

The Power of Asking, Listening, and Acting in Advancing Respectful Maternity Care and Self-care in Kenya

Organization: White Ribbon Alliance Kenya, Nairobi, Kenya

1. Problem Statement

Disrespect and abuse during childbirth remain a significant yet under-addressed barriers to improving maternal health outcomes. Despite efforts to increase skilled birth attendance, many women continue to face verbal abuse, neglect, and mistreatment in health facilities, experiences that deter them from seeking facility-based care. This gap in respectful maternity care undermines trust in the health system and discourages women from utilizing essential services during one of the most vulnerable periods of their lives. In Kisumu County, a 32-year-old woman shared, *“Respect for me is when I get to be talked to politely by the service providers,”* highlighting how basic dignity is often overlooked. These negative encounters not only compromise the quality of care but also jeopardize maternal and newborn health by driving women away from skilled birth attendants. Addressing this problem is critical to ensuring safe, respectful, and equitable maternity care for all.

2. Innovation or Practice Description

In 2018, [White Ribbon Alliance \(WRA\) Kenya](#) launched the *What Women Want* campaign to elevate women’s voices in setting the agenda for their health. This initial campaign through which we reached 1.2 million women and girls globally and 120,000 women and girls across Kenya, revealed a resounding call for improved quality of care, with ***respectful and dignified maternity care*** emerging as the top demand. While Kenya has made investments in promoting respectful maternity care (RMC), policy gaps, weak accountability, and lack of responsiveness continue to undermine women’s experiences in health facilities.

To address this, WRA Kenya applied its signature ***Ask. Listen. Act.*** approach, conducting listening exercises in Kakamega, Kisumu, Vihiga, and Narok counties. Women and girls were asked one powerful question: *“What does respect mean to you when accessing maternal health services during pregnancy, delivery, and after childbirth?”* A total of 3,212 women and girls shared their views, revealing deep insights into systemic mistreatment and their visions for dignified care.

Recognizing that providers are central to this experience, WRA Kenya also engaged 1,195 healthcare workers across the four counties. They too were asked: *“What does respectful care look like to women and girls?”* Their answers affirmed the importance of respect but highlighted critical gaps, especially inadequate staffing and resources that hinder quality care delivery.

This dual listening approach humanized data collection and built a shared foundation for advocacy. The campaign not only captured the realities and aspirations of women and girls, but also amplified the voices of healthcare providers. These voices now guide local advocacy agendas and provider-led action plans to ensure respectful, high-quality maternal healthcare for all.

3. Results and Evidence of Impact

Through the Respectful Maternity Care (RMC) listening exercise, we engaged 3,212 women and girls and 1,195 healthcare providers across four counties. This dual-perspective approach allowed us to compare how women define respectful care versus how providers perceive it highlighting critical gaps, misunderstandings, and areas for alignment. By actively listening, we have been bridging the divide between the services women *should* receive and what is currently provided. We have equally pushed for uptake of self-care, ‘the root of healthcare’, by individual women and girls in the communities.

As a result of these insights, we have:

- Trained over **20,000 women** in Kenya on the Respectful Maternity Care and RMC Charter, equipping them with fundamental knowledge on their deserved maternal rights as well as self-care.
- Trained **1,500+ healthcare workers** and health institutions on the RMC charter
- Built a network of over **150 RMC champions** across communities and in the various sub-counties. Notably, through this effort in Kisumu County, a group of midwives, led by a champion midwife, took a formal pledge to uphold respectful and dignified care for all women and girls, something that continues to restore Quality, Equity and Dignity in the grassroots.
- At the national level, a champion Member of Parliament advanced this agenda further by introducing a motion in the National Assembly of Kenya to **recognize and criminalize obstetric violence**. Her efforts marked a crucial step toward institutionalizing respectful maternity care and ensuring legal protections for women and girls against mistreatment during childbirth.
- Hosted a **National Dialogue in Nairobi**, uniting health leaders, community-based organizations, civil society organization, national government, county governments, women and girls commit to advancing RMC across Kenya.

The above results from a grassroots initiative, rooted in listening and local leadership, demonstrates the power of provider commitment and community-driven change in transforming maternal and newborn healthcare.

4. Scalability & Sustainability

While we have achieved tremendous progress in promoting Respectful Maternity Care (RMC) across the counties we work in, sustainability has remained at the heart of our efforts. We trained over 150 champions in every sub-county who continue to continue educate women and girls about their rights, working alongside midwives who not only uphold RMC principles but also train communities. One of the most powerful outcomes was in Kisumu County, where midwives came together and made a voluntary pledge to uphold respectful and dignified care for all women and girls. This pledge came from within, driven by their commitment and leadership, and marked a turning point in how communities perceive RMC. Women and girls are now more aware that respectful care is not a privilege, but a right. Together, these efforts are changing maternal health outcomes from the grassroots up.

5. Lessons Learned or Key Insights

When the voices of women and girls lead the way, change happens; lives are improved, dignity is restored, and maternal outcomes are strengthened. Listening to women and girls about what respectful maternity care means to them has shown us that real change begins with asking the right questions and acting on the answers.

We have learned that conversations about women's health must be inclusive and continuous. If we are to design policies and programs that truly meet women's needs, we must centre their lived experiences while also bringing healthcare providers into the dialogue. Midwives, nurses, and doctors are important allies. By listening to both service users and providers, we are better able to identify the gaps in care and co-create solutions that work.

Respectful Maternity Care is not just a standard; it is a shared responsibility.

6. Partner Quotes or Community Voice

“There has been a remarkable shift; more women are choosing to give birth in health facilities, and they are becoming more aware of their right to quality, respectful care. White Ribbon Alliance Kenya's advocacy efforts in the region have ignited women to demand better services, while also encouraging healthcare providers to uphold dignity in maternity care.

*One of the moments I am most proud of was during a self-care sensitization and Respectful Maternity Care (RMC) session led by White Ribbon Alliance Kenya. I initiated a pledge for midwives in Kisumu County; a commitment to always provide respectful, compassionate, and high-quality care to every mother. Seeing midwives take this pledge and truly embody it in their work has been incredibly fulfilling.” ~ **Carolyn Gichana, Midwife, Kisumu County Referral Hospital***

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