

“Omugwo” – preventing and managing postpartum depression

Lawal et al describe a Nigerian socio-culture practice that supports the mental health of new mothers

Postpartum depression (PPD) is a global public health challenge and a major concern because each day, 360,000 babies are born and PPD is an unexpected consequence.¹ The prevalence of PPD varies from one country to another based on the system of health care delivery and social support available to women. In the global north, countries like Germany have a prevalence level put at 3.6%,² while in Canada it ranges between 8.46% and 8.69%. In the low- and middle-income countries of the global south, prevalence rates are much higher. In Bangladesh, for example, it is as high as 39.4%.³ In Nepal, it is estimated at 29%.⁴ Research findings in Ethiopia indicate that PPD, estimated at 25%, is a major concern for reproductive health of women.⁵ Estimates for Nigeria were registered at 22.4% and 22.9% (Chinawa et al, 2016).^{6,7} Across all developing and sub-Saharan African countries, PPD ratings range from as low as 1.9% to as high as 82.1%.⁶

Arguably, PPD on women is a major concern the world over, with barely any visible deliberate or responsive interventions. The high prevalence rates are an indication that attention must be paid to the problem, to provide desirable consideration to the health of post-delivery women to be able to care for their new-borns. Against this background, this paper is an examination of the concept of “Omugwo” (maternal post-partum care) as a social mechanism for the prevention and management of PPD in Nigeria.

The concept of Omugwo

Omugwo is a cultural response to the burden on the mother that arises with the arrival of a new-born baby. While it is not globally widespread as a concept, Omugwo has been institutionalised across many Nigerian communities, especially among the Igbos of the south-eastern region of the country. Practically, it is a support system towards new mothers to take care for their babies in early post-delivery periods.

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Omugwo is a local demonstration of social support offered as a gesture to felicitate in the care of the new-born baby. It is considered a stress-easing mechanism for mothers upon delivery. It is also a gesture of companionship and backup against the daunting task of taking care for a new born child. The practice further serves as a social process of bonding between the usually elderly mother that comes to provide support and the new mother. Scholars have observed that the practice continues to thrive as it contributes to reducing anxiety, stress and preventing mothers from becoming depressed. Studies⁸ have shown that, despite challenges that may arise – usually not major, maternal postpartum care is reported to have a positive effect on the overall health of mothers and their newborns, making it a strong recommendation for the women of Nigeria.

Omugwo as a socio-cultural practice

The practise of Omugwo is a replication of old African traditions where elderly women in the community join their daughters or younger women to provide post-delivery care. A further benefit for the new mothers is found in the considerable lessons they reportedly learn in new born child attention as well as their post-delivery self-care. It has been found to augment and harness desirable relationships between senior women and the younger ones in communities. As a social practice, Omugwo is considered a privilege, especially when an elderly woman is presented the opportunity to provide maternal post-partum care to a younger woman in the community. Often it is preferred that both of the women involved are of same family lineage or clan, and this has defined the choice of who is nominated once a baby is born. But as a tradition also, elderly women are known to pay prolonged visits to their children when a baby is born, to offer both child and new mother-care support. It is considered a form of maternal and child education as many young women use this opportunity to learn, unlearn and relearn about child rearing especially in the very early stages of motherhood.

Omugwo today

Omugwo remains relevant in contemporary Nigeria, but has also spread beyond the south-east region to other regions of the country. It is considered beneficial to both the health and social well-being of the new mother and her new-born child. But the question is: how is it performing especially with the advent of modernity?

This paper observes that modern forms of social relations are inevitably being incorporated into the Omugwo practises, through education, modernisation and technological advancement, among others. However, in spite of these developments of the times, Omugwo remains steadfast in the societal norms of the Nigerian people. At the centre of this multi-generational practices is the much-needed post-delivery support to the vulnerable mother and child, as well as critical baby care skills. According to Mokhtari et al,⁹ postpartum care delivered at home increases the mother's knowledge of her health and that of her baby. Suffice to note that there are also unintended benefits, such as harmony between new mother and husband ushered in by the support offered by the community, especially the elderly who attend to the post-delivery development. Bonding was also earlier noted as another consequence of Omugwo, where social relations are harnessed between families and the women involved. The process of birth is associated with various forms of body setbacks such as fatigue, stress, anxiety or even depression, and social support offered during postpartum period has been found very effective in alleviating or managing these ills.¹⁰

Omugwo in the prevention and management of PPD

Studies in various Nigerian societies have established that Omugwo is effective in not just the prevention but also the management of PPD. In addition, there are some unintended consequences noted, including; new mothers being able to have adequate sleep and eat well with reduced pressures from the burdens of baby care. This also means faster body recovery for the mother and steady development for the infant. It is a stress management mechanism and the associated depression during the fragile post-delivery period, specifically from 10 days to six weeks. It has been found to lower the infant mortality rate.¹¹

The sharing that transpires during Omugwo between the new mothers and the usually much older woman is a proven social capital. It is an avenue for free engagement through which baby caring and many other skills are passed over to younger women. In the process, they are helped to avoid depression, which they are said to develop because of fear, anxiety and inexperience in motherhood. While instances of conflict may arise between the parties, the social cohesion that forms the bedrock of the practice is revered and remains paramount.

In view of the several scholars referenced in this paper, Omugwo comes out as a useful social mechanism that promotes solidarity in families and communities. As a social driver, it has been proven to prevent PPD given the concerted counselling involved. Omugwo thrives on communal living structures that characterise typical households in Nigeria. The practice of elderly mothers making committed relocation to their daughters' homes to partake in the delicate care of the new baby affirms a social system grounded in the traditions of Nigerian societies.

Conclusion

Omugwo is a beneficial socio-cultural mechanism. It is without doubt a proven societal structure found effective for women and their new-born babies, and families in the management of post-delivery experiences. Beyond the various scholarly references made in this paper, further studies are recommended to determine the extent to which it has bearing on women's mental health post-delivery.

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