Cultural Barriers to Husband’s Involvement in Maternal Health in Indonesia Rural Area, A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: Maternal mortality represents the health condition of the mother during pregnancy. In developing countries, maternal health is often poor because pregnant women are not fully supported by their husbands. The problem is, husbands have cultural barriers to engage in activities that can provide space for pregnant women to be healthier.

AIM: This study was conducted to examine the husband’s cultural barriers in the Toba Batak tribe in North Sumatra, Indonesia.

METHODS: The research was conducted using a qualitative approach in reality. A total of 30 kebabs were interviewed using a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) technique, in addition to FGDs with health workers.

RESULTS: This study revealed the root of cultural problems related to the husband’s perception of men’s and women’s work, as well as the inherent traditions that make the husband distance himself from his wife’s health.

CONCLUSION: Cultural barriers of husband’s involvement in maternal health are very clear in the Batak tribe. Efforts are needed to change cultural barriers by implementing a cultural approach.

Introduction

The husband’s role in reproductive health, especially when the wife is pregnant, is very important [1]. If a husband plays a good role, then a healthier wife will certainly be realized. Unfortunately, there are still many husbands who are not involved in maternal health, which is reflected in the high level of maternal mortality, poor maternal and child health, which generally occurs in low-middle income countries [2], [3], [4].

Therefore, efforts to increase the role of husbands in maternal health are an absolute necessary condition. However, to increase this role, it is not easy, because the husband’s reluctance is often very closely related to the cultural views in the community where men and women are raised and live [5], [6]. Both men and women are faced with a patrilineal cultural view, which is implemented in so many social systems of society. This cultural view unfortunately often produces views, mindset, values, and even practices that prevent husbands from being able to be more actively involved in their wife’s health during pregnancy. Investigation of these cultural perceptions can provide information in designing behavior change.

Indonesia has a high maternal mortality rate, even the highest in an Asian country, at 305/100 thousand live births [7]. If we look at the data, among all provinces that make the main contribution, there are only nine (9) provinces that make a significant contribution. One of the nine is North Sumatra Province. The dominant ethnic group in this province is the Batak tribe, who inhabits more than three quarters of the area in North Sumatra Province [8]. Indirectly, as a tribe with a very strong patrilineal tradition, maternal health issues are closely related to the views of the Batak tribe. Therefore, this paper aims to describe the cultural perception of the Batak ethnic group on maternal health.

Methods

Approach

This study applied a qualitative research approach [9] because the socio-cultural context needs to explore problems that reveal the information behind
the problem. To collect the necessary information, the researchers managed the method of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and in-depth interviews.

**Settings**

This research was conducted in Sipahutar District, a rural area in North Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra Province. The research area is 8 h by road from the provincial capital (Medan), and 1 h by car from the district capital. This location is inhabited by almost 100% by the Batak people. In general, people work as rice and corn farmers, and grow coffee and pineapples on community-owned plantations. Nearly, 100% of the tribes in the study area are Toba Batak.

**Participants**

Participants in the FGDs were husbands of pregnant wives. A total of three FGD’s groups were conducted to collect husbands’ views on reproductive health, with a total of 30 husbands participating. In addition, a FGD was conducted by gathering health workers working at the Sipahutar District Health Center, together with seven officers from the Health Office.

FGDs in the husband’s group were conducted at the Village Hall and at the Church. The FGDs lasted for approximately 3 h each session, using an interview guide that had been prepared by the researcher. The FGD questions are related to the husband’s view of the division of labor in the household, the husband’s view of pregnancy, the type of husband’s work during pregnancy and the husband’s view of his own work during pregnancy. The questions in the FGD have been prepared after receiving input from the expert.

The FGD for the group of health workers was held in the Sipahutar Health Center hall. The questions in the FGD were arranged to ask about the health profile of women in the research area, health problems of pregnant women, and the views of officers regarding the husband’s role in the wife’s pregnancy.

**Data collection**

Data were collected by recording all of the FGDs activities after first asking permission from the participants. Verbal consent was requested from each participant to ensure the privacy of the participants, after first explaining the purpose of the study and data processing procedures.

