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Impact of Socioeconomic Status on Hypertension among Pregnant Women in West Africa

Chelimo Faith Rebecca

Department of Clinical Medicine and Dentistry Kampala International University Uganda
Email: rebecca.chelimo@studwc.kiu.ac.u

ABSTRACT

Hypertension during pregnancy, including chronic hypertension and pregnancy-related hypertensive disorders such as preeclampsia and eclampsia, remains a leading cause of maternal and fetal morbidity and mortality globally. In West Africa, where healthcare infrastructure is often inadequate, the incidence of hypertension during pregnancy is alarmingly high. Socioeconomic status (SES), encompassing factors such as income, education, employment, and access to healthcare, plays a pivotal role in shaping maternal health outcomes. This review examines the complex relationship between SES and hypertension during pregnancy in West Africa, focusing on how lower SES contributes to increased risks of hypertensive disorders and poor maternal health outcomes. Women from lower SES backgrounds face multiple challenges, including limited access to healthcare, inadequate nutrition, poor living conditions, and higher stress levels, all of which heighten their risk of developing hypertension. The study highlights the importance of addressing social determinants of health, such as education, income, and healthcare access, to mitigate hypertension-related complications in pregnancy. By exploring these factors, this review aims to inform the development of targeted public health strategies that improve maternal health outcomes and reduce maternal mortality in the region.

Keywords: Hypertension, Pregnancy, Socioeconomic Status, West Africa, Maternal Health, Preeclampsia.

INTRODUCTION

Hypertension in pregnancy, which includes both chronic hypertension and pregnancy-related hypertensive disorders such as preeclampsia and eclampsia, is a significant cause of maternal and fetal morbidity and mortality worldwide. It is one of the leading preventable causes of death for both mothers and their newborns [1]. In West Africa, the incidence of hypertension during pregnancy remains disturbingly high, with a complex interplay of risk factors contributing to this issue. Among these factors, socioeconomic status (SES), which encompasses variables such as income, education, employment, and access to healthcare services, has emerged as a critical determinant in shaping maternal health outcomes [2]. The link between SES and hypertension during pregnancy is particularly important in the West African context, where healthcare infrastructure is often inadequate, and many women experience significant barriers to accessing quality maternal care. The relationship between SES and hypertensive disorders in pregnancy is an area of growing interest, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where the burden of maternal and fetal complications is disproportionately high [3]. Pregnant women from lower SES backgrounds face increased risk of developing hypertension during pregnancy, which is further compounded by limited access to healthcare services, poor nutrition, inadequate health education, and overall poor living conditions. The understanding of how SES influences hypertension in pregnancy is essential for designing more targeted

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interventions and public health strategies that can mitigate maternal and fetal risks and improve overall health outcomes for pregnant women in West Africa [4].

Hypertension in pregnancy is a critical health condition that can severely impact both mothers and their unborn children, leading to complications such as preterm birth, fetal growth restriction, placental abruption, stroke, and maternal death. Hypertensive disorders include chronic hypertension, gestational hypertension, and preeclampsia, which can progress to eclampsia if not managed appropriately [5]. Globally, these conditions contribute to approximately 10% of maternal deaths, with sub-Saharan Africa, including West Africa, experiencing some of the highest rates. The prevalence of hypertensive disorders in pregnancy is particularly alarming in West Africa, where healthcare challenges such as inadequate medical facilities, limited access to trained healthcare providers, and insufficient healthcare coverage for pregnant women exacerbate the problem. Rural and impoverished women, in particular, face significant barriers to accessing timely care, which increases the likelihood of undiagnosed or poorly managed hypertension during pregnancy. Inadequate healthcare systems in the region often lead to devastating outcomes for both mothers and their babies [6]. Socioeconomic status (SES) plays a pivotal role in maternal health outcomes, with individuals from lower SES backgrounds experiencing poorer health due to limited access to healthcare, poor nutrition, and higher stress levels. These women are more likely to have insufficient access to prenatal care and may not recognize the symptoms of hypertension or its complications until it's too late. Barriers such as the high cost of transportation, lack of nearby healthcare facilities, and financial limitations prevent many pregnant women from seeking or affording proper care [7]. Despite the critical role SES plays in hypertension during pregnancy, there is a significant gap in research exploring this connection in West Africa. While clinical risk factors like age and BMI have been well studied, the social and economic factors influencing hypertension in pregnancy remain underexplored. This lack of focus on SES contributes to a gap in understanding, hindering the development of targeted public health interventions that could address these disparities and reduce maternal mortality in the region [8].

This study aims to investigate the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and hypertension during pregnancy in West Africa, with a particular focus on understanding how SES influences both maternal and fetal health outcomes. The primary objective is to assess the prevalence of hypertension in pregnancy across different socioeconomic backgrounds in the region. The study will also examine how variables such as income, education, and employment impact the likelihood of developing hypertensive disorders during pregnancy. Additionally, the research will identify barriers faced by women from lower SES backgrounds in accessing prenatal care and managing hypertension effectively. A key objective is to evaluate the effectiveness of current interventions aimed at reducing hypertension-related complications, particularly for women in low-income communities. The significance of this study lies in its potential to fill a critical gap in the existing literature regarding hypertension in pregnancy in West Africa. By linking SES to maternal and fetal health outcomes, it will provide valuable insights into the social and economic determinants of maternal morbidity and mortality. The findings could inform the development of targeted public health interventions that focus on improving access to care, health education, and affordability of treatments for women from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ultimately, this research will contribute to improving maternal health outcomes and reducing the high maternal mortality rates in the region.

