VOL. 13 NO. 6,
AUGUST, 2026
E-ISSN 3027-1401
P-ISSN 3026-9148

African Scholar Publications & Research International
www.africanscholarpub.com

Journal of Arts and Sociological Research (JASR)

Legal Risks in Obstetrics and Gynaecology Practice in Nigeria: Protecting Female Doctors from Litigation

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.70382/ajasr.v13i6.0147

Abstract

Obstetrics and gynaecology constitute one of the highest-risk specialties for medical negligence litigation due to the complexity of maternal and fetal care, the time-sensitive nature of clinical decision-making, and the potential for catastrophic outcomes. In Nigeria, female obstetricians and gynaecologists increasingly face legal exposure arising from allegations of medical negligence, informed consent violations, delayed diagnosis, poor documentation, wrongful death, birth injuries, and professional misconduct. Beyond the conventional risks associated with clinical practice, female practitioners frequently encounter gender-specific challenges, including workplace discrimination, excessive workload, inadequate institutional support, harassment, and work-life balance pressures, all of which may indirectly increase the likelihood of adverse clinical outcomes and subsequent litigation. Despite these realities, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to examining the intersection between medical negligence law, professional liability, and the unique vulnerabilities of female doctors within Nigeria's healthcare system. This article critically examines the legal risks confronting female obstetricians and gynaecologists in Nigeria and evaluates the adequacy of the existing legal and regulatory framework governing professional liability. Adopting a doctrinal research methodology, the article relies on statutes, judicial authorities, professional ethical regulations, and comparative international best practices to assess existing mechanisms for preventing litigation and protecting healthcare professionals. It argues that while patient rights must remain paramount, effective legal protection for female doctors requires institutional reforms that strengthen clinical governance, continuous professional education, risk management systems, adequate staffing, professional indemnity insurance, standardized clinical protocols, and workplace policies addressing gender-related occupational challenges. The article concludes that reducing litigation in obstetrics and gynaecology requires a balanced legal framework that simultaneously safeguards patient safety and supports healthcare professionals operating under demanding clinical conditions. It recommends legislative reforms, improved hospital risk management practices, enhanced documentation standards, mandatory professional indemnity coverage, greater institutional support for female practitioners in Nigeria.

Keywords: Obstetrics and gynaecology, legal risks, female Doctors, litigation, Nigeria, medical negligence.

Introduction

The Nigerian legal framework governing medical liability derives from multiple sources, including the common law of negligence, the Medical and Dental Practitioners Act, the National Health Act 2014, the Code of Medical Ethics in Nigeria, the Evidence Act 2011, and judicial precedents interpreting professional duties owed by healthcare providers.[81] Collectively, these legal instruments impose obligations relating to professional competence, informed consent, confidentiality, proper documentation, emergency treatment, communication, and adherence to accepted standards of medical practice. Failure to comply with these obligations may expose practitioners to civil liability, professional disciplinary proceedings before the Medical and Dental Practitioners Tribunal, and, in exceptional circumstances involving gross negligence or recklessness, criminal prosecution.[82]

Among the most common causes of litigation in obstetric and gynaecological practice are delayed diagnosis of obstetric emergencies, failure to perform timely Caesarean delivery, inadequate fetal monitoring, improper management of postpartum haemorrhage, birth trauma, medication errors, negligent infertility treatment, wrongful sterilisation, failure to obtain valid informed consent, poor communication with patients and relatives, and deficient medical record keeping.[83] Many of these disputes arise not solely from clinical error but from inadequate documentation, ineffective communication, unrealistic patient expectations, or failures in institutional systems beyond the direct control of individual practitioners.[84] Modern medico-legal scholarship therefore recognises that effective litigation prevention requires comprehensive clinical risk management rather than merely improved individual competence.

Equally important is the recognition that healthcare institutions bear significant responsibility for creating safe systems capable of reducing medical errors and protecting both patients and practitioners. The contemporary doctrine of clinical governance emphasises multidisciplinary collaboration, standard treatment protocols, regular clinical audit, continuous professional development, incident reporting mechanisms, adequate staffing, simulation training, electronic medical records, and institutional accountability as indispensable components of patient safety.[85] Hospitals that fail to provide adequate facilities, qualified personnel, essential equipment, or appropriate supervision may themselves incur liability for institutional negligence in addition to the personal liability of individual healthcare professionals.[86]

Against this background, this article critically examines the legal risks confronting female obstetricians and gynaecologists in Nigeria and evaluates the adequacy of existing legal mechanisms designed to protect healthcare professionals from avoidable litigation while

81 Medical and Dental Practitioners Act, Cap M8 LFN 2004; National Health Act 2014; Code of Medical Ethics in Nigeria (Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria, revised ed.); Evidence Act 2011.

82 Medical and Dental Practitioners Act, ss 15–16.

83 Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, *Clinical Risk Management Standards* (latest ed. 2025).

