

Life after maternal death: Lived experiences of families without mothers in Okpoga, Okpokwu local government area, Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Maternal death, although largely preventable, remains unacceptably high in developing countries such as Nigeria. The consequences of maternal death on the family members are dramatic, maternal death is one of the profound and life-altering events families will ever experience. This study explored the lived experiences of families following maternal death in Okpoga, Okpokwu L.G.A of Benue State. The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design. To understand the families' experiences, purposive sampling was used to select 9 families, these include the spouse and children ≥ 12 years of women who died from pregnancy or childbirth complications, who were interviewed. Data for this study were collected using semi-structured interview guide. The experiences of these families were illuminated through stories and reflections, two themes emerged from their experiences, these are; Losses, and Overwhelming Support system. The study found that widowers grieve both the loss of a companion and the death of their dreams. Accompanying these losses are the challenges of single parenthood; the readjustment to life as a single adult. The study also revealed friends and family support, faith in God (spirituality), maintaining connection with the deceased and loss and grief counselling services as a coping mechanism. Support groups for widowers was recommended to help ameliorate the bleak effect of maternal death by sharing experiences, strategies used as coping mechanism and as well provide support. The study concluded that losing a wife (and mother of one's children) through maternal death is quite emotive and it affects the family's psychosocial wellbeing.

Keywords: Family Support; Losses; Maternal Death; Nigeria; Psychosocial Health; Lived Experiences

1. Introduction

It is hard to overstate how important mothers are around the world when it comes to the health and well-being of their families. The death of a mother is likely to cause problems for families in many different ways. Maternal deaths include all female deaths that happen during pregnancy and delivery up to the sixth week after giving birth. These deaths are very sad for the husband and kids who are still alive, as well as for the rest of the family, the community, and society as a whole. According to statistics, over 300,000 women died around the world due to complications during pregnancy and childbirth in 2015 [1]. Every day in 2023, over 700 women died from preventable causes related to pregnancy; childbirth and maternal death occurred almost every 2 minutes in 2023 [2]. This aligns with the Global Burden of Disease Study, which noted persistent maternal mortality in Low and Medium Income Countries (LMICs) despite interventions [3, 4], more than half of this is accounted for by Sub-Saharan Africa [5, 2]. Following the death of the mother, the family members who are still alive try to fill in the void left by her responsibilities [6].

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Mothers are the primary caregivers for their children, and it is generally understood that nutrition and other critical child health care practises, such as early and exclusive breastfeeding and regular immunizations, are strongly connected to mother engagement and attention to child health. These critical caregiving roles significantly impact child health and survival. A systematic review confirms the cascading effects on undernutrition and immunization [7]. Also, mothers are often responsible for household work that is also critical to family wellbeing activities such as, gathering water and firewood, preparing and tending to livestock, food preparation, caring and grooming of children among others are some of the important contributions of mothers to the growth and development of the families, these roles can only be partially fulfilled by other members of the family if the mother [6]. Mothers are also instrumental in meeting the sexual needs of their spouses.

Changes in duties, such as child care, might have an impact on one's social life. The process of socialization is dependent on both parents performing complimentary roles in their children's upbringing, which will undoubtedly benefit the children throughout their school years. Children from single parent homes when their mother has died, on the other hand, are more likely to be denied these chances, which might have a severe psychosocial influence throughout their school years [8, 9, 10]. Children in motherless homes are more likely to suffer psychosocial disadvantages [11, 12].

Qualitative data gathering from the different families is one technique to get in-depth understanding of the experiences of families that live without a mother as a consequence of the mother's death. Unfortunately, the bulk of what we currently know about maternal death is based on statistical data, i.e., the problem has been analysed quantitatively with little or no respect for the family's experiences after the mother's death. There is a dearth of qualitative study on what maternal mortality means to families and how the loss of a mother affects the nuclear family's social and mental health.

