



ADDRESSING HEALTHCARE INEQUALITIES IN NIGERIA: A COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE ON ADVOCACY AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT: *With notable differences in healthcare outcomes and access among various regions and demographic groups, healthcare disparities in Nigeria pose a serious threat to public health. Numerous factors, such as geographic, demographic, education, cultural, and socioeconomic level, all have an impact on these disparities. The health disparity between urban and rural populations is exacerbated in rural regions by poor healthcare facilities, a lack of medical personnel, and restricted access to basic health services. Furthermore, specific barriers prevent vulnerable populations including women, children, and the elderly from receiving high-quality healthcare. Healthcare inequalities in Nigeria are deeply rooted in socio-economic, geographic, and cultural factors, significantly impeding access to quality health services for marginalized populations. This paper explores the critical role of communication in advocating for equitable healthcare policies and recommendations to bridge existing disparities. Effective communication strategies employed by grassroots organizations, health advocates, and policymakers are identified to raise awareness and mobilize support for healthcare reform. The importance of culturally sensitive messaging, inclusive dialogue, and community engagement is emphasized to foster trust and collaboration among stakeholders. Additionally, leveraging digital platforms and social media to amplify the voices of the underserved is discussed as a means to influence policy change. A strategic communication approach is essential for addressing healthcare inequalities in Nigeria, advocating for evidence-based policies, and promoting sustainable healthcare practices that ensure no individual is left behind. This study aims to inform and inspire ongoing advocacy efforts, urging stakeholders to consider communication as a vital tool in the fight for health equity.*

KEYWORDS: Health inequalities, Communication, Healthcare advocacy, Policy implications.



INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, the healthcare system is characterized by significant disparities that affect the population's well-being. The country faces challenges such as uneven distribution of healthcare facilities, shortage of medical professionals, and varying quality of care across urban and rural areas. Urban regions often have better access to healthcare services, advanced medical technology, and a higher concentration of healthcare professionals compared to rural areas. This urban-rural divide exacerbates health inequalities, leaving a large portion of the population without adequate medical care.

Healthcare inequalities pose a significant threat to public health, resulting in unequal access to healthcare services, health outcomes, and health opportunities (WHO, 2019). These inequalities are a major concern in Nigeria, where healthcare disparities exist across different regions, socioeconomic groups, and gender (FMoH, 2020).

Healthcare inequalities in Nigeria present a significant challenge, deeply rooted in a complex interplay of socio-economic, geographic, and cultural factors. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), disparities in access to healthcare services are exacerbated by poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and social determinants of health, leading to poorer health outcomes for marginalized populations. The rural-urban divide in healthcare access is particularly pronounced, as rural communities frequently face a shortage of medical facilities and qualified healthcare professionals (Adeniyi et al., 2020). Furthermore, cultural beliefs and practices can hinder individuals from seeking appropriate healthcare, with traditional beliefs often taking precedence over modern medical advice (Oduro et al., 2019).

Effective communication plays a crucial role in addressing these healthcare inequalities and advocating for equitable policies. Communication strategies that include culturally sensitive messaging and community engagement can help build trust among stakeholders (Shaw et al., 2019). Furthermore, grassroots organizations and health advocates have leveraged digital platforms and social media to amplify the voices of the underserved, raising awareness and mobilizing support for healthcare reform (Tetteh et al., 2021).

This paper aims to highlight the importance of strategic communication in addressing healthcare inequalities in Nigeria. By examining successful communication initiatives and advocating for evidence-based policies, this research seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on health equity and inspire action among policymakers, healthcare providers, and community leaders. Communication is crucial to the achievement of policy objectives and behaviour change campaigns targeted at vices in the society (Ezebuenyi & Ezeaka, 2015).

Socioeconomic factors further compound these disparities. Individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often struggle to afford healthcare services, leading to delayed or inadequate treatment. High out-of-pocket expenses, coupled with limited health insurance coverage, prevent many Nigerians from seeking necessary medical attention. Consequently, poorer populations experience worse health outcomes, higher disease prevalence, and lower life expectancy compared to wealthier groups.