Socioeconomic Status and Hypertension Risk

Socioeconomic status (SES) plays a crucial role in determining hypertension risk, particularly during pregnancy. Research consistently indicates that women from lower SES backgrounds are at a significantly higher risk of developing hypertension during pregnancy. This is particularly evident in West Africa, where socioeconomic disparities are stark [9]. Women from impoverished communities often face a combination of challenges that increase the likelihood of hypertension, including heightened stress levels, poor nutrition, limited access to healthcare, and substandard living conditions. These factors contribute to the elevated risk of hypertension and its associated complications during pregnancy. Studies conducted in countries like Nigeria and Ghana reveal that lower education levels and reduced income are strongly correlated with higher rates of pregnancy-induced hypertension [10]. Educated women, on the other hand, tend to have better knowledge of prenatal care and more access to healthcare resources, which enables earlier identification and management of hypertensive disorders. This underscores the importance of addressing social determinants of health, such as education and income, as part of a comprehensive strategy to reduce hypertension-related risks in pregnancy [11]. Improving access to education and healthcare could significantly mitigate these risks and improve maternal health outcomes in the region.

Access to Healthcare and SES

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Access to healthcare is a critical factor in preventing and managing hypertension during pregnancy, particularly in West Africa, where disparities in socioeconomic status (SES) can significantly impact maternal health outcomes. Women from lower SES backgrounds often face multiple barriers to accessing quality healthcare. Financial constraints are one of the most significant obstacles, as many pregnant women cannot afford the costs of prenatal care, medications, or hospital visits [12]. In addition, long distances to healthcare facilities and poor transportation infrastructure in rural areas make it difficult for women to access timely medical care, leading to delays in the detection and management of hypertension during pregnancy. The lack of health insurance further compounds these issues, as uninsured women may be unable to seek necessary care due to the high out-of-pocket expenses [13]. Moreover, healthcare providers in low-resource settings may lack the specialized training, equipment, or medications needed to properly diagnose and treat hypertensive disorders of pregnancy. Limited maternal health education and a lack of awareness about hypertension and its risks also contribute to the problem. Without adequate healthcare services, the late detection and poor management of hypertension can lead to serious complications for both the mother and her child, including preeclampsia, premature birth, and even maternal death [14].

Mechanisms through Which SES Affects Hypertension in Pregnancy

The relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and hypertension in pregnancy is complex and influenced by a variety of social, environmental, and behavioral factors. Women from lower SES backgrounds often face significant challenges that increase their risk of developing hypertension during pregnancy. One of the key factors is nutrition. Poor access to nutritious food, along with limited financial resources to purchase quality food, can lead to inadequate intake of essential vitamins and minerals that are crucial for blood pressure regulation [15]. Nutrient deficiencies, particularly in folate, calcium, and magnesium, can exacerbate hypertension risks. In addition to nutrition, stress plays a critical role in the development of pregnancy-related hypertension. Women from low SES backgrounds often face economic hardship, unstable housing, and a lack of social support, all of which contribute to chronic stress. High levels of stress have been shown to increase the release of hormones like cortisol, which can elevate blood pressure [16]. Furthermore, women with low SES may experience higher levels of anxiety and emotional distress, further exacerbating hypertension. Lifestyle factors also contribute significantly to the risk of developing hypertension. Limited access to resources such as healthcare, exercise facilities, and healthy food options often results in poor lifestyle choices. Women in low SES groups are less likely to engage in physical activity or adhere to a balanced diet, both of which are protective against high blood pressure. Additionally, these women may face challenges in ensuring adequate rest, as poor living conditions and work demands can interfere with sleep, further contributing to hypertension. Environmental factors also play a crucial role [17]. Women living in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions are at greater risk of stress-related hypertension. Inadequate sanitation, exposure to pollutants, and lack of access to clean water can increase the risk of infections and other health complications, placing further strain on the cardiovascular system. These environmental stressors can contribute to an increased likelihood of developing hypertensive disorders during pregnancy, making the interplay between SES and hypertension multifaceted and urgent for healthcare interventions [18].

CONCLUSION

Hypertension in pregnancy remains a major public health concern in West Africa, with socioeconomic status (SES) being a key determinant of both the risk and outcomes associated with hypertensive disorders. Women from lower SES backgrounds are disproportionately affected by hypertension due to several interconnected factors, including limited access to quality healthcare, inadequate nutrition, poor living conditions, and elevated levels of stress. These socioeconomic challenges exacerbate the risk of developing hypertension during pregnancy, which in turn increases the likelihood of adverse maternal and fetal outcomes, such as preeclampsia, eclampsia, and preterm birth. Inadequate prenatal care is often a consequence of financial barriers, leading to delayed diagnosis and management of hypertension. To mitigate the impact of hypertension in pregnancy, it is crucial to address these underlying socioeconomic determinants. This can be achieved by improving access to affordable prenatal care, providing targeted education, promoting better nutrition, and enhancing social support for women in low-income communities. Such efforts would significantly reduce maternal morbidity and mortality related to hypertensive disorders in West Africa.

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