

# PUSHING INSTITUTIONAL DELIVERIES: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF CHILDBIRTH CARE IN RURAL TANZANIA

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Across sub-Saharan Africa, as governments strive to meet international development goals and improve health indicators, homebirths are increasingly deemed illegal and facility births mandated by government policies. Tanzania is no exception. Here, homebirth fines are common as is the prohibition of deliveries by 'traditional birth attendants' (TBAs), whose role is reduced to escorting women to health facilities for birth. At the same time international, national and local level public health interventions push parturient women into biomedical health facilities for care, a growing body of literature reveals a high prevalence of 'disrespect and abuse' during facility-based childbirth worldwide. In other words, while hospitals may deliver babies, they do not always deliver the 'care' they promise.

My dissertation project addresses this conundrum by taking a closer look at what happens to care in the wake of institutional deliveries. With rural Tanzania as my case study, I am interested in understanding what practices and understandings count as care, when, why and to whom. How does care materialize in the policies, indicators, and interventions surrounding the push for facility births? How do women, TBAs, and health care workers experience and negotiate care today?

In Tanzania, about half of all women in rural communities deliver in a health facility, compared with 86% of women who live in urban areas. Over the last five to ten years, decentralized policies have tried to change these numbers. My preliminary dissertation research highlights the rise in homebirth fines and the withholding of child health cards for women who give birth at home. As a result, some women are afraid to return to health facilities lest they be fined or harassed. In other instances, women denied child health cards are unable to access health care services for their infants born at home. While a growing body of literature documents similar findings, I will



conduct an in-depth ethnography to explore the effects of such sanctions on care, and the negotiations of mothers, TBAs, and health care workers living in rural Mpwapwa district.

Mpwapwa is located roughly 150km from Dodoma town, in the central Dodoma region. Due to the remote location of many communities in Mpwapwa, many women find it difficult to access mandated hospital births and end up delivering at their local health dispensaries at home, or even on the way. I am interested in conducting participant observation in three different 'middle' spaces where maternity care is negotiated: 1) local health dispensaries, 2) the homes, churches, and public spaces of respected elders, TBAs, and local healers and 3) the maternity waiting home for pregnant women and mothers referred to deliver at the district hospital.

These spaces are all 'middle' in that they represent states of in-between, such as between the home and hospital, traditional and biomedical forms of knowledge, and a pregnant woman's due date and time of delivery. I hypothesize that these middle spaces, and in particular rural health

dispensaries, the lowest tier of the Tanzanian biomedical health system, are important sites for the creation and implementation of new sanctions as well as acceptable solutions. I also see these spaces as important sites where mothers and health care workers can articulate frustrations with scarcity and negotiate intimacies and desires for care.

As a mother I am passionate about improving maternal health by gaining a better understanding of the care desires, decisions, and experiences of mothers. My preliminary field research and time working as an ethnographer for the Transparency for Development Project has led me to focus on what counts as care today, and with what intended and unintended consequences. I am thankful for the encouragement and support from UP's Department of Anthropology and Center for African Studies. I am excited to return to Mpwapwa to begin my dissertation research with support from a Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad award in spring 2019.

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