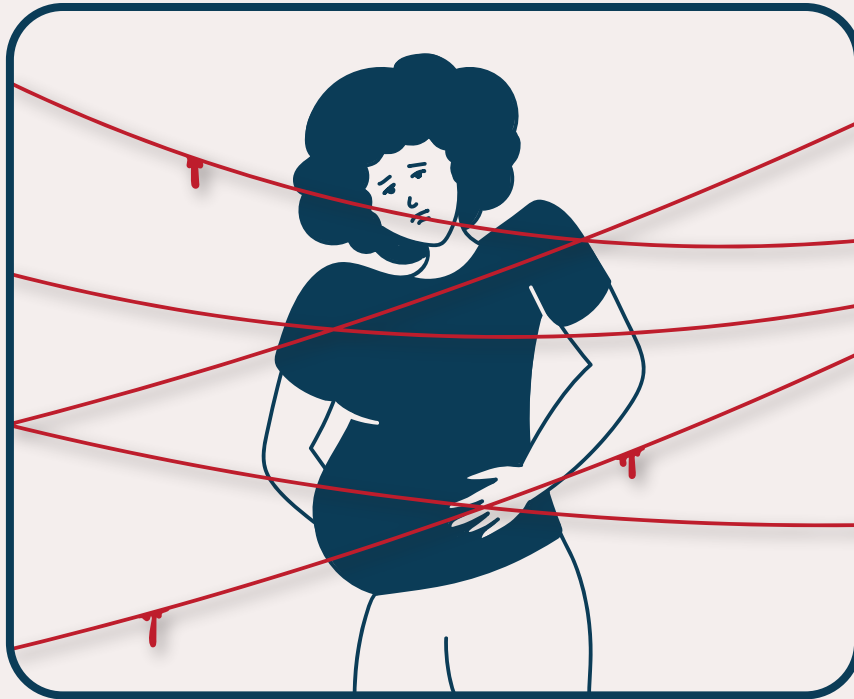


# A GUIDE TO *Understanding* OBSTETRIC VIOLENCE



## WHAT IS OBSTETRIC **VIOLENCE**?

Obstetric violence is a form of gender-based violence experienced by women and birthing persons during pregnancy, childbirth, and postnatal care, as well as in other reproductive health services. It includes mistreatment, abuse, neglect, coercion, and denial of care by healthcare providers. While sometimes dismissed as “poor service” or “normal practice”; these experiences are harmful, violate human rights, and can have long-term physical and emotional consequences.



# FORMS OF OBSTETRIC VIOLENCE

Obstetric violence can take many forms, including:

- Physical abuse: Slapping, rough handling, unnecessary physical restraint.
- Verbal abuse: Shaming, yelling, mocking, or using discriminatory language.
- Coercion and denial of consent: Performing procedures without informed consent, forced sterilisation or episiotomies, or ignoring women's birthing preferences.
- Neglect and abandonment: Refusing to provide care or leaving patients unattended during labour.
- Denial of pain relief or companionship: Withholding pain medication or not allowing a birth companion.
- Discrimination: Based on race, age, income, disability, HIV status, or being an adolescent or migrant.

## WHY IS THIS A GENDERED ISSUE?

Obstetric violence occurs because women and girls are targeted due to their gender. It reflects patriarchal attitudes that devalue women's autonomy and experiences, especially in sexual and reproductive health. Social norms often silence women and normalise suffering during childbirth, reinforcing gender inequality in healthcare.

## WHO IS MOST AT RISK?

While obstetric violence can happen to any woman, the following groups are especially vulnerable:

- Black women and women from marginalised communities
- Adolescent girls and young mothers
- Women with disabilities
- Women living with HIV
- Migrant and refugee women
- Rural or low-income women

## WHO ARE THE PERPETRATORS?

Obstetric violence is most often perpetrated by:

- Doctors
- Nurses and midwives
- Hospital administrators and staff
- Security or support staff

# WHAT RIGHTS DOES OBSTETRIC VIOLENCE VIOLATE?

- Right to health and life
- Right to be free from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment
- Right to privacy and confidentiality
- Right to bodily autonomy and informed consent
- Right to non-discrimination
- Right to information and to be heard

# WHAT IS RESPECTFUL MATERNITY CARE?

Respectful maternity care (RMC) is the standard of care every woman and birthing person deserves. It includes:

- Dignity, respect, and compassionate treatment
- Clear, accurate information and informed consent
- Privacy and confidentiality
- The right to choose a birth companion
- Access to pain relief and emotional support
- Continuity of care throughout pregnancy, birth and postpartum

# STATE RESPONSIBILITIES AND LEGAL PROTECTION

Governments are obligated to:

- Train healthcare providers in respectful, rights-based care
- Prevent and address mistreatment in health facilities
- Ensure access to remedies and justice for victims
- Strengthen complaint systems and regulatory oversight
- Provide adequate maternal healthcare resources and staffing

# KNOW YOUR RIGHTS: STAND AGAINST OBSTETRIC VIOLENCE




You have the right to:

- Dignified, respectful healthcare
- Say no to any medical procedure
- Have a companion during labour and delivery
- Receive clear explanations and give informed consent
- Report mistreatment without fear of retaliation

# REPORTING OBSTETRIC VIOLENCE: YOU'RE NOT ALONE

NAVIGATING THE AFTERMATH OF OBSTETRIC VIOLENCE CAN  
BE CHALLENGING, BUT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE:

## LEGAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT:

- Women's Legal Centre: Free legal advice and assistance on obstetric violence.  
 [info@wlce.co.za](mailto:info@wlce.co.za)
- Embrace: The Movement for Mothers: Support and advocacy network.  
 [embrace.org.za](http://embrace.org.za)
- PMHP: Perinatal Mental Health Project for support during and after pregnancy.  
 [pmhp.za.org](http://pmhp.za.org)

## REGULATORY BODIES TO REPORT HEALTHCARE MISCONDUCT:

- Health Ombud: General health services complaints: 080 911 6472
- Office of Health Standards and Compliance (OHSC): For public/private facility complaints:  
012 942 7700
- South African Nursing Council (SANC): For complaints about nurses:  
012 420 1000
- Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA): For complaints about doctors:  
012 338 9300

## IN-HOSPITAL SUPPORT:

- Ask for the Facility Manager, Patient Safety Officer, or contact your  
Provincial Health Complaints Centre.

## MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT:

- Contact SADAG (South African Depression and Anxiety Group) for free  
telephone counselling: 0800 205 026. Open daily from 8:00–20:00.
- Reach out to registered counsellors, social workers, or mental health nurses for  
emotional support.

**Obstetric violence is not normal. It is not your fault  
And it is never acceptable. You have the right to be treated with  
dignity, respect, and compassion.**