Losing a mother is a traumatic experience in Nigeria, and it often results in a long-term fall in social and economic standards for both her immediate family and community at large. When a mother dies, it may have a tremendous impact on the lives, quality of life, and survival chances of those who are left behind [13]. Women in Okpokwu L.G.A. are primarily farmers and petty traders, with a few civil servants of low cadre, while men are farmers/palm wine tappers, artisans, and civil servants of low cadre. Women in these communities visibly support their families, spouses, and children by providing basic supplies that meet their psychological and social needs. The death of a woman may create a large gap in the family, the loss of cohesion. In light of this, the researcher set out to learn more about the lives and stories of families without a mother. The goal of this study was to look at how families in Okpoga, Okpokwu Local Government Area, Benue State, react to the death of a mother. The study specifically seeks to: Explore the psychosocial life experiences of families following maternal death, and describe how families cope with these challenges.

2. Material and Methods

The study employed a qualitative, phenomenological research approach. The goal of the approach is to arrive at a description of a particular phenomenon, in this case widowers and children experiences of living without a wife/mother. The population of study comprised families whose wife and mother died of causes relating to pregnancy and/ or childbirth complications in Okpoga, Okpokwu LGA, these are spouse and children (12years and above), the population was drawn across three council wards in Okpoga, Okpokwu LGA. There is no record for determination of this population, hence infinite. Purposive sampling was used to select 9 families (participants), consisting of the spouse and children aged 12 or older of women who died as a result of pregnancy or childbirth complications, three (3) subjects from each of the study area's three communities, for a total of nine (9) families (comprising spouses and children ≥ 12 years) who met the inclusion criteria. The researcher was able to achieve saturation in this study with a sample size of nine (9) families; the decision to stop at the ninth interview was made because the researcher noticed that after collecting and analysing eight (8) interviews, no new information was emerging from the participants; this process was achieved through a careful sampling, data collection, and data analysis process.

This study's data were gathered utilising a semi-structured interview guide, comprising two sections: section A, which contains demographic data, and section B, which contains open-ended semi-structured questions about the experiences of families who have lost their wives (mother of their children). It was structured with the goal of eliciting information on their lived experiences as they affect their psychosocial lives. The instrument was subject to face and content validity. The research's credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were also established to achieve trustworthiness. The data collected were analysed through five processes, they are:

- Bracketing and phenomenological reduction.
- Delineating units of meaning.
- Clustering of units of meaning to form themes.

- Summarizing each interview, validating it and where necessary modifying it.
- Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary [14].

3. Results

The present study examine life after maternal death: lived experiences of families without mothers in Okpoga, Okpokwu local government area, Benue State, with a sample of nine (9) families (comprising spouses and children ≥ 12 years)

3.1. Sociodemographic Attributes of Participants

The demographic features of widowers and their children, whose wives and mothers died as a consequence of pregnancy and delivery problems are shown in Table 1. Five of the participants (55.6%) are between the ages of 40 and 45. Most of the participants had secondary education (44.5%). In terms of the participants' occupation, majority (44.5%) are farmers. In terms of years of marriage, nearly all (88.9 %) of the participants spent 12 – 14 years before maternal death. Eight (88.9%) of participants has 3 – 4 children with their eldest child between the age range of 12 – 14 years while 1 (11.1%) participant have 5 – 6 children with an eldest child being 16 years.

Table 1 Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants (Widowers) n=09

Criterion	Characteristics	n	%
Age	40 - 45 years	5	55.6%
	46 - 50 years	2	22.2%
	51 - 55 years	2	22.2%
Level of Education	Primary	3	33.3%
	Secondary	4	44.5%
	Tertiary	2	22.2%
Occupation	Farming	4	44.5%
	Trading	2	22.2%
	Civil service	3	33.3%
Years of Marriage	12 - 14 years	8	88.9%
	15 - 17 years	1	11.1%
Number of Children	3 – 4	8	88.9%
	5 – 6	1	11.1%
Age of your Eldest Child			
	12 - 14	8	88.9%
	15 - 17	1	11.1%

3.2. Themes and subthemes that emerged from the thematic content analysis

Two (2) themes and seven (7) subthemes emerged from the experiences of life after maternal death. The themes and subthemes are as follows: losses (loss of companionship, loss of hopes and dreams, and losses in family relationships and activities), Overwhelming Support system (Family and friends are very supportive, trust in God (spirituality), keeping a connection with the departed, and loss and grief therapy services were all beneficial). The details and the quotes from the participants that formed the themes were described below. Participants and numbers were used to replace participants name and to maintain anonymity.