**Data analysis**

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach after first performing a verbatim process on the data. The themes that emerged were then arranged according to the research objectives. The thematic analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Theme and sub-theme

| Theme | Sub-Theme |
|-------|-----------|
| Husbands’ involvement in antenatal care | The activities of husbands and the reasons, the activities of wives and the reasons, the position of husbands, the position of wives and the reasons, the view towards the health of wives |
| Husbands’ involvement in the delivery period | The activities of husbands and the reasons, the activities of wives and the reasons |
| Husbands’ involvement in raising children | Child care, child care, the number of children and the reasons |

**Ethics considerations**

Before carrying out the research, the researcher submitted the ethical permit from the Health Research Ethics Committee, the Faculty of Nursing, Universitas Sumatera Utara and was approved by number 2328/VII/SP/2021. Legal research permits were also submitted through the Head of the Research Institute and submitted to the Head of the North Tapanuli Regency District Health Office.

**Results**

After conducting data management, the themes emerging from the research data transcriptions are as follows:

This study reveals that generally husbands often take their wives to check their pregnancy at the midwife. The schedule is determined by the wife because according to the husband, only the wife knows about it, unless they are told. However, at the Health Center, the husband only waits outside the Health Center. The dialogue with the FGD participants is presented below:

| Participant | Dialogue |
|-------------|----------|
| Researcher  | Did you go inside the health center? |
| Participant | Yes, I had another thing to do, sir |

The husband feels that even taking his wife with him is enough because it is his wife’s business to check her pregnancy.

This study reveals the husband’s activities, which are more private in the family. Some husbands said that they wash clothes when their wives give birth. However, the problem behind it is presented below.

From the dialogue above, it can be seen that many husbands feel that they do not have the responsibility to help their wives. This is of course closely related to their position as men.

One of the husband’s excuses is that they must also work. The husbands said that they were tired after working, “Tired. It’s no longer possible for us to wash clothes, wash dishes. It’s not possible anymore. Already
The dialogue above provides an insight into cultural views that have taken root and become a tradition that is considered to be passed down from generation to generation, namely that men have a much higher position, are far more important, and therefore if we relate it to maternal health, men will feel their manhood lessen if they are involved in paying attention to their wives’ health.

The one-sided perspective from the husbands aforementioned is supported with the information obtained from a health officer. The officer admitted that the pregnant women in Sipahutar Village are never accompanied by their husbands when they are doing the checkup in the Community Health Center. The husbands just drop them in front of the Health Center and they will either go home or wait outside. The health officers in FGDs also explained that the Batak women are not very lucky in terms of their position in a community, as they still have to do many household chores even when they are in the final trimester of their pregnancy; this happens because those chores are considered as women’s responsibility. Many men even have plenty of time to be in a stall to drink tuak (alcoholic beverage) with their friends. Women are often considered unable to make decisions at home and in a community. The health officers never conduct an activity to increase the participation of husbands because there are heavy challenges that must be faced besides having no budget allocation for such an activity.

Discussion

The absence of the husband in health problems has caused an imbalance in the burden which in turn causes the handling of various health problems not to be optimal. This condition occurs for all circumstances so that it often results in an imbalance of responsibilities that have implications on women’s health [10], [11].

This study reveals that husbands identify health problems as the wife’s domain. Even husbands still feel that health (of their wives) should be the full responsibility of the wives. Husbands, according to Lewis et al. [12] position themselves in only “secondary roles”, or only supportive roles. Because of those secondary roles in maternal health, including in the postnatal period, the main role is not carried out by men but by women, whether it is the wife or other women including the mother-in-law or the husband’s sister(s). These women are considered to have a primary role in reproductive health matters. As stated by Tekeslasia et al. [13] husband and wife are considered to have different roles with their respective characteristics. The husband is considered to have the responsibility in earning family income and carry out physical burden [14], while the wife is expected to take care of things related to daily life at home. The limited role of husbands in reproductive health has something to do with cultural barriers as
not feel the need to be involved in pregnancy, because they are justified that pregnancy is only a matter for pregnant women or women.

Therefore, investigating husbands’ views and then involving them in future interventions are important and should not be separated from efforts to design health promotion strategies that aim to improve the health of pregnant women [21], [22] while at the same time, the wife should also be given the same understanding because this cultural view also affects both sexes [23].

This process should be carried out using appropriate cultural social channels. Involving the community slowly through proper health education will provide results that may be more positive than changing the customs that have long been implemented by the community.

Conclusion

This study shows that the role of husbands in reproductive health, especially when their wives are pregnant, is still low. This is due to the cultural view that places men in a higher position than women, thus keeping men away from jobs that are considered to be women's affairs. Efforts are needed to change the cultural views of society.

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