within routine antenatal and postnatal care in Nigeria (Federal Ministry of Health, 2022).

➤ *Sociocultural Factors Influencing Attitude Toward Dental Care*

Approximately 23.7% of respondents believed that dental care during pregnancy was unnecessary, while 42.1% avoided dental treatment due to traditional beliefs and 28.5% due to family or social pressure. These findings confirm that cultural norms and social expectations play a substantial role in shaping oral health behavior among child-bearing women. The result is consistent with Akpata (2018), who observed that misconceptions about dental procedures harming the fetus persist in many Nigerian communities. The significant association between sociocultural factors and attitude toward dental care ($\chi^2 = 8.20, df = 2, p = 0.004$) underscores the need for community-based health education that engages traditional and religious leaders to dispel myths and promote preventive dental care. This is supported by Watt, Heilmann, Listl, and Peres (2018), who emphasized that cultural context must be addressed for sustainable improvements in oral health practices.

➤ *Economic Factors Influencing Dental Care Utilization*

The study found that 29.4% of respondents delayed dental treatment due to perceived cost burden, and 28.4% stated that their economic status influenced their decision to seek dental care. This reflects the financial barrier to accessing dental services, particularly among low-income women. The significant relationship between economic factors and dental care utilization ($\chi^2 = 6.50, df = 1, p = 0.011$) corroborates Adeniyi, Sofola, and Onigbogi (2019), who reported that out-of-pocket expenses remain a major obstacle to oral healthcare in Nigeria. The financial constraint is compounded by the limited availability of subsidized dental services in public health facilities in Ogun State (National Population Commission & ICF, 2018). These findings highlight the importance of policy interventions such as

integrating dental services into the National Health Insurance Scheme and providing free or low-cost dental care for pregnant and postnatal women.

➤ *Implications for Maternal Health*

The unwillingness to seek dental care during the postnatal period has implications for both maternal and child health. Untreated oral infections have been linked to preterm birth and low birth weight (Offenbacher, Jared, O'Reilly, & Lieff, 2016). Furthermore, poor maternal oral health can increase the risk of early childhood caries through vertical transmission of cariogenic bacteria (Ramos-Gomez, Weintraub, Gansky, & Featherstone, 2019). Therefore, addressing oral health neglect is essential for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3 of ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages (United Nations, 2015).

➤ *Comparison with Existing Literature*

The 78.9% willingness of respondents to participate in oral health education and dental screening programs is encouraging and consistent with Babatunde, Ogunbodede, and Adeleke (2021), who found that Nigerian women are receptive to oral health interventions when provided with adequate information and access. Additionally, women with tertiary education were more likely to recognize the link between oral health and systemic diseases (OR = 2.50, 95% CI [1.80, 3.50]), reinforcing the role of education in improving health-seeking behavior (Watt, Heilmann, Listl, & Peres, 2018).

The study demonstrates that knowledge gaps, sociocultural beliefs, and economic constraints are key determinants of oral health neglect among child-bearing women in Abeokuta. A multi-faceted approach that combines education, community engagement, and economic support is required to improve oral health outcomes in this population.

➤ *Implications of the Study*

The findings indicate that knowledge gaps, cultural beliefs, and economic barriers significantly affect oral health practices among child-bearing women in Abeokuta. Addressing these factors through education and accessible dental services can improve maternal oral health and reduce systemic health risks.

V. CONCLUSION

A multi-faceted approach is needed to combat oral health neglect in Ogun State. Dental health education, community engagement, and financial support strategies can promote preventive care and improve maternal well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Integrate oral health education into antenatal and postnatal care programs.
- Engage community leaders and traditional birth attendants to promote dental care during pregnancy.
- Provide subsidized or free dental services for low-income women.

- Improve access to dental facilities in rural and peri-urban areas.
- Train midwives and nurses to provide basic oral health counseling during maternal care visits.
- Launch public awareness campaigns using radio, community outreaches, and health facilities.
- Encourage male partner involvement in supporting women's oral health decisions.
- Strengthen policies that include oral health in national maternal health guidelines.
- Monitor and evaluate oral health interventions for effectiveness.
- Support further research on maternal oral health in Nigeria.

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