Table 2 Themes and subthemes that emerged from the thematic content analysis

Themes	Subthemes
Losses	Companionship is being lost.
	Hopes and dreams are dashed
	Losses in family activities and connections
Overwhelming Support system	Family and friends are very supportive
	Faith in God (Spirituality)
	Maintaining connection with the deceased
	Loss and grief counselling services were helpful

3.2.1. Theme 1: Losses

When asked what living without their wife (and mother of their children) meant to them, all of the participants in this research addressed the subject of losses associated with the death of their wife. Loss of companionship, loss of goals and dreams, and loss of family connections and activities are among the subthemes that give an understanding of these losses.

Loss of companionship: This is how the loss of company and physical presence was described:

She was the love of my life. We had a lovely relationship, full of love and concern for one another, and we always knew what the other was thinking. Oh death! I never think a day that I can survive, living without her up to this day; I believe her thought keeps me going because there is no passing day that I don't think about her. Also, I often see her in our children (Participant 3)

She is not only a wife but also my best friend that is gone. As long as we had eye contact, she would understand what I mean. She is a person like that. She is my exclusive best friend that I always look forward to coming home to anytime I am out for work. Now the death of my wife has created a void, an emptiness that can't be filled. There is a part of me that feels it is gone forever. I can never fully enjoy anything again because half of me cannot. I am still in love with her. She is still part of me. She is still with me spiritually, even though she is not with me physically (Participant 7)

A participant spoke on the feeling of emptiness every time he opened the door:

For the first few months after her death, and particularly the first time I opened my door I looked in there, and she was not there. The house was like an empty cave. There was emptiness there, and I was looking for her and I could not find her (Participant 1)

Other Participants described how the loss of their wife (and mother of their children) leaves them feeling bewildered

I just did not know what to do, and that was probably the first time in my entire life that I felt so hopeless and helpless. I just feel like I am so lost, like I am in a hole and cannot get out (Participant 4)

I am startled sometimes how my emotions will suddenly spring to the surface and I will unexpectedly be in tears at a thought, a spoken word, or a memory of my wife. Just when I thought I was getting it together. It has been over two (2) years now; I still wear my wedding ring, because I'm not ready to consider another relationship. The death of my wife hits me in a way that is difficult to explain, it creates a vacuum that none can fill. I love her even in death; she was my soul mate and companion (Participant 9)

As seen by these narratives, the loss of their wife's presence has left the participants feeling alone, helpless, and vulnerable. These feelings of despair and helplessness reflect wider patterns of psychological distress among widowers in LMICs [15]

Loss of hopes and dreams: Loss of hopes and dreams for the future was another way participants articulated their experience. The extract elucidated below emphasized this subtheme

It has always been my dreams seeing us grow old together and have grandchildren, which is beautiful and would have been nice. But my dreams and hope were shattered the moment the doctor look at me and said "we tried all we could, but sorry we lost her" I can still recall vividly every single thing that happen that day. My little comfort is that I still have a bit of her in my children; if I didn't, with all the expectations and goals I had when I married, things would have been far more difficult. (Participant 3)

Losses in family relationships and activities: Some individuals mentioned the loss of family bonds and activities.

For me growing up I came from a relatively happy home. Four kids, Mother and Father, they are still together, and that was my hope for my life, and now it's gone. When she died, I had to let that dream go forever and that was not at all what I had planned for life (Participant 2)

There will be grandchildren, and there are lots of things in my life that will be happy, but at the same time, I am sad because she really wanted to see her grandchildren. She never thought she would not see her children grow up (Participant 8)

These remarks demonstrate that the widowers' lived experience includes the loss of nuclear family bonds as well as the loss of aspirations for the future as a family.

3.2.2. Theme 2: Overwhelming Support System

When participants were asked, "how have you been coping with the mental thoughts and realization of the fact that your wife is dead?" The aim was to explore the various coping mechanisms adopted by participants following maternal death. Participants mentioned; family and friends were very supportive, faith in God (spirituality), maintaining connection with the deceased and that loss and grief counselling service. Elucidated below are the subthemes that represented participant's description of how they have been able to cope with the mental thoughts of maternal death.

Family and friends are very supportive: Participants described varying degrees of supports of family members and friends. A Participant found support in his relationship with his wife's family helpful.

My wife's family has been really helpful. They have been fantastic; I could not have asked for a better family. My mother-in-law came to see me often, constantly expressing their love for me and remembering how well I cared for their daughter till her death, as well as how important my family is to them. How they love my children and how they are always going to be there for them. Their support encourages and strengthens me, I feel a little relief anytime I hear those words from her (my mother-in-law), it helps me to cope with the mental thought that my wife is dead (Participant 4)

Similarly, other participants described family support;

My father-in-law and mother-in-law often visit to see the children, even though they live in another town that is a little far from here, and my children often spend time with them during school vacation. I am often happy and relief seeing my children happy anytime they return from such visit, knowing that my wife will be happy anywhere she is. I found this helpful in coping with the mental thought that my wife is no more (Participant 7)

My mother-in-law was very supportive, she personally took the responsibility of caring for my last-born child, and I occasionally send money for medication and feeding. I cannot imagine coping without her help (Participant 3)

Other participants reported coping through supports from their siblings;

My sister is very supportive, since my wife's death over two (2) years, my elder sister took in my last child who is now five (5) years old and promised to be responsible for her upbringing which she has being doing very well since then. My two elder brothers were also very supportive, especially during the funeral planning, they were all involved and helpful in the funeral arrangements and they supported financially to make the burial successful, but since they do not live here (in Okpoga) it is difficult to be affected by their support on a regular basis. I am encouraged and strengthened by the support of my family in my time of needs (Participant 9)

I cannot imagine coping without my family's support, my younger sister moved in to care for my children especially the last born following maternal death who is now three (3) years old (Participant 8)

Another participant narrate how Support from his friends assisted him in coping with the mental thought and realization of the fact that his wife is dead

I found support from my friends at work who helped me to focus on things other than the loss of my wife, going to work has been wonderful. It makes me feel good, you know, to laugh and not think about things sometimes. My friends in church also give me strength to continue to live (Participant 1)

The engagement of family and friends, to varied degrees, is a source of support for the widowers in this research, as it provides encouragement and strength, as well as an obvious advantage in adjusting to their new lives. Studies found that robust family and peer support improves resilience post maternal death [16, 17].

Faith in God (spirituality): Another key aspect of coping that comes from religious assistance is forgiveness (the support from God). Many people benefit from this kind of help while they are going through a tough moment. Participants said that their trust in God helps them deal with the death of their wife unexpectedly during childbirth.

God just told me to trust Him, so I think my faith really helped me a lot in the first couple of months (Participant 5)

My faith has given me everything I need to cope with my wife's death, which is why I do not really care about people's support. I have the greatest support –God (Participant 6)

This spiritual reliance is echoed in Nigerian studies on bereavement, which underscore its importance in coping [18, 19].

Maintaining connection with the deceased: Maintaining symbolic connections with the deceased has been shown to assist widowers in emotional processing [20, 21]. Some participants said they coped by staying in touch with their wives. They spoke about the techniques they employed to keep in touch with their departed wife. A participant said how owning and wearing his wedding ring provided him with comfort.

It has been over two (2) years now; I still wear my wedding ring, there is this connection I feel anytime I am wearing our wedding ring, it is comforting because I'm not ready to consider another relationship. I still have our wedding enlargement (picture) hang in our parlour. I don't think I will ever get rid of anything even her clothing, they keep her here for me. A memory of her wearing those clothes, I can't let go of that (Participant 9)

Another participant recounted how particular locations and activities helped him keep in touch with his wife.

When I go to the farm I talk to her not out loud, but inside. This is because we did a lot of farm work together and I feel so close to her there. Especially when I am resting under the mango tree in the farm, I can hear her as usual saying "few more and we can go home" (Participant 5)

These actions and the memories they evoked allowed the participants to experience their wife's presence and stay connected to her.

Loss and grief counselling services were helpful: A participant reported seeking and utilizing professional help for themselves.

When I lost my wife due to problems during delivery, I went through a lot of pain. Until after the funeral, I fell into denial. My buddy, who had lost his wife a year ago, recommended that I see a professional therapist. By guiding me through the five stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, the therapist assisted me in effectively overcoming the mourning process. I now urge and support other bereaved people to get professional grief and loss therapy from a competent therapist. (Participant 3)

Professional therapy provided aid and guidance to the participant in addressing the needs that occurred as a consequence of becoming a widower.

4. Discussion

4.1. Psychosocial life experiences of families following maternal death

Mental experiences involve awareness, thought, emotion, memories and imagination. Losing a wife (and mother of one's children) through maternal death is quite emotive and may affect the family's psychosocial wellbeing. All the participants in this study addressed the issue of losses experienced with the death of their wife, when they were asked

what life without their wife (and mother of their children) means to them. The subthemes which present an understanding of these losses include: loss of companionship, loss of hopes and dreams, and loss of family relationships and activities. Participants expressed the loss of companion to include the feeling of emptiness, as maternal death has created a void that cannot be filled. It was observed that a parent's death is an unexpected event that incurs family stress and grief for remaining family members, whom often include the surviving parent and dependent children (children under the age of 18) [21, 22]. Similarly, a sustained poorer mental health quality of life among the surviving families was revealed [23].

Participants in this study expressed sadness and depression due to loss of nuclear family relationships, as well as the loss of expectations for future as a family. The findings of this study revealed detrimental effects on participants' mental health following maternal death, and majority of the widowers suffered from depression and anxiety mostly during the first year of bereavement. The behavioural and emotional responses to loss include many symptoms such as sadness, preoccupation with many thoughts and activities which may lead to depression, anxiety or numbness portrayed by the trauma survivor [13]. It may be beneficial for family interventions to: mentally prepare surviving parents for anticipated changes in parenting that may occur due to their partner's death so that they are better equipped to assume their partner's parenting responsibilities

In terms of social connectedness and support as an important component of life experiences following maternal death, participants mentioned that the support they enjoy from people around them made them feel good and belonging. It also helped the family to cope with life following maternal death. This is true because it is assumed that during this period of the widower's life, there is the feeling of loneliness. It was observed that the young widowed individuals find meaning in getting strong support from people around them [19]. This helps them to have healthy life. They also indicated financial support as very necessary because their wives before maternal death were a source of financial assistance to the family. Hence, receiving some money from friends, family members, and loved ones does contribute to their happiness [24]. Families following maternal death feel happier in times shared with people who are familiar and care about them; family support is an antidote against suicide [21, 25]. The family association was a major factor in ensuring that the widowers with suicidal ideations did not commit suicide.

Coping mechanisms adopted by families following maternal death

In answering this research question, when participants were asked, how have they been coping with the mental thoughts and realization of the fact that their wife is dead? A broad theme overwhelming supports with subthemes; family and friends were very supportive, faith in God (spirituality), maintaining connection with the deceased and loss and grief counselling services were helpful emerged. Participants described varying degrees of supports of family members and friends. Family and friends' involvement in varying degrees (including financial and moral support) were sources of support for the widowers in this study, as it engendered encouragement and strength; and an apparent benefit in the adaptation to their additional responsibilities. It was observed that the financial burden for care and children's basic needs were largely met through family support [26, 27, 28].

Spirituality is another important element of coping that comes from religious support (the support from God). Participants indicated that their faith in God is what helps them to cope with maternal death. It was observed that the religious community to which a widowed individual belongs often lends critical support in their adjustment [19].

Another coping strategy found in this study was maintaining connection with the deceased and also, few participants reported seeking and utilizing professional help for themselves. Staying connected through memories includes remembering with objects, such as photographs and belongings, and specific activities designed to allow the widower and his children to feel connected with his wife. Other connections include reflections on the memories that were built before maternal death [21].

5. Conclusion

All the participants in this study addressed the issue of losses experienced with the death of their wife (and mother of their children). Losing a wife (and mother of one's children) through maternal death is quite emotive and it affects the family's psychosocial wellbeing. The study revealed that support is an important component of life experiences following maternal death; participants mentioned that the varying degrees of support they enjoy from people around them make them feel good and belonging. It also helped the family to cope with life following maternal death. This is true because it is assumed that during this period of the widower's life, there is the feeling of loneliness.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors do hereby declare that there is no conflict of interest in this study.

Statement of ethical approval

Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the Okpokwu Local Government Health Authority, Benue State, Nigeria.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from the participants before the administration of questionnaire.

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