Gender disparities also play a critical role in healthcare inequalities in Nigeria. Women, particularly in rural areas, face significant barriers to accessing healthcare. Cultural norms, limited financial resources, and lack of education often restrict women's ability to seek medical care. Maternal health services, including prenatal and postnatal care, are often inadequate,



contributing to high maternal and infant mortality rates. Additionally, women's health needs, such as family planning and reproductive health services, are frequently underserved, further perpetuating gender-based health disparities.

Addressing healthcare inequalities in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach. Efforts must be made to improve healthcare infrastructure, especially in rural and underserved areas. Increasing the number of healthcare professionals, enhancing training programs, and incentivizing medical practice in remote regions can help bridge the urban-rural gap. Moreover, implementing universal health coverage and reducing out-of-pocket expenses are crucial steps toward ensuring equitable access to healthcare services for all socioeconomic groups.

Furthermore, targeted interventions are needed to address gender-specific health disparities. Empowering women through education, increasing awareness about available healthcare services, and providing financial support for maternal and reproductive health can significantly improve women's health outcomes. Collaborative efforts between the government, non-governmental organizations, and international partners are essential to drive sustainable change and promote health equity in Nigeria.

Healthcare inequalities in Nigeria present a significant challenge to public health. Addressing these disparities requires comprehensive strategies that focus on improving healthcare infrastructure, ensuring equitable access to services, and addressing the unique needs of different population groups. By tackling these issues, Nigeria can move towards a more inclusive and equitable healthcare system, ultimately improving the health and well-being of its entire population.

Healthcare Inequalities

Healthcare inequalities refer to the differences in health outcomes, access to healthcare services, and health opportunities across different populations (WHO, 2019). These inequalities can be attributed to various factors, including socioeconomic status, geographic location, gender, and ethnicity (Bloom et al., 2011).

Impact on Public Health

Healthcare inequalities refer to the differences in health outcomes, access to healthcare services, and health opportunities across different populations (World Health Organization WHO, 2019). These inequalities can be attributed to various factors, including socioeconomic status, geographic location, gender, and ethnicity (Bloom et al., 2011).

Health Outcomes

Healthcare inequalities often manifest in varying health outcomes among different groups. These outcomes can include life expectancy, disease prevalence, infant mortality rates, and overall health status. For instance, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may experience higher rates of chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and hypertension, compared to those from more affluent backgrounds. These disparities in health outcomes are frequently a result of limited access to preventive care, poor living conditions, and inadequate healthcare services (Akeredolu, 2018).



Access to Healthcare Services

Inequalities in access to healthcare services are a significant aspect of healthcare disparities. Access can be influenced by geographic location, with rural and remote areas often having fewer healthcare facilities and professionals. Urban areas typically have better access to healthcare services, including specialized medical treatments and advanced diagnostic tools. Additionally, financial barriers, such as high out-of-pocket costs and lack of health insurance, can limit access to necessary medical care for disadvantaged populations (Omonona et al., 2015).

Health Opportunities

Health opportunities refer to the conditions and resources that allow individuals to achieve and maintain good health. These include access to nutritious food, clean water, safe housing, education, and employment opportunities. Socioeconomic status plays a crucial role in determining health opportunities. For example, individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds generally have better access to resources that promote health, such as healthy food options and recreational facilities, compared to those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Adam & Awunor, 2015).

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status is one of the primary determinants of health care inequalities. It encompasses income, education, and occupation, which collectively influence an individual's ability to access healthcare services and maintain a healthy lifestyle. Higher income levels enable individuals to afford better healthcare, healthier food, and safer living environments. Education also plays a pivotal role, as it increases health literacy and awareness, enabling individuals to make informed health decisions (Akeredolu, 2018).

