

6-2019

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Recommended Citation

Jan, R, Lakhani, A, & Kaufman, K. Higher Education in Midwifery in Pakistan: A Proposed Framework. *Journal of Asian Midwives*. 2019;6(2):40–45.

Higher Education in Midwifery in Pakistan: A Proposed Framework

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Abstract

Access to a skilled professional midwife is the right of each woman. Research evidence shows that midwives prepared to international standards decrease rates of morbidity and mortality and promote health of both mothers and infants. At present, in Pakistan, there are several midwifery cadres, with different formal education levels, who provide maternal and child health services. There are currently three types of diploma programs each serving a different cadre. Until 2012, there was no opportunity to obtain higher education in midwifery in the country. This absence contributed to non-acceptance and invisibility of midwifery as a profession. As a result, midwives were not adequately prepared or permitted to provide full scope of care to women. Making higher education available in programs based on the International Confederation of Midwives' Global Standards for Midwifery Education and its Essential Competencies for Midwifery Practice will enable midwives to provide improved health care services and increase opportunities for them to be advocates, leaders, and teachers who will continue to strengthen the profession. This paper proposes a framework for higher education in midwifery in Pakistan

Key Words: *Midwifery, higher education, Pakistan, South Asia*

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals set forth by the World Health Organization (WHO) call for the reduction of maternal and neonatal deaths, most especially in low- and middle-income countries.¹ Health indicators show evidence of the need for improved maternal-child health care, much of which is currently provided by midwives. Globally, research shows that

well-educated and skilled midwives, working in collaboration with other healthcare professionals, contribute to high quality maternal, neonatal, and child health.² A goal for health systems should be to provide access to a skilled professional midwife for every woman. Competent midwives not only potentiate a decrease in morbidity and mortality but promote improved health outcomes of mothers and infants. According to the WHO (2013), sufficient and competent health care providers, specifically those with “midwife or other midwifery skills” (MOMS) are essential; without MOMS the goal of reduced maternal and neonatal mortality may never be achieved.³ Advancement and innovations in midwifery education are necessary to prepare the next generation of midwives to competently provide the skilled care necessary to effect improved outcomes for mothers and infants.⁴ This paper proposes a framework for higher education in midwifery in Pakistan.

Midwifery Education in Pakistan

At present, there are several midwifery cadres which are educationally disparate providing maternal and child health care services in Pakistan. Currently there are three distinct Diploma level midwifery programs including:

1. Two-year Community Midwifery programs for which the entry requirement is 10 years matriculation education with graduates registered as Community Midwives.
2. One-year diploma programs for female nurses who have completed 3 years of general nursing training with graduates registered as Nurse-Midwives.
3. Two-year diploma programs with one year of public health training and one year of midwifery with graduates registered as Lady Health Visitors (LHV).

Prior to 2012, there was no degree granting program in midwifery which limited career pathing for the diploma-prepared midwives who basically remained at the same level for their practice life. Those with a nursing diplomas could advance their careers by studying for advanced degrees in nursing education programs but there was no opportunity to obtain advanced preparation in midwifery. The absence of higher education in midwifery contributed to low acceptance and invisibility of midwives and the midwifery profession. Most programs were not competency-based which limited professional autonomy and independent practice for the midwives. The multiplicity of designations and roles has contributed to confusion and

misperceptions about the competencies of midwives and to a lack of acceptance of their role as primary care providers.

The lack of consistent and uniform standards and competencies results in a fragmented and weak profession without a strong identity, ultimately, undermining the ability of midwives to advocate effectively for improved care of women and children. Importantly, the professional fragmentation also limits the ability of midwives to realize their own potential through continued professional development. Generally, women's professions in Pakistan need to model the development of intellectual and leadership capabilities to advance the profession and benefit the larger society. So, in order for midwifery in Pakistan to achieve the desired improvements in maternal – child health such systemic problems must be addressed. Hence, it is imperative to provide higher education for midwives, which will expand career opportunities for women, develop the midwifery profession and, most importantly, enhance the quality of care for women and infants.

International Standards of Midwifery Education

The International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) has set forth Essential Competencies for Midwifery Practice to define the knowledge and skills of those who have the title of midwife.⁵ In addition, the ICM also created the Global Standards for Midwifery Education,⁶ which are the basis for assessing quality of education programs. Meeting the provisions of these documents ensures that graduates meet international standards and can contribute positively to multi-disciplinary teams in the healthcare system. In recognition of this potential impact, as part of the overall strategy, the government of Pakistan is committed to improving maternal, infant and children's health through strengthening midwifery education and practice with a goal of establishing exemplary higher education pathways to attain higher education in midwifery.