84 World Health Organization, *Global Patient Safety Report 2024*.

85 Donabedian, A., 'The Quality of Care: How Can It Be Assessed?' *JAMA* (1988) 260 1743.

86 *Cassidy v Ministry of Health* [1951] 2 KB 343; principles of hospital liability have persuasive value in Nigerian negligence jurisprudence.

preserving patients' rights to quality healthcare and effective legal remedies. The article analyses the principal sources of medical negligence claims in obstetric practice, evaluates relevant statutory provisions, judicial decisions, ethical regulations, and comparative international standards, and considers the impact of gender-specific workplace challenges on medico-legal exposure. It argues that reducing litigation requires a balanced legal framework that strengthens patient safety while simultaneously providing institutional support, effective risk management systems, professional indemnity protection, continuous medico-legal education, and workplace reforms responsive to the unique realities confronting female medical practitioners in Nigeria. Such reforms are essential not only for protecting healthcare professionals from unnecessary legal exposure but also for improving maternal healthcare outcomes and strengthening public confidence in Nigeria's healthcare system.

Legal Risks

The concept of *legal risk* refers to the possibility that an individual or institution may incur civil, criminal, administrative, or professional liability arising from the breach of a legal duty or failure to comply with statutory, regulatory, ethical, or contractual obligations.[87] Within the healthcare sector, legal risks encompass the potential exposure of medical practitioners and healthcare institutions to litigation, disciplinary proceedings, financial liability, reputational damage, and, in exceptional cases, criminal prosecution resulting from professional conduct or omissions in the course of medical practice.[88] Unlike ordinary occupational risks, legal risks arise where a patient's injury or loss is attributable to an alleged breach of the applicable standard of care, violation of statutory duties, infringement of patients' rights, or non-compliance with professional ethical standards.[89]

In Nigeria, legal risks confronting medical practitioners derive from multiple legal sources, including the common law of negligence, the National Health Act 2014, the Medical and Dental Practitioners Act, the Code of Medical Ethics in Nigeria, the Evidence Act 2011, constitutional guarantees relating to human dignity and access to justice, and judicial precedents governing professional liability.[90] Consequently, legal risks are not confined to successful negligence claims but extend to complaints before the Medical and Dental Practitioners Tribunal, coroners' inquests, regulatory investigations, criminal prosecutions involving gross negligence, employment disputes, and claims alleging violations of patients' fundamental rights.[91]

Modern healthcare governance recognises legal risk management as an integral component of patient safety and quality assurance. Rather than merely responding to litigation after adverse events occur, healthcare institutions are expected to identify, evaluate, and minimise legal exposure through effective clinical governance, documentation, informed consent procedures, continuous professional education, and institutional accountability mechanisms.[92]

Obstetrics and Gynaecology Practice

Obstetrics and gynaecology constitute specialised branches of medicine concerned respectively with pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum care, and disorders affecting the female reproductive system.[93]

87 Garner, B. A (ed), *Black's Law Dictionary*, 12th edn, Thomson Reuters, 2024.

88 World Health Organization, *Global Patient Safety Report 2024* (WHO 2024).

89 General Medical Council, *Good Medical Practice* (GMC 2024).

90 National Health Act 2014; Medical and Dental Practitioners Act, Cap M8, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (LFN) 2004; Evidence Act 2011.

91 *Medical and Dental Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal v Okonkwo* (2001) 7 NWLR (Pt 711) 206 (SC).

92 World Health Organization, *Global Patient Safety Action Plan 2021–2030* (WHO 2021).

93 World Health Organization, *Recommendations on Maternal and Newborn Care for a Positive Postnatal Experience* (WHO 2022).

Obstetrics primarily focuses on the medical and surgical management of pregnancy, labour, delivery, and maternal-fetal health, while gynaecology addresses the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of diseases affecting the female reproductive organs, including infertility, menstrual disorders, reproductive cancers, pelvic floor dysfunction, contraception, and menopausal conditions.[94] In contemporary clinical practice, both specialties are integrated because pregnancy-related care frequently overlaps with broader reproductive health services.

Obstetrics and gynaecology have long been recognised as among the highest-risk clinical specialties for professional liability worldwide. The specialty requires continuous clinical monitoring, rapid emergency decision-making, invasive surgical procedures, multidisciplinary collaboration, and simultaneous consideration of maternal and fetal wellbeing. Adverse outcomes such as maternal mortality, neonatal brain injury, postpartum haemorrhage, obstetric fistula, stillbirth, uterine rupture, birth asphyxia, and surgical complications may occur even where practitioners exercise reasonable care, yet such outcomes frequently become the subject of litigation because of the devastating consequences suffered by patients and their families.[95]

Within the Nigerian healthcare system, the legal risks associated with obstetric and gynaecological practice are intensified by systemic challenges including inadequate healthcare infrastructure, shortages of specialist personnel, delayed referrals, limited access to emergency obstetric care, insufficient diagnostic facilities, and resource constraints affecting both public and private healthcare institutions. These systemic deficiencies often complicate the determination of professional negligence because adverse clinical outcomes may result from institutional failures rather than individual professional incompetence.

Medical Negligence

Medical negligence is the failure of a healthcare professional to exercise the degree of knowledge, skill, competence, and care expected of a reasonably competent practitioner in similar circumstances, resulting in injury or damage to a patient.[96] It represents the application of the general law of negligence to professional medical practice and requires proof of four essential elements: the existence of a duty of care, breach of that duty, causation linking the breach to the injury sustained, and legally recognisable damage.[97]

Nigerian courts have consistently recognised that once a doctor-patient relationship is established, the medical practitioner assumes a legal duty to provide treatment in accordance with accepted professional standards.[98] The applicable standard of care is determined objectively by reference to what a reasonably competent practitioner possessing similar qualifications and experience would have done under comparable circumstances.[99] Accordingly, not every unsuccessful medical outcome constitutes negligence. Liability arises only where the practitioner fails to meet the legally acceptable standard of professional care.