Geographic Location

Geographic disparities in healthcare access and quality are prevalent, particularly between urban and rural areas. Urban areas often have a higher concentration of healthcare facilities, specialized services, and medical professionals. In contrast, rural areas may suffer from a shortage of healthcare providers, outdated medical equipment, and limited access to specialized care. This geographic divide can lead to significant differences in health outcomes between urban and rural populations (Adam & Awunor, 2015).

Gender

Gender-based healthcare inequalities are influenced by cultural, social, and economic factors. Women, especially in low- and middle-income countries, may face barriers to accessing healthcare due to traditional gender roles, financial dependency, and lack of education. Maternal health services, including prenatal and postnatal care, are critical areas where gender disparities are evident. Women may also have limited access to reproductive health services, family planning, and other gender-specific healthcare needs (Adewole & Omotoso, 2020).



Ethnicity

Ethnic disparities in healthcare are often rooted in historical and systemic inequalities. Minority ethnic groups may experience discrimination, cultural barriers, and language differences that hinder their access to healthcare services. These groups often have poorer health outcomes and higher rates of certain diseases compared to the majority population. Addressing ethnic healthcare inequalities requires culturally sensitive healthcare practices, language support services, and targeted health interventions (Bloom et al., 2011).

Overview of Healthcare Inequalities in Nigeria

Nigeria faces significant healthcare challenges, including inadequate healthcare infrastructure, an insufficient healthcare workforce, and limited access to healthcare services (FMoH, 2020). These challenges have resulted in healthcare inequalities, with some regions having better access to healthcare services than others. For instance, the northern regions of Nigeria have higher infant mortality rates and maternal mortality rates compared to the southern regions (FMoH, 2020).

Inadequate Healthcare Infrastructure

The disparity in healthcare infrastructure across Nigeria is stark. Urban areas, particularly in the southern regions, are more likely to have better-equipped hospitals, clinics, and healthcare facilities. These areas benefit from more significant investments and higher standards of medical technology and equipment. Conversely, rural and northern regions often suffer from a lack of basic healthcare infrastructure. Many communities in these areas rely on poorly equipped primary healthcare centers that are often unable to provide essential medical services (Adam & Awunor, 2015).

Insufficient Healthcare Workforce

A critical issue exacerbating healthcare inequalities in Nigeria is the uneven distribution of healthcare professionals. The southern regions, especially major cities like Lagos and Abuja, attract a higher concentration of doctors, nurses, and specialists due to better living conditions, higher salaries, and more opportunities for professional development. In contrast, the northern regions face a severe shortage of healthcare workers, which limits the availability of quality healthcare. This disparity is evident in the doctor-to-patient ratio, which is significantly lower in the north compared to the south (Akeredolu, 2018).

Limited Access to Healthcare Services

Access to healthcare services in Nigeria is highly variable and influenced by factors such as geography, socioeconomic status, and gender. Urban populations generally have better access to a wide range of healthcare services, including specialized treatments and advanced medical care. In contrast, rural populations, particularly in the northern regions, face significant barriers to accessing even basic healthcare services. These barriers include long travel distances to healthcare facilities, high costs of medical care, and cultural factors that may restrict certain groups, particularly women, from seeking medical help (Omonona et al., 2015).



Regional Disparities in Health Outcomes

The healthcare inequalities in Nigeria are reflected in stark regional disparities in health outcomes. The northern regions, which suffer from inadequate infrastructure and workforce shortages, report some of the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in the country. For instance, the maternal mortality rate in the north is significantly higher than in the south, often due to the lack of access to skilled birth attendants and emergency obstetric care. Similarly, infant mortality rates are higher in the north, where vaccination coverage and preventive healthcare services are less accessible (UNICEF, 2020).

Socioeconomic and Gender Inequalities

Socioeconomic status significantly affects access to healthcare in Nigeria. Those with higher income levels and better education are more likely to afford quality healthcare services and have better health outcomes. In contrast, individuals from poorer backgrounds often delay seeking medical care due to the costs involved, leading to worse health outcomes. Gender inequalities also play a crucial role, particularly in rural and northern regions where cultural norms and financial dependency limit women's access to healthcare services. These gender-based disparities are most pronounced in maternal and reproductive health services (Adewole & Omotoso, 2020).

Addressing healthcare inequalities in Nigeria requires a comprehensive approach that includes improving healthcare infrastructure, ensuring equitable distribution of healthcare professionals, and enhancing access to healthcare services for all populations. Targeted interventions are needed to address the specific challenges faced by rural and northern regions, such as increasing investment in healthcare infrastructure and providing incentives for healthcare workers to serve in these areas. Additionally, efforts to reduce socioeconomic and gender-based disparities are essential for promoting health equity and improving overall public health in Nigeria. By tackling these issues, Nigeria can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable healthcare system that benefits all its citizens.

Importance of Healthcare Advocacy and Policy Initiatives

Healthcare advocacy and policy initiatives are crucial in addressing healthcare inequalities (Bloom et al., 2011). Advocacy efforts can help raise awareness about healthcare inequalities, influence policy decisions, and promote evidence-based solutions (Jhpiego, 2020). Policy initiatives can help address health care inequalities by promoting equal access to healthcare services, improving healthcare infrastructure, and increasing the healthcare workforce (FMoH, 2020).

Factors Contributing to Healthcare Inequalities in Nigeria

1. Geographic Location (Urban vs. Rural): Nigeria's healthcare system faces significant disparities between urban and rural areas. Rural areas have limited access to healthcare services, infrastructure, and healthcare professionals, leading to poor health outcomes (Omonona et al., 2015). Urban areas, on the other hand, have better access to healthcare services, infrastructure, and healthcare professionals, resulting in better health outcomes.

2. Socioeconomic Status (SES): Socioeconomic status is a significant determinant of healthcare access in Nigeria. Individuals with higher SES have better access to healthcare



services, infrastructure, and healthcare professionals, leading to better health outcomes (Adam & Awunor, 2015). Those with lower SES face significant barriers in accessing healthcare services, leading to poor health outcomes.

3. Gender: Gender is a significant factor in healthcare inequalities in Nigeria. Women face significant barriers in accessing healthcare services, including cultural and social barriers, leading to poor health outcomes (Adewole & Omotoso, 2020). Men, on the other hand, have better access to healthcare services, leading to better health outcomes.

4. Education: Education is a critical factor in healthcare inequalities in Nigeria. Individuals with higher levels of education have better access to healthcare services, infrastructure, and healthcare professionals, leading to better health outcomes (Omonona et al., 2015). Those with lower levels of education face significant barriers in accessing healthcare services, leading to poor health outcomes.

5. Vulnerable Populations (Women, Children, Elderly): Nigeria's healthcare system faces significant challenges in addressing the healthcare needs of vulnerable populations, including women, children, and the elderly (UNICEF, 2020). These populations face significant barriers in accessing healthcare services, including cultural and social barriers, leading to poor health outcomes.

These factors are interconnected and can have a compounding effect on healthcare inequalities in Nigeria. Addressing these factors is crucial to reducing healthcare inequalities and improving health outcomes in Nigeria.

Communication Perspective on Advocacy and Policy Implications in Nigeria

Effective communication is a critical component of advocacy efforts aimed at addressing healthcare inequalities in Nigeria. In a rapidly evolving socio-political environment characterized by diverse cultural beliefs and varied socio-economic contexts, communication strategies must be thoughtfully designed and implemented. This section explores the communication perspective on advocacy and its implications for health policy in Nigeria. Addressing healthcare inequalities in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach that incorporates effective communication strategies. From a communication perspective, advocacy and policy implications play a crucial role in promoting health equity and social justice. Development communication can be a game-changer in a number of important areas by utilizing communication tools and approaches effectively (Ezeaka & Ochuba, 2024).