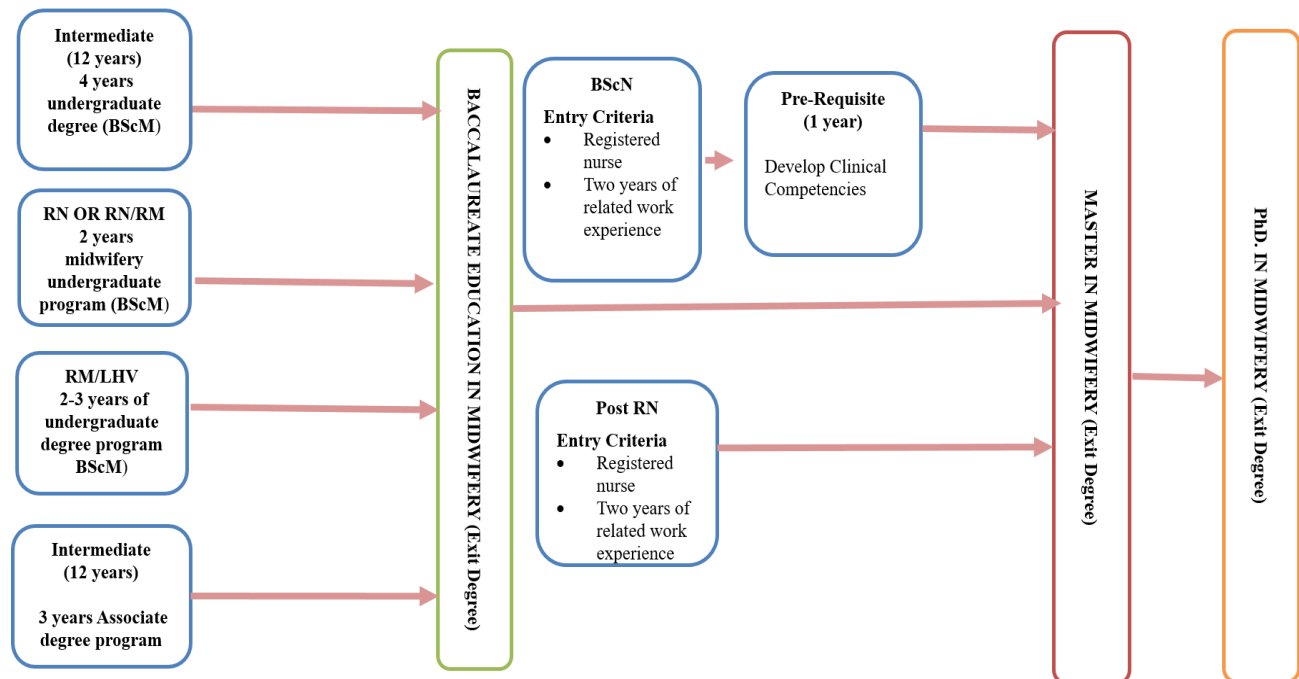
In 2012, the Aga Khan University (AKU) opened the first Bachelor's in Midwifery program in Pakistan for midwives who held diplomas in both nursing and midwifery. The goal of the program is to prepare professionally strong midwives, who can contribute their enhanced knowledge and advanced skills for the benefit of maternal-child health services. The ICM Global Standards for Midwifery Education provided the guiding framework for the structure of the program. The benefits of the program are not limited to AKU because the graduates are working currently in private and public facilities across the country. Through this program, the profession

of midwifery experienced a significant boost to the potential career opportunities to those practitioners wanting to advance their skills and focus only on midwifery.

Proposed Midwifery Degree Programs for Pakistan: The way forward

One program alone is unable to meet the midwifery of the country or the profession for well qualified practitioners and leaders. Hence, it is important to establish additional higher education degree programs that lead to excellence in evidence-based midwifery practice, teaching, and leadership. It is anticipated that making higher education available for midwives will catalyze the demand similar to that experienced by advanced education programs for nurses. Using ICM’s standards for midwifery education and centering the curriculum around the Essential Competencies for Midwifery Practice will improve maternal-child health and advance the ability of midwives to influence health care systems and policy makers, as well as preparing them to take on leadership roles and advocate for women and families.

Figure 1: Proposed Higher Education Framework for Midwifery Education Program



We propose further development of undergraduate and graduate degree programs in Pakistan for midwives. The programs would prepare graduates to provide the full scope of

midwifery care on their own responsibility and contribute to future developments in midwifery worldwide. Figure 1 outlines the framework we have developed for program development. It shows several pathways by which midwives could achieve higher education.

On the far-left side of Figure 1 are proposed routes of entry to an undergraduate degree program. The long-term plan is development of a direct-entry four-year Bachelor's Degree. However, for a formative period of five to seven years, we propose (a) a two-year undergraduate midwifery degree program for RNs; and (b) a full-time two to three year undergraduate program for LHVs and Registered Midwives (RMs), the latter includes both pupil and Community Midwives. In addition, we think it is important to consider developing a three-year Associate Degree midwifery program, based on the ICM educational standards and Higher Education Commission requirements which ensures 12 years of basic education followed by three years of professional education, to meet the current shortage of competent midwives. The three year program is a short term plan, which will serve as an intermediate (transitional) step leading to undergraduate Bachelor's in Midwifery program while enabling graduates to pursue higher education in midwifery and gain expertise in the field.

These new programs mentioned above cannot be realized if there are not sufficient qualified faculty to develop and teach within the programs. Therefore, efforts should be directed to preparing a cadre of clinical teachers/preceptors and faculty members. Providing a path to graduate and post graduate degree programs is important for preparing leaders and teachers who can influence maternal-child health services, evidence/research, and policy making. The graduates would also have excellent clinical skills and serve as mentors and role models for those with less experience. In order to move forward with this agenda, it is imperative that those involved in the development and delivery of these evolving programs must work in partnership with government and non-government institutions in order to build innovative, responsive, and sustainable educational pathway for midwives in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The proposed framework can have several impacts on maternal health, midwifery career pathing, and a sustained and quality midwifery service for women and children in in Pakistan. The availability of higher education in midwifery will potentiate advancement for individuals and greater credibility for the profession. It will bring women into leadership roles where their

voices can be heard. Most importantly, it will raise the standard of midwifery practice and the ability to be advocates for improved reproductive and maternal, neonatal and child health.

Acknowledgements

None

Competing Interest

None declared by authors

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