Within obstetrics and gynaecology, medical negligence commonly arises from delayed Caesarean section, failure to recognise fetal distress, improper management of obstetric emergencies, medication

94 Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, *Standards for Women's Health Care* (RCOG, latest ed.).

95 World Health Organization, *Trends in Maternal Mortality 2000–2023* (WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and UNDESA 2024).

96 Charlesworth & Percy on Negligence, CUP, 2022

97 *Donoghue v Stevenson* [1932] AC 562 (HL); *Bolam v Friern Hospital Management Committee* [1957] 1 WLR 582.

98 *Ojo v Gharoro* (2006) 10 NWLR (Pt 987) 173 (SC).

99 *Bolitho v City and Hackney Health Authority* [1998] AC 232 (HL).

errors, negligent surgical procedures, failure to obtain informed consent, delayed diagnosis of reproductive diseases, inadequate antenatal monitoring, and deficient postnatal care.[100] However, courts increasingly recognise that unavoidable complications inherent in pregnancy and childbirth do not automatically establish negligence where the practitioner has exercised reasonable professional judgment consistent with accepted medical practice.[101]

Litigation in Medical Practice

Medical litigation refers to judicial or quasi-judicial proceedings instituted against healthcare professionals or healthcare institutions alleging breach of professional duties resulting in injury, disability, death, or violation of patients' legal rights.[102] Such proceedings may involve civil actions for damages, disciplinary proceedings before professional regulatory bodies, criminal prosecutions in exceptional cases involving gross negligence, or constitutional actions alleging infringement of fundamental rights.[103]

The principal objective of medical litigation extends beyond compensating injured patients. It also promotes professional accountability, encourages compliance with accepted standards of medical practice, deters negligent conduct, and reinforces public confidence in healthcare delivery.[104] Nevertheless, excessive litigation may generate unintended consequences, including defensive medicine, increased healthcare costs, physician burnout, reluctance to undertake high-risk procedures, and reduced availability of specialist obstetric services.[105] Modern legal scholarship therefore advocates a balanced approach that protects patients' rights while creating legal environments that enable competent practitioners to provide effective healthcare without undue fear of litigation.

Female Doctors

Female doctors are legally qualified medical practitioners who identify as women and are licensed to practise medicine in accordance with applicable professional regulatory requirements.[106] In the context of obstetrics and gynaecology, female practitioners constitute an increasingly significant proportion of the specialist workforce and make substantial contributions to maternal, neonatal, and reproductive healthcare in Nigeria.[107] Their growing representation reflects broader global trends toward gender diversity within the medical profession.

Notwithstanding these advances, female doctors frequently encounter workplace conditions that may indirectly increase their medico-legal vulnerability. Empirical studies identify challenges including gender discrimination, sexual harassment, unequal access to leadership opportunities, occupational stress, pregnancy-related career interruptions, inadequate mentoring, burnout, work-family conflicts, and disproportionate caregiving responsibilities.[108] These factors may adversely affect communication, decision-making, fatigue levels, and overall professional wellbeing, thereby increasing the possibility

100 Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, *Clinical Risk Management in Maternity Services* (latest ed.).

101 *Roe v Minister of Health* [1954] 2 QB 66.

102 Margaret Brazier and Emma Cave, *Medicine, Patients and the Law*, 7th edn, Manchester University Press 2023.

103 Medical and Dental Practitioners Act, ss 15–16.

104 World Medical Association, *International Code of Medical Ethics* (2022).

105 World Health Organization, *Patient Safety Rights Charter* (2024).

106 Medical and Dental Practitioners Act, Cap M8 LFN 2004.

107 Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria, *Annual Report* (latest available edition).

108 World Medical Association, *Statement on Women in Medicine and Healthcare Leadership* (2023).

of clinical errors capable of attracting legal claims. Although liability for medical negligence is determined by objective legal standards applicable to all practitioners irrespective of gender, institutional measures designed to address gender-specific workplace challenges remain essential for improving patient safety and reducing avoidable litigation.

Protecting Female Doctors from Litigation

Protection from litigation does not imply immunity from legal responsibility or exemption from professional accountability.[109] Rather, it encompasses the implementation of legal, institutional, professional, and administrative mechanisms aimed at reducing avoidable legal exposure while ensuring that patients continue to enjoy effective remedies for genuine medical negligence.[110] Such protective mechanisms include adherence to evidence-based clinical guidelines, effective informed consent procedures, comprehensive medical documentation, continuing professional development, hospital risk management systems, multidisciplinary teamwork, professional indemnity insurance, alternative dispute resolution, institutional legal support, and compliance with ethical obligations governing medical practice.

For female obstetricians and gynaecologists, litigation prevention further requires workplace policies addressing excessive workload, discriminatory employment practices, workplace harassment, inadequate staffing, occupational burnout, maternity-related career interruptions, and limited institutional support.[111] Strengthening these protective measures enhances clinical performance, promotes professional wellbeing, and contributes to safer maternal healthcare delivery. Accordingly, protecting female doctors from litigation should be understood not as shielding negligent practitioners from accountability but as fostering legal and institutional conditions that minimise preventable errors while preserving both patient safety and professional integrity.

