

ABIYE SAFE MOTHERHOOD : A case of leadership in turning the tide of maternal mortality in Nigeria

By Tunde Fajimbola. Nigerian Health Journal

Mrs Hawwa Muhammad is a student from Bayero University, Kano who like many other Nigerian future leaders, had felt a serious concern about the high rate of maternal and infant



Governor Olusegun Mimiko

mortality in Nigeria. In the article titled , Nigeria: Alarming high rate of maternal mortality among local women, Hawwa had observed that Nigeria as a nation is blessed with both human and natural resources ,yet women die every day from the scourge of maternal mortality.

It is not only this Nigerian student that should be worried; leadership at all levels in Nigeria should equally feel uncomfortable by the nation's high maternal death profile. Global health statistics revealed that Nigeria is the second highest in maternal death in the world, only second to India.

Many of the people of Ondo State in the Western part of the country had experienced at one time or the other what it was meant for pregnancy to become a 'death sentence'. Of the every ten women that die as result of pregnancy in Nigeria, Ondo State accounted for the highest figure in the South West. The 2008 World Bank Health Indices had placed the State on top list of maternal death, the worst in the South West.

In 2009, just few days on the assumption of office, Governor Olusegun Mimiko of Ondo State was welcomed with the shocking revelation from the World Bank through its Operations Officer ,Anne Fisher that Ondo State was carrying a huge burden of high rate of maternal mortality in Nigeria.

This news was a big challenge for a governor who has background as a medical doctor and commitment to transform the health sector , especially in the rural areas. A home-grown strategy to reverse the ugly indices of maternal death , tagged the "ABIYE safe motherhood programme" became the answer to tackle the challenge. The launching of the pilot project in Ifedore local government area in October 2009 was seen as a turning point and test of leadership in Ondo State.

The goal of Abiye safemotherhood is to ensure that infant and maternal mortality is brought down drastically in Ondo state within 2 years. To achieve this goal ,government would address

and eliminate the four major delays that cause maternal death during pregnancy, that is, delays in seeking, reaching, receiving health care and referrals as well as train and retrain health workers, provide skilled personnel for government health and centres and hospitals, provide essential drugs and services for emergency.

To address the first delay in seeking health care, the state government began advocacy programme to rural areas and sensitisation of the pregnant women on dangers relating to pregnancy and complications, where and how they can seek available help without delay. A base line survey was conducted to determine through empirical evidence the number of hospital utilisation before. This was necessary for accurate data at the pilot local government area.

The outcome of the baseline survey revealed that only sixteen per cent of those who had registered for antenatal at government facility in the area eventually delivered at the government facility. The analysis showed that eighty four percent of the pregnant women would have delivered elsewhere. Base on this finding, Governor Mimiko concluded that the World Bank statistics could be higher on Ondo State maternal death indices because the available indicator only classified cases by the hospital authority while majority of the pregnant women delivered outside the government facility with no reliable records for research. Well trained community health extension workers engaged pregnant women as part of the component of Abiye to ensure an accurate documentation. 25 pregnant women were assigned to one health ranger who visits them regularly. The health rangers with customised check list, detect high risk, carry out birth plan, embark on complications readiness, carry out education on, advice on family planning and use of insecticide treated mosquito nets.

To address the second delay in reaching health care, Mimiko government provided a mobile phone for each registered pregnant woman free of charge, and its toll free prepaid by government to access and ensures information flow with the health range that also has free toll mobile phone. Motorbikes, tricycles and ambulances are on standby for 24 hour services. This strategy help to eliminat communication challenges in the rural areas.

The third delay is the delay in receiving health care. To overcome this delay in, Basic Health Centres in villages and remote towns were provided and equipped. The health centres were also staffed with qualified personnel. Consumables and drugs needed for normal delivery were supplied. The ministry of health works in synergy with Ministry of Community Development, Local Government Authority, the World Bank and office of the Governor to ensure close monitoring and deliver result. Comprehensive health centres were also established in major towns to handle serious cases.