The Role of Communication in Healthcare Advocacy

Effective advocacy requires clear, persuasive, and culturally relevant communication. In Nigeria, advocacy efforts directed at healthcare reform must resonate with the values, priorities, and lived experiences of the communities they aim to serve (Akinyemi et al., 2020). Engaging community members through inclusive dialogue fosters a sense of ownership and trust, encouraging individuals to participate actively in advocating for their health rights. The use of local languages, culturally relevant narratives, and community leaders as spokespeople can enhance understanding and mobilize support (Shaw et al., 2019). Communication enables advocates to raise awareness about health disparities, mobilize public support, and influence policy decisions. A communication perspective on advocacy highlights the importance of:



1. **Framing health messages:** Crafting messages that resonate with diverse audiences and promote health equity.
2. **Building coalitions:** Collaborating with stakeholders, including community leaders, healthcare providers, and policymakers, to amplify advocacy efforts.
3. **Utilizing media channels:** Leveraging traditional and digital media to disseminate health information, promote advocacy campaigns, and influence public opinion.

Digital communication platforms, including social media and mobile applications, can further amplify advocacy efforts by reaching a wider audience, especially youth who are increasingly connected online (Tetteh et al., 2021). These platforms provide an avenue for grassroots organizations to share success stories, educate the public, and generate discussions around critical health issues. Health Communication represents the interface between communication and health and is increasingly recognized as a necessary element for improving both personal and public health (Ezeoke, Ezeaka & Nwodu, 2020).

The implications of effective communication in advocacy are profound. As communities become more informed and engaged, they can exert pressure on policymakers to prioritize health equity and address systemic barriers in the healthcare system. Evidence-based advocacy, supported by data and research, can help frame health disparities as urgent policy issues, encouraging government commitment and funding allocations (Adeniyi et al., 2020).

Moreover, fostering partnerships between health advocates, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can facilitate a multi-sectoral approach to addressing healthcare inequalities. Collaborative efforts enhance the visibility of health issues while ensuring that diverse perspectives are integrated into policy discussions (Oduro et al., 2019).

The communication perspective on advocacy in Nigeria is essential for addressing healthcare inequalities. Advocacy campaigns normally use multi-media and varied communication, persuasion and strategies to achieve desired objectives (Ezeaka, Nwodu & Agbanu, 2022). By prioritizing culturally sensitive and strategic communication, stakeholders can enhance community engagement, mobilize support for health reform, and influence policy changes (Obiora & Nwafor, 2022). As this dialogue continues, leveraging both traditional and digital communication methods will play a pivotal role in transforming healthcare access and outcomes for all Nigerians. Communication is therefore needed to usher in development and development encourages the advancement of communication infrastructures (Ezeaka & Nwodu, 2022).



POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND COMMUNICATION

Effective communication is also vital for informing policy decisions that address healthcare inequalities. A communication perspective on policy implications emphasizes the need for:

1. **Translating research into policy:** Communicating research findings and recommendations to policymakers, stakeholders, and the general public.
2. **Engaging policymakers and stakeholders:** Building relationships with policymakers, healthcare providers, and community leaders to ensure that policies address the needs of diverse populations.
3. **Evaluating policy effectiveness:** Assessing the impact of policies on healthcare outcomes and making adjustments as needed.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes the critical importance of communication in advocacy efforts aimed at addressing healthcare inequalities in Nigeria. It highlights the need for communication strategies that are culturally sensitive and responsive to the diverse socio-economic contexts of the population.

Effective communication can engage communities and empower individuals to assert their health rights, fostering a collective movement for change. It also plays a vital role in raising awareness about healthcare issues, mobilizing support, and influencing policy decisions.

Furthermore, the study underscores the significance of collaboration among various stakeholders, including government entities, non-governmental organizations, and community leaders. Such partnerships are essential for amplifying advocacy messages and ensuring that the needs of marginalized populations are addressed in health policy discussions.

Integrating effective communication into advocacy efforts is crucial for promoting health equity in Nigeria. By prioritizing these strategies, stakeholders can contribute to creating a more inclusive and equitable healthcare system that serves all citizens, regardless of their socio-economic background or geographic location. As Nigeria continues to grapple with healthcare challenges, a focus on communication and collaboration will be vital for driving meaningful progress toward health equity.



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