

Embrace takes a stand against medical xenophobia

As the movement for mothers, we recognise that the advancement of rights for mothers is not true progress if *some* mothers are excluded. Equal access to quality healthcare is in our collective interest.

Embrace, the Movement for Mothers, notes with great concern reports of foreign nationals who are denied access to healthcare in South African facilities. This comes after media reports of ongoing xenophobic protests at Kalafong Provincial Tertiary Hospital and Hillbrow Community Health Centre preventing foreign nationals from accessing the facilities. In June, SECTION27 launched a court application in response to complaints by pregnant women and mothers of young children who are required to pay fees to access healthcare services at public hospitals in Gauteng. Last week a video went viral; in it, Limpopo Health MEC Phophi Ramathuba is seen berating a Zimbabwean woman seeking medical attention at Bela Bela Hospital.

We are deeply troubled that xenophobia is finding expression in our country's clinics and hospitals, with public figures fuelling xenophobia with misinformation that foreign nationals utilising healthcare facilities are somehow at the root of our overburdened and chronically under-funded health care system. This is despite the fact that the Department of Health currently does not keep a record of the number of foreign nationals accessing treatment at health facilities, which means it would be difficult to assess the impact of foreign nationals on the healthcare system. What we do know is that according to official estimates, South Africa is home to about 2.9 million immigrants (which would account for just under 5 percent of the overall population of 60.6 million people).

The Bill of Rights (Section 27 of the Constitution) guarantees access to healthcare services to all people in our country, including reproductive healthcare. Denying anyone access to healthcare - including refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented foreign nationals - is a violation of a basic human right, enshrined in the Constitution. The National Health Act prescribes categories of people eligible for free health services at public health establishments, which include vulnerable groups such as women, children, older persons and persons with disabilities - regardless of nationality. Pregnant and lactating women and children below the age of 6, who attend community health centres are eligible for free health services. In addition, the National Health Act states that no health care provider, health worker or health institution may refuse a person emergency medical treatment.



It has also come to our attention that care has been denied or delayed in cases where migrant women in labour have gone to health care facilities seeking emergency medical assistance, resulting in poor health outcomes for the mother and the child. We are also aware of migrant women being subjected to obstetric violence at the hands of healthcare professionals. Obstetric violence refers to abuse and rights violations that occur against pregnant or birthing people accessing reproductive healthcare.

Anyone who needs medical care should be able to receive help without worrying about being mistreated, harassed, humiliated, denied service or being made to pay before they can be seen to or discharged into the care of their families - especially the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, women and children.

We call on the government, in particular, the National Department of Health, to confront the growing incidences of institutionalised xenophobia in our country's healthcare facilities.

Mothers, as those most acutely affected by service delivery failure, we urge you to join the conversation and add your voice in demanding accountability and urgent action to address the challenges in our country's healthcare system. We are not free unless all of us are free.

Yours in solidarity,
Embrace, the Movement for Mothers

I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own - Audre Lorde

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