The Mother and Child Hospital in Akure serves as the referral to attend to complicated cases. The referral takes care of the fourth delay. Dr Adeyanju described the networking as the perfect model and template for safemotherhood anywhere in the world. Governor Mimiko is happy that "in the first 15 month of operation, the Mother and Child Hospital in Akure, a 100-bed

facility has attracted 10,315 pregnant women and had a safe delivery of 14,216 babies” in a world class medical environment and completely free services.

A law on inquiry into maternal death tracks maternal death in the state to make everybody accountable. Also Community Health Committee made of traditional rulers ,religion leaders, women leaders and opinion leaders set up to monitor the Abiye programme at the local government level.The essence is for sustainability and community ownership. At the state level , Abiye Committee, made up of experts looks at challenges facing the programme and makes recommendations. The Bill gate Institute of Obafemi Awolowo University,Ile-Ife, is a technical partner for the Abiye project.

Two years on, the World Bank review of maternal health situation in Ondo state revealed cheering news for the result. The testimony of the World Bank Country Director, Onnoh Ruhl after experiencing the genesis ,the stages ,the resources, the commitments , and the breakthroughs of Abiye initiative made this comment; “Mr Governor, Dr Olusegun Mimiko,you opened the Abiye facility here in Ifedore local government and two of us went into the post delivery room ,in that room, we found two mothers and two babies delivered at about five o clock this morning. I have never experience that in a facility that has just been opened by the governor.”

Onnoh Ruhl added that “it’s so impressive. It’s like you step out of Nigeria into another world, but it is still very much like Nigeria. That is really great.

What did we learn from that?” The lessons learnt are many. First, that leadership is just having a vision, but a vision must be back up with actions that deliver result. Secondly, leadership is about commitment for transformation where every breakdown generates further breakthrough. Thirdly, that leadership is about team work and partnership for development and fourth,a leader must work out a caring heart. The actualisation of this concept of leadership which find embodiment in the quality of Governor Mimiko has transformed Ondo state to become a place of pride in Africa.

How could a state that had the worst health indices on maternal health indicator in the South West of Nigeria in 2 years ago , re- emerge to become a role model for the African Continent? What strategy has Ondo state adopt to become a global teacher on how to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on Infant and Maternal health?. What are the lessons on leadership that could be learnt from this generational change? These are questions must not be gloss over because for the first in history ,a leader in Africa has got it right in best practise for the health sector and so acknowledged by the global community.

The World Bank recommended Ondo State’s Abiye Safe Motherhood programme as the solution to Africa health challenges. The World Bank, African Region Vice President, Mrs Oby Ezekwesili in Washington DC after witnessing the historic event and presentation of Abiye safemotherhood initiative and success story hailed the people and government of Ondo State

for providing a role model and instituting the benchmark for African in reversing infant and maternal mortality .

She remarked that the expectation is for the Federal Government and other states of the federation to develop modalities that will key-in to Ondo State's strategy on safemotherhood and replicate same throughout Nigeria. In her conclusion, this is a sure and fast means of combating infant and maternal mortality challenge in African and countries in developing world should set to learn from the Ondo State experience and from the excellent leadership of Governor Mimiko.

The global expectation is that experts and indeed Governor Olusegun Mimiko will soon begin to engage the world community on the Abiye project 3- prong strategy of providing reliable and quality care with fixed facilities, health ranger scheme-outreach that monitor women and children and Apex mother and child hospital that cater for the welfare of the mother and child after birth for up to 5 years free of charge.

The London Tropical School of Medicine is learning from Ondo State as the global health institution has been involved on the activity of state Mother and Child with the plan to develop the hospital as a research centre. Ms Hawwa Muhammad, a student of Bayero University, Kano, Northern Nigeria, and several other future leaders who had expressed concern about the Nigeria high maternal mortality rate can now smile, the torch of hope is here with us in Nigeria. This torch is showing the way to how 'pregnancy will never again become a death sentence in Africa'. This kind of exemplary leadership being championed by Governor of Ondo State, Dr Olusegun Mimiko is the change that Africa needs to re-write history.