Intersection between Medical Negligence Law, Professional Liability, and the Unique Vulnerabilities of Female Doctors within Nigeria's Healthcare System

Medical negligence law and professional liability constitute the principal legal mechanisms through which healthcare practitioners are held accountable for injuries resulting from substandard medical care. In Nigeria, these doctrines operate within a framework derived from the common law of negligence, statutory regulation, professional ethical standards, and judicial precedent.[112] Their primary objective is to balance the protection of patients' rights with the preservation of professional autonomy and the delivery of quality healthcare. However, the application of these legal principles cannot be divorced from the realities of the healthcare environment in which medical practitioners operate. Female doctors, particularly those practising obstetrics and gynaecology, often function within institutional and socio-cultural contexts that expose them to additional occupational pressures capable of increasing both clinical risk and medico-legal vulnerability.[113]

109 National Health Act 2014.

110 World Health Organization, *Global Patient Safety Action Plan 2021–2030* (WHO 2021).

111 International Labour Organization, *Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No 190)*; World Health Organization, *Health Workforce Support and Safeguards* (2023).

112 National Health Act 2014; Medical and Dental Practitioners Act, Cap M8, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (LFN) 2004; *Ojo v Gharoro* (2006) 10 NWLR (Pt 987) 173 (SC).

113 World Health Organization, *Global Patient Safety Action Plan 2021–2030* (WHO 2021).

Under Nigerian law, a medical practitioner owes every patient a duty to exercise the degree of skill, competence, and care expected of a reasonably qualified practitioner in similar circumstances.[114] Liability arises where the practitioner breaches that duty and the breach proximately causes injury to the patient.[115] Nigerian courts have consistently recognised that medicine is not an exact science and that liability does not arise merely because treatment proves unsuccessful. Rather, negligence is established only where the practitioner falls below the accepted professional standard of care.[116] This objective standard applies equally to all medical practitioners irrespective of gender. Nevertheless, the practical circumstances within which female doctors discharge their professional duties may influence their exposure to litigation, even though gender itself is not a legal determinant of liability.

Professional liability extends beyond civil claims for negligence. A female doctor may simultaneously face disciplinary proceedings before the Medical and Dental Practitioners Tribunal, administrative sanctions imposed by her employer, coroners' investigations following maternal deaths, criminal proceedings in cases involving gross negligence, and reputational consequences affecting career progression.[117] The multiplicity of these potential liabilities means that an adverse obstetric outcome may trigger overlapping legal, professional, regulatory, and institutional processes. Consequently, the burden of professional accountability extends far beyond the payment of civil damages.

Obstetrics and gynaecology present unique medico-legal challenges because clinical decisions frequently involve emergency situations requiring immediate intervention to protect both maternal and fetal life.[118] Decisions concerning emergency caesarean sections, postpartum haemorrhage, eclampsia, obstructed labour, fetal distress, and ectopic pregnancy often must be made within minutes and under conditions of significant uncertainty. Although adverse outcomes may result from unavoidable clinical complications, dissatisfied patients or relatives frequently attribute such outcomes to professional negligence.[119] This environment places practitioners under considerable legal pressure and contributes to the high incidence of litigation associated with obstetric practice worldwide.

For female doctors, these ordinary medico-legal risks intersect with workplace conditions that are often gender-specific. Although Nigeria has witnessed a significant increase in the number of women entering medical practice, female physicians continue to encounter structural barriers including gender stereotyping, workplace discrimination, limited representation in hospital leadership, unequal opportunities for promotion, inadequate mentoring, and implicit bias in performance evaluation.[120] These institutional inequalities may not directly constitute grounds for negligence liability, but they create working conditions capable of affecting professional performance, decision-making, and psychological wellbeing.

One of the most significant vulnerabilities confronting female doctors is excessive workload resulting from the dual demands of professional practice and socially assigned caregiving responsibilities.[121] In many Nigerian households, women continue to shoulder primary responsibility for childcare, family

114 *Donoghue v Stevenson* [1932] AC 562 (HL).

115 *Bolam v Friern Hospital Management Committee* [1957] 1 WLR 582.

116 *Bolitho v City and Hackney Health Authority* [1998] AC 232 (HL); *Ojo v Gharoro* (2006) 10 NWLR (Pt 987) 173 (SC).

117 Medical and Dental Practitioners Act, ss 15–16.

118 World Health Organization, *Standards for Improving Quality of Maternal and Newborn Care in Health Facilities* (WHO 2016).

119 Brazier, M and Cave, E., *Medicine, Patients and the Law*, 7th edn, Manchester University Press, 2023.

120 World Medical Association, *Statement on Women in Medicine and Healthcare Leadership* (2023).

121 International Labour Organization, *Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No 190)*.

care, and domestic management notwithstanding their full-time professional commitments. The cumulative effect of prolonged working hours, emergency night duties, pregnancy-related responsibilities, and domestic obligations may contribute to fatigue, burnout, sleep deprivation, and emotional exhaustion. Contemporary patient-safety literature identifies these conditions as recognised contributors to communication failures, reduced concentration, delayed clinical judgment, and avoidable medical errors capable of generating professional liability.[122]

The problem is particularly pronounced in obstetrics and gynaecology because emergencies frequently occur outside normal working hours. Female consultants and resident doctors may be required to perform complex surgical procedures after extended periods of continuous duty while simultaneously balancing family responsibilities. Chronic fatigue has been associated with diminished cognitive performance, impaired clinical decision-making, and increased risk of adverse events, thereby indirectly increasing exposure to negligence claims. Importantly, however, the law generally evaluates conduct according to the objective standard of the reasonable practitioner rather than the personal circumstances of the individual doctor. Consequently, occupational stress or excessive workload seldom constitutes a legal defence to negligence, thereby highlighting the importance of institutional responsibility for maintaining safe staffing levels.

Another important intersection concerns informed consent and communication. Nigerian courts increasingly recognise the patient's right to receive adequate information regarding diagnosis, treatment options, material risks, alternatives, and likely outcomes before consenting to medical procedures.[123] Effective communication is therefore both an ethical obligation and a legal safeguard against litigation. Female doctors frequently report experiencing communication challenges arising from excessive patient loads, inadequate consultation time, language barriers, and cultural expectations surrounding reproductive health.[124] In obstetric practice, misunderstandings regarding emergency interventions, infertility treatment, sterilisation procedures, or pregnancy complications may subsequently form the basis of negligence actions alleging failure to obtain valid informed consent. Comprehensive documentation of consent discussions therefore assumes particular legal significance.

Workplace harassment and gender-based violence also constitute significant but often overlooked contributors to medico-legal vulnerability. Reports of sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation, and hostile working environments within healthcare institutions have attracted increasing scholarly attention globally and within Nigeria.[125] Such conduct may undermine professional confidence, impair teamwork, discourage junior female doctors from seeking supervisory assistance during emergencies, and contribute to errors in clinical management. Since multidisciplinary communication is fundamental to safe obstetric practice, institutional cultures that discourage open communication may indirectly increase both patient harm and professional liability.

Resource limitations within the Nigerian healthcare system further complicate the relationship between negligence law and professional responsibility. Many public hospitals continue to experience shortages of essential drugs, blood products, monitoring equipment, intensive care facilities, theatre space, and

122 World Health Organization, *Global Patient Safety Report 2024* (WHO 2024).

123 *Medical and Dental Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal v Okonkwo* (2001) 7 NWLR (Pt 711) 206 (SC); National Health Act 2014, ss 23–26.

124 World Health Organization, *Quality of Care for Maternal and Newborn Health* (WHO 2023).

125 International Labour Organization, *Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No 190);* World Medical Association, *Statement on Women in Medicine* (2023).

specialist personnel.[126] Female obstetricians frequently provide care under circumstances in which institutional deficiencies rather than individual incompetence determine clinical outcomes. While courts have acknowledged that surrounding circumstances are relevant when evaluating professional conduct, the legal distinction between institutional negligence and individual negligence remains insufficiently developed in Nigerian jurisprudence.[127] Consequently, practitioners may bear significant litigation risks arising from systemic failures beyond their personal control.

Professional liability also intersects with mental health and physician wellbeing. Increasing evidence demonstrates that repeated exposure to maternal deaths, neonatal losses, traumatic deliveries, litigation threats, and professional complaints contributes to anxiety, depression, burnout, and psychological distress among obstetricians and gynaecologists. Female doctors may experience these pressures more acutely because of additional workplace and family responsibilities. Fear of litigation may encourage defensive medicine, characterised by unnecessary diagnostic investigations, excessive referrals, avoidance of high-risk patients, or preference for caesarean delivery over vaginal birth primarily to minimise legal exposure rather than optimise clinical outcomes.[128] Such practices increase healthcare costs while potentially compromising evidence-based patient care.

Professional indemnity insurance represents another important point of intersection between medical negligence law and professional protection. Although professional indemnity coverage is increasingly recognised internationally as an essential component of medical practice, awareness and utilisation remain inconsistent among Nigerian healthcare practitioners.[129] Female doctors working in private practice or smaller healthcare facilities may possess inadequate insurance protection, thereby exposing personal assets to potential negligence claims. Comprehensive indemnity coverage, coupled with institutional legal support, provides an important safeguard against the financial consequences of litigation without diminishing professional accountability.

The Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria's Code of Medical Ethics emphasises competence, continuous professional development, confidentiality, documentation, informed consent, collegiality, and respect for patients' rights as core professional obligations. Compliance with these ethical standards significantly reduces legal exposure because courts frequently rely upon accepted professional practice when determining whether negligence has occurred. Continuous medico-legal education is therefore particularly important for female doctors practising in high-risk specialties such as obstetrics and gynaecology, where evolving legal standards increasingly require meticulous documentation, effective communication, adherence to clinical guidelines, and prompt recognition of obstetric emergencies.

Ultimately, the intersection between medical negligence law, professional liability, and the unique vulnerabilities of female doctors demonstrates that medico-legal exposure is influenced not only by individual professional conduct but also by broader institutional, organisational, and socio-cultural factors. A legal framework focused exclusively on individual fault is insufficient to address the realities of contemporary healthcare delivery. Protecting female doctors from avoidable litigation therefore requires an integrated approach combining effective clinical governance, adequate staffing, institutional risk management, gender-sensitive workplace policies, professional indemnity insurance, continuous medico-legal education, and judicial recognition of the systemic conditions under which healthcare is

126 Federal Ministry of Health, *National Strategic Health Development Plan II* (Abuja).

127 *Cassidy v Ministry of Health* [1951] 2 KB 343.

128 World Health Organization, *Health Workforce Support and Safeguards* (2023); World Medical Association, *International Code of Medical Ethics* (2022).

129 Medical Protection Society, *Annual Review of Claims and Risk Management* (latest ed.).

delivered. Such an approach preserves patient rights while promoting a safer, fairer, and more sustainable healthcare system for practitioners and patients alike.[130]

Legal Risks Confronting Female Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in Nigeria

Obstetrics and gynaecology constitute one of the most litigation-prone medical specialties because practitioners routinely manage pregnancies, childbirth, reproductive health conditions, and gynaecological surgeries involving significant risks to both maternal and fetal life.[131] The complexity of clinical decision-making, coupled with the unpredictability of obstetric emergencies and heightened public expectations of successful outcomes, exposes practitioners to substantial legal risks. In Nigeria, female obstetricians and gynaecologists encounter not only the general medico-legal risks associated with their specialty but also additional vulnerabilities arising from systemic deficiencies within the healthcare sector and gender-related workplace challenges.[132] These legal risks manifest in civil liability, professional disciplinary proceedings, criminal prosecution in exceptional circumstances, constitutional claims, employment disputes, and reputational damage.

Medical Negligence Claims

The most significant legal risk confronting female obstetricians and gynaecologists in Nigeria is civil liability for medical negligence. Under Nigerian law, once a doctor-patient relationship is established, the practitioner owes a duty to exercise the degree of care, skill, and competence expected of a reasonably qualified specialist practising under similar circumstances.[133] A claimant alleging negligence must establish the existence of a duty of care, breach of that duty, causation, and resulting damage.[134]

In obstetric practice, negligence claims frequently arise from delayed diagnosis of fetal distress, failure to perform timely emergency caesarean section, mismanagement of postpartum haemorrhage, negligent administration of oxytocin, delayed referral of high-risk pregnancies, failure to diagnose ectopic pregnancy, retained surgical instruments, anaesthetic complications, and inadequate monitoring during labour.[135] Adverse outcomes such as maternal mortality, cerebral palsy, stillbirth, uterine rupture, neonatal asphyxia, and permanent reproductive injury often form the basis of malpractice litigation.[136] Although many of these complications may occur despite competent medical care, dissatisfied patients or bereaved families increasingly seek judicial redress where they perceive deficiencies in clinical management.

The Supreme Court of Nigeria has affirmed that healthcare practitioners are expected to possess and exercise the knowledge and skill ordinarily possessed by reasonably competent members of the profession.[137] Nevertheless, courts have equally recognised that medicine is not an exact science and that liability cannot be imposed merely because treatment fails to achieve the desired outcome.[138] The

130 World Health Organization, *Global Patient Safety Action Plan 2021–2030* (WHO 2021).

131 World Health Organization, *Standards for Improving Quality of Maternal and Newborn Care in Health Facilities* (WHO 2016).

132 World Medical Association, *Statement on Women in Medicine and Healthcare Leadership* (2023).

133 *Ojo v Gharoro* (2006) 10 NWLR (Pt 987) 173 (SC).

134 *Donoghue v Stevenson* [1932] AC 562 (HL); *Bolam v Friern Hospital Management Committee* [1957] 1 WLR 582.

135 Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, *Clinical Risk Management in Maternity Services* (latest ed. 2025).

136 World Health Organization, *Trends in Maternal Mortality 2000–2023* (2024).

137 *Ojo v Gharoro* (2006) 10 NWLR (Pt 987) 173 (SC).

138 *Bolitho v City and Hackney Health Authority* [1998] AC 232 (HL).

legal challenge for female practitioners therefore lies in demonstrating that accepted professional standards were observed despite an unfavourable clinical outcome.

Liability Arising from Failure to Obtain Informed Consent

The doctrine of informed consent has become one of the most significant sources of medico-legal liability in contemporary medical practice. Nigerian law recognises every competent patient's right to receive adequate information regarding diagnosis, proposed treatment, available alternatives, foreseeable risks, expected benefits, and the consequences of refusing treatment before consenting to medical intervention.[139] The National Health Act 2014 expressly guarantees this right and requires healthcare providers to obtain informed consent except in recognised emergencies.[140]

Obstetrics and gynaecology present numerous situations where informed consent assumes exceptional legal importance, including emergency caesarean sections, hysterectomy, sterilisation, infertility treatment, assisted reproductive technologies, blood transfusion, termination of pregnancy where legally permissible, and major gynaecological surgery.[141] Failure to explain material risks or to document consent adequately may expose practitioners to negligence claims even where the actual medical procedure is competently performed.[142] Female obstetricians often work under intense time pressure during obstetric emergencies, making meticulous documentation of consent discussions indispensable for legal protection.

Professional Disciplinary Liability

Apart from civil litigation, female obstetricians and gynaecologists are exposed to professional disciplinary proceedings under the Medical and Dental Practitioners Act.[143] Allegations of infamous conduct in a professional respect, unethical behaviour, incompetence, breach of confidentiality, improper relationship with patients, falsification of medical records, or failure to comply with the Code of Medical Ethics may result in investigation by the Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria and adjudication before the Medical and Dental Practitioners Tribunal.[144] Sanctions may include suspension, erasure from the medical register, reprimand, mandatory retraining, or other disciplinary measures depending on the gravity of the misconduct.[145]

Professional disciplinary proceedings differ from civil negligence claims because they focus primarily on professional standards rather than compensation. Nevertheless, findings made during disciplinary investigations may significantly influence subsequent civil litigation and adversely affect professional reputation and career progression.

Criminal Liability

Although medical negligence ordinarily gives rise to civil rather than criminal liability, Nigerian law recognises circumstances in which gross negligence or recklessness may attract criminal responsibility.[146] Where a practitioner's conduct demonstrates a reckless disregard for human life or

139 *Medical and Dental Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal v Okonkwo* (2001) 7 NWLR (Pt 711) 206 (SC).

140 National Health Act 2014, ss 23–26.

141 Code of Medical Ethics in Nigeria (Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria, latest revised ed. 2024).

142 *Montgomery v Lanarkshire Health Board* [2015] UKSC 11 (persuasive authority).

143 Medical and Dental Practitioners Act, Cap M8 LFN 2004.

144 Ibid, ss 15–16.

145 Ibid.

146 Criminal Code Act, Cap C38 LFN 2004.

safety resulting in death or grievous bodily harm, criminal prosecution may be instituted under the Criminal Code or Penal Code, depending on the applicable jurisdiction.[147]

Examples capable of attracting criminal investigation include abandonment of patients requiring emergency care, administration of contraindicated medication with reckless disregard for established protocols, intentional falsification of medical records, unlawful termination of pregnancy outside statutory exceptions, and deliberate refusal to provide emergency treatment contrary to statutory obligations.[148] Although criminal prosecutions of obstetricians remain relatively uncommon in Nigeria, the possibility of criminal investigation following maternal deaths or highly publicised adverse obstetric outcomes constitutes a significant legal risk.

Liability for Poor Medical Documentation

Proper medical documentation constitutes one of the strongest legal safeguards available to medical practitioners. Medical records provide contemporaneous evidence of clinical observations, diagnostic reasoning, treatment decisions, informed consent, medication administered, referrals made, and communications with patients and relatives.[149] In negligence litigation, courts frequently regard contemporaneous medical records as more reliable than oral testimony given years after the events in dispute.

Female obstetricians and gynaecologists frequently manage large patient volumes within resource-constrained environments, leaving limited time for comprehensive documentation. Incomplete labour records, missing operative notes, inadequate documentation of fetal monitoring, undocumented consent discussions, or alteration of patient records after adverse outcomes may significantly weaken the practitioner's legal defence. Poor documentation may itself be interpreted as evidence of professional negligence or breach of ethical obligations.

Liability Arising from Emergency Obstetric Care

Emergency obstetric care presents some of the greatest medico-legal challenges confronting female practitioners. Conditions such as eclampsia, obstructed labour, placental abruption, uterine rupture, postpartum haemorrhage, cord prolapse, fetal distress, and severe sepsis require immediate intervention.[150] Delays in diagnosis, referral, surgical intervention, or blood transfusion may result in catastrophic maternal or neonatal outcomes.

The legal difficulty lies in distinguishing negligence from unavoidable complications occurring within resource-limited healthcare environments. Nigerian hospitals frequently experience shortages of blood products, theatre space, intensive care facilities, specialist personnel, electricity, and essential equipment.[151] Although these institutional deficiencies may contribute significantly to adverse outcomes, litigation frequently focuses on the conduct of the attending physician rather than systemic failures. Consequently, female obstetricians may bear substantial litigation risks arising partly from circumstances beyond their direct control.

Liability Associated with Reproductive Health Services

Modern obstetrics and gynaecology encompass a broad range of reproductive health services, including infertility management, assisted reproductive technologies, family planning, cervical cancer screening,

147 Ibid.

148 National Health Act 2014, s 20.

149 Evidence Act 2011.

150 WHO, *Managing Complications in Pregnancy and Childbirth* (latest ed. 2024).

151 Federal Ministry of Health, *National Policy on Quality of Care* (2023).

menopausal care, and management of gynaecological malignancies. Each of these services presents unique legal challenges.

Infertility treatment may generate claims relating to negligent diagnosis, unsuccessful assisted reproductive procedures, loss of reproductive material, or inadequate counselling regarding treatment outcomes.[152] Surgical management of fibroids, ovarian cysts, endometriosis, and pelvic organ prolapse similarly carries risks of injury to adjacent organs, haemorrhage, infertility, and postoperative complications. Failure to disclose foreseeable risks or to adhere to accepted clinical protocols may expose practitioners to negligence actions.

Constitutional and Human Rights Claims

Medical practice increasingly intersects with constitutional and human rights law. The National Health Act 2014 guarantees patients' rights relating to informed consent, confidentiality, dignity, emergency treatment, and access to information.[153] Furthermore, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, domesticated in Nigeria, protects the rights to life, dignity, health, and access to justice.[154]

Where allegations involve denial of emergency obstetric care, discriminatory treatment, or violations of reproductive rights, female obstetricians and healthcare institutions may become defendants in constitutional or human rights litigation alongside conventional negligence claims.[155] Such proceedings may involve declaratory relief, compensation, and judicial orders requiring institutional reforms.

Employment-Related Legal Risks

Female obstetricians also face employment-related legal risks arising from workplace discrimination, maternity-related disputes, sexual harassment, unequal opportunities for promotion, occupational health concerns, and unsafe working conditions.[156] Although these matters are distinct from medical negligence, they may indirectly affect clinical performance and expose practitioners to additional legal proceedings before the National Industrial Court or other competent tribunals.

Long working hours, inadequate staffing, compulsory overnight duties during pregnancy, and insufficient institutional support contribute to occupational burnout among female doctors.[157] Burnout has been recognised internationally as a patient-safety concern because it increases the likelihood of communication failures, diagnostic errors, impaired decision-making, and adverse clinical events capable of resulting in litigation.[158] Addressing these workplace challenges therefore serves both labour law objectives and patient safety goals.

Reputational and Professional Risks

Beyond formal legal liability, female obstetricians increasingly face reputational risks associated with adverse media publicity and social media scrutiny. High-profile maternal deaths or neonatal injuries frequently attract widespread public attention before formal investigations establish the facts.[159]

152 Brazier and Cave, *Medicine, Patients and the Law* (7th edn, 2023).

153 National Health Act 2014.

154 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Ratification and Enforcement) Act, Cap A9 LFN 2004.

155 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended); African Charter Act.

156 International Labour Organization, Convention No 190 (2019).

157 WHO, *Health Workforce Support and Safeguards* (2023).

158 WHO, *Global Patient Safety Report 2024*.

159 World Medical Association, *International Code of Medical Ethics* (2022).

Allegations circulated through digital media may seriously damage professional reputation, reduce patient confidence, affect referral patterns, and expose practitioners to psychological distress irrespective of the eventual outcome of litigation.

The preservation of professional reputation has therefore become an important aspect of medico-legal risk management. Prompt institutional investigation, transparent communication with affected families, adherence to ethical standards, accurate documentation, and appropriate legal representation remain essential measures for mitigating reputational harm following adverse clinical events.

The legal risks confronting female obstetricians and gynaecologists in Nigeria are multidimensional, extending beyond ordinary negligence claims to encompass professional discipline, criminal liability, constitutional litigation, employment disputes, and reputational damage. While the substantive legal standards governing professional liability apply equally to all medical practitioners, female doctors frequently practise within institutional environments characterised by workforce shortages, inadequate infrastructure, gender-based workplace challenges, and increasing patient awareness of legal rights. Effective mitigation of these risks requires strict compliance with professional standards, meticulous documentation, informed consent, continuous medico-legal education, adequate professional indemnity insurance, institutional risk management systems, and gender-responsive workplace reforms. Such measures will enhance patient safety while ensuring that competent female practitioners are protected from avoidable legal exposure without compromising professional accountability.[160]

Adequacy of the Existing Legal and Regulatory Framework Governing Professional Liability

The legal and regulatory framework governing professional liability in Nigeria comprises constitutional provisions, statutory enactments, judicial precedents, professional ethical rules, and institutional regulatory mechanisms designed to promote accountability within the medical profession while safeguarding patients' rights. Collectively, these legal instruments establish the standards of professional conduct expected of healthcare practitioners, prescribe disciplinary procedures for professional misconduct, and provide remedies for patients who suffer injury as a result of negligent medical care. Although the existing framework contains many of the essential elements of a modern medico-legal system, significant deficiencies remain in its implementation, enforcement, and adaptation to contemporary healthcare challenges, particularly those affecting female obstetricians and gynaecologists practising within resource-constrained environments. Consequently, the adequacy of the framework must be assessed not merely by the existence of legal rules but by their effectiveness in balancing patient protection with fair treatment of healthcare professionals.

Constitutional Framework

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) does not expressly create an enforceable fundamental right to healthcare. Nevertheless, several constitutional provisions provide indirect protection relevant to professional liability. *Section 17(3)(d)* places an obligation upon the State to ensure adequate medical and health facilities for all persons, while sections *33 and 34* protect the rights to life and human dignity respectively. Although the provisions contained in Chapter II of the Constitution are generally non-justiciable by virtue of *section 6(6)(c),* Nigerian courts have increasingly interpreted the rights to life and dignity in a manner that reinforces the obligation of healthcare providers to deliver competent medical services consistent with accepted professional standards.[161]

160 WHO, *Global Patient Safety Action Plan 2021–2030* (2021).

161 *Medical and Dental Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal v Okonkwo* (2001) 7 NWLR (Pt 711) 206 (SC).

The constitutional framework therefore provides an important normative foundation for patient protection. However, its practical contribution to professional liability remains limited because the principal constitutional obligation to provide healthcare rests upon the State rather than individual practitioners. Furthermore, the absence of an expressly enforceable constitutional right to health restricts judicial oversight of systemic healthcare deficiencies that frequently contribute to adverse clinical outcomes in obstetric practice.[162] Consequently, litigation often focuses on the conduct of individual doctors while institutional failures receive comparatively limited judicial attention.

National Health Act 2014

The National Health Act 2014 represents Nigeria's most comprehensive legislative framework regulating healthcare delivery and patient rights. The Act establishes fundamental principles governing