

Expectant women want to know that someone is paying attention before a situation becomes critical

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For many women, pregnancy is presented as a joyful waiting period marked by baby showers, clinic visits and countdowns to delivery. But beneath the excitement lies another reality one filled with uncertainty, fear, exhaustion and unanswered questions.

For Jacinta Mwikali, that reality became frighteningly real. Throughout most of her pregnancy, she continued working long night shifts, dismissing persistent back pain as normal fatigue.

It was not until her condition suddenly worsened that she rushed to hospital, where doctors performed an emergency caesarean section to save both her life and that of her baby. Today, what troubles her most is not just the medical emergency itself, but how little she understood about what was happening in her body.

"Being a first-time mom, I did not have a lot of information," she recalls adding how she silently prayed through the fear and confusion until she heard her baby cry. Her experience reflects a growing but often overlooked challenge in Kenya's maternal healthcare system: many expectant mothers still navigate pregnancy with limited information and inconsis-

Mothers with their newly born babies at the Kenyatta National Hospital Maternity wing when Health ministry officials toured the facility on Thursday January 16, 2025 BENARD MALONZA



Beyond the baby bump: Why Kenyan mothers are demanding more

ent support despite increased access to health facilities. Caroline Wanjiku is one of the mothers whose journey reveal another side of that struggle. After years of trying to conceive, she had nearly given up hope after being told In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) might be

her only option, an expensive process she could not afford. When she eventually became pregnant, it felt like a breakthrough. But the pregnancy itself was physically and emotionally draining.

Psychological burden

In her first trimester, she experienced bleeding and was later diagnosed with gestational diabetes. "There were days I could go for hours without sleep; the pain was sometimes unbearable," she says. Yet, maternal health experts say one of the least discussed aspects of pregnancy is the psychological burden that comes with uncertainty, the constant fear of missing

warning signs or failing to seek help in time. That anxiety persists even in a country where maternal healthcare access has improved significantly over the years.

According to recent analysis from the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, only 61 per cent of women receive quality antenatal care despite relatively high attendance at clinics. The gap highlights a deeper issue: access alone does not guarantee consistent or comprehensive support. For many mothers, antenatal care still revolves around scheduled check-ups, leaving long periods in between where women must manage symptoms, fears and

decisions largely on their own. It is within those gaps that Kenya's maternal healthcare conversation is beginning to shift.

This has created space for community-based support systems, digital maternal health tools and telehealth services aimed at improving communication between mothers and healthcare providers. Community health workers across the country now play a larger role in conducting home visits and monitoring expectant mothers, especially in underserved areas. Meanwhile, digital platforms are emerging as an alternative source of timely health information. One such initiative is

Lea Mama, a maternal support programme developed by Britam Holdings Plc, which provides expectant mothers with health reminders, educational messages and guidance from pregnancy through the first six months after birth.

What distinguishes such programmes is not necessarily advanced technology, but consistency.

Women receive regular messages explaining what to expect during different stages of pregnancy, symptoms that may require medical attention, nutritional advice and reminders about antenatal appointments. For mothers dealing with anxiety and uncertainty, that constant communication can become a critical form of reassurance.

Closing gaps

"We realised that many expectant mothers do not attend the recommended antenatal visits, sometimes because of distance, cost, or simply not knowing when care is needed," says Liza Maru a Maternal and Female Healthcare expert. "Missing those touchpoints can affect both the mother's well-being and the safety of delivery. Lea Mama was designed to walk with a mother throughout her entire pregnancy journey, checking in, guiding, and making sure she doesn't fall through the cracks," she adds.

Health experts say such interventions are helping close one of the biggest maternal health gaps in Kenya: access to timely information. For Caroline, the support became more valuable than she initially expected.

"I did not think much of it at first, but the information was actually very helpful," she says. "If I were to describe it, I would call it personalised care."

61pc

The percentage of women who receive quality antenatal care despite relatively high attendance at clinics, according to recent analysis from the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey.