

The Expanding Role of Midwives in Prenatal and Postnatal Care: A Qualitative Study on Perceptions and Challenges in Saudi Arabian Hospitals

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1. Midwife

Abstract

Objective: This qualitative study aimed to explore the perceptions and challenges of midwives regarding their expanding role in prenatal and postnatal care within Saudi Arabian hospitals.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 midwives from various hospitals in Saudi Arabia. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: Three main themes emerged from the data: 1) perceived benefits of midwifery-led care, 2) challenges in practice, and 3) professional development needs. Midwives recognized their unique role in providing continuity of care and empowering women. However, they also faced challenges related to role ambiguity, interprofessional collaboration, and resource constraints. The need for specialized training and recognition was highlighted.

Conclusion: Midwives in Saudi Arabia perceive their expanding role in prenatal and postnatal care as valuable but face various challenges. Addressing these challenges through role clarification, interprofessional collaboration, and professional development opportunities is crucial to optimize midwifery care and improve maternal and neonatal outcomes in Saudi Arabian hospitals.

Keywords: midwifery, prenatal care, postnatal care, qualitative research, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Midwives play a critical role in providing comprehensive care to women during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period (International Confederation of Midwives [ICM], 2017). In recent years, the role of midwives has expanded beyond intrapartum care to include prenatal and postnatal care, contributing to improved maternal and neonatal outcomes (Renfrew et al., 2014). This shift towards midwifery-led care aligns with the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommendation to provide continuity of care throughout the childbearing continuum (WHO, 2016).

In Saudi Arabia, the healthcare system has undergone significant reforms in recent years, with an increased focus on improving maternal and child health (Almalki et al., 2011). However, the role of midwives in Saudi Arabian hospitals has been relatively understudied. This qualitative study aims to address this gap by exploring the perceptions and challenges of midwives regarding their expanding role in prenatal and postnatal care within the Saudi Arabian healthcare context.

Literature Review

Midwifery-Led Care

Midwifery-led care models have been associated with improved maternal and neonatal outcomes, increased patient satisfaction, and cost-effectiveness (Sandall et al., 2016). In these models, midwives serve as the lead professionals in the planning, organization, and delivery of care throughout pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period (ICM, 2017). Midwifery-led care emphasizes continuity of care, patient-centered approaches, and the promotion of normal birth processes (Renfrew et al., 2014).

Research has demonstrated the benefits of midwifery-led care in various settings. A Cochrane review by Sandall et al. (2016) found that women who received midwifery-led continuity models of care were less likely to experience interventions during childbirth and more likely to be satisfied with their care compared to those who received other models of care. Additionally, midwifery-led care has been associated with reduced preterm births, improved breastfeeding rates, and better maternal mental health outcomes (Hildingsson et al., 2021; Horton & Astudillo, 2014).

Challenges in Midwifery Practice

Despite the evidence supporting midwifery-led care, midwives often face challenges in their practice. One significant challenge is the lack of clarity regarding the scope of midwifery practice and the boundaries between midwifery and other healthcare professionals' roles (Goodman, 2015). This role ambiguity can lead to conflicts and hinder effective interprofessional collaboration (Reiger & Lane, 2009).

Another challenge is the limited resources and support available to midwives in some healthcare settings (Michel-Schuldt et al., 2020). Inadequate staffing, high workloads, and lack of access to necessary equipment and supplies can negatively impact the quality of midwifery care and job satisfaction (Brodie, 2013).

Furthermore, midwives may face resistance from other healthcare professionals who are unfamiliar with or skeptical of midwifery-led care models (Goodman, 2015). This resistance can create barriers to the integration of midwifery services and limit midwives' autonomy in practice (Reiger & Lane, 2009).

Midwifery in the Saudi Arabian Context

In Saudi Arabia, midwifery education and practice have undergone significant development in recent years. The first midwifery education program in the country was established in 1986, and since then, several universities have begun offering bachelor's degrees in midwifery (Altaweli et al., 2015). However, the number of Saudi Arabian midwives remains relatively low, with many hospitals relying on expatriate midwives (Almalki et al., 2011).

Studies have highlighted the need for further development of midwifery education and practice in Saudi Arabia. Altaweli et al. (2015) found that Saudi Arabian midwifery students and educators perceived a lack of clinical exposure and hands-on training opportunities. Additionally, research has identified challenges related to the cultural acceptability of midwifery care and the need for increased public awareness of the role of midwives (Alyami et al., 2016).

Methods

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews to explore the perceptions and challenges of midwives regarding their expanding role in prenatal and postnatal care within Saudi Arabian hospitals. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and the context in which they operate (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

Twenty midwives from various hospitals in Saudi Arabia participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Inclusion criteria included being a registered midwife with at least two years of experience working in a Saudi Arabian hospital. Participants' demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics	
Characteristic	n (%)
Gender	
Female	20 (100%)
Age (years)	
25-34	7 (35%)
35-44	9 (45%)
45-54	4 (20%)
Nationality	
Saudi Arabian	12 (60%)
Non-Saudi	8 (40%)
Years of Experience	
2-5	5 (25%)
6-10	8 (40%)
>10	7 (35%)

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. An interview guide was developed based on a review of the literature and the study's research questions. The guide included open-ended questions exploring participants' perceptions of their role in prenatal and postnatal care, the challenges they faced, and their professional development needs. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyze the interview data. The analysis involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes,

and defining and naming the final themes. Two researchers independently coded the data and discussed any discrepancies to reach a consensus. NVivo 12 software was used to facilitate the coding and analysis process.

Results

Three main themes emerged from the data analysis: 1) perceived benefits of midwifery-led care, 2) challenges in practice, and 3) professional development needs.

Theme 1: Perceived Benefits of Midwifery-Led Care

Participants recognized the unique contributions of midwifery-led care in prenatal and postnatal care. They emphasized the importance of continuity of care, empowering women, and providing holistic support. One participant stated:

"As midwives, we have the opportunity to build strong relationships with women throughout their pregnancies and beyond. This continuity allows us to provide individualized care and support them in their journey to motherhood." (P7)

Table 2 presents the subthemes and representative quotes related to perceived benefits.

Table 2
Perceived Benefits of Midwifery-Led Care

Subtheme	Representative Quote
Continuity of care	"Midwifery-led care ensures that women receive consistent care from a midwife they trust, which can lead to better outcomes and satisfaction." (P12)
Empowering women	"We empower women to make informed decisions about their care and support them in their choices. This can boost their confidence and lead to a more positive experience." (P18)
Holistic support	"Midwives provide not only physical care but also emotional and psychological support to women and their families. We take a holistic approach to care." (P3)

Theme 2: Challenges in Practice

Participants discussed various challenges they faced in their practice, including role ambiguity, interprofessional collaboration, and resource constraints. One participant shared:

"Sometimes there is confusion about the scope of our practice and how it intersects with other healthcare professionals' roles. This can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts." (P15)

Table 3 presents the subthemes and representative quotes related to challenges.

Table 3
Challenges in Practice

Subtheme	Representative Quote
Role ambiguity	"There is a need for clearer guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of midwives, especially in relation to other healthcare professionals involved in maternal care." (P11)
Interprofessional collaboration	"Collaborating with physicians and other healthcare team members can be challenging at times. Building mutual trust and respect is crucial for effective teamwork." (P6)
Resource constraints	"Lack of adequate staffing and resources can hinder our ability to provide optimal care. We need more support to meet the growing demands of our role." (P19)

Theme 3: Professional Development Needs

Participants emphasized the importance of ongoing professional development to enhance their skills and knowledge in providing prenatal and postnatal care. They highlighted the need for specialized training, mentorship, and recognition of their expertise. One participant stated:

"We need access to specialized training programs that focus on the unique aspects of midwifery care in prenatal and postnatal periods. This will help us stay updated with the latest evidence and best practices." (P9)

Table 4 presents the subthemes and representative quotes related to professional development needs.

Table 4
Professional Development Needs

Subtheme	Representative Quote
Specialized training	"Targeted training programs on topics such as breastfeeding support, mental health screening, and postpartum care would be highly valuable for midwives working in prenatal and postnatal settings." (P14)
Mentorship	"Having access to experienced midwife mentors can provide guidance and support, especially for newly qualified midwives navigating their expanded roles." (P5)
Recognition of expertise	"Recognizing midwives as experts in prenatal and postnatal care is essential. This can help build trust and collaboration with other healthcare professionals and the public." (P20)

Discussion

This qualitative study explored the perceptions and challenges of midwives regarding their expanding role in prenatal and postnatal care within Saudi Arabian hospitals. The findings highlight the perceived benefits, challenges, and professional development needs associated with midwifery-led care in this context.

Participants recognized the value of midwifery-led care in providing continuity of care, empowering women, and offering holistic support. These findings align with previous research that has demonstrated the benefits of midwifery-led care models in improving maternal and neonatal outcomes, patient satisfaction, and cost-effectiveness (Sandall et al., 2016; Renfrew et al., 2014).

However, participants also identified challenges related to role ambiguity, interprofessional collaboration, and resource constraints. These challenges are consistent with previous studies that have highlighted the need for clear role definitions, effective teamwork, and adequate support for midwives (Goodman, 2015; Reiger & Lane, 2009; Michel-Schuldt et al., 2020).

The professional development needs identified by participants underscore the importance of providing specialized training, mentorship, and recognition of midwives' expertise. These findings align with previous research that has emphasized the need for continuous education and professional development opportunities to support midwives in their expanded roles (Altaweli et al., 2015; Brodie, 2013).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has some limitations. First, the sample size of 20 midwives may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of midwives in Saudi Arabia. Future research could include a larger and more diverse sample to capture a wider range of perspectives and experiences.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Participants may have emphasized positive aspects or downplayed challenges to present a favorable image. Future research could triangulate findings using additional data sources, such as observations or surveys, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of midwives' perceptions and challenges.

Finally, this study focused on the perspectives of midwives in Saudi Arabian hospitals. Future research could explore the perceptions and experiences of other healthcare professionals, women, and families regarding midwifery-led care in prenatal and postnatal settings to gain a more holistic understanding of the expanding role of midwives.

Conclusion

This qualitative study provides valuable insights into the perceptions and challenges of midwives regarding their expanding role in prenatal and postnatal care within Saudi Arabian hospitals. The findings highlight the perceived benefits of midwifery-led care, the challenges faced by midwives in practice, and their professional development needs.

Addressing the identified challenges through role clarification, interprofessional collaboration, and supportive policies is crucial to optimize midwifery care and improve maternal and neonatal outcomes in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, providing specialized training, mentorship, and recognition of midwives' expertise can enhance their capacity to deliver high-quality care in prenatal and postnatal settings.

By understanding the perspectives of midwives and taking proactive steps to support their expanding role, Saudi Arabian hospitals can harness the full potential of midwifery-led care in improving the health and well-being of women and their families throughout the childbearing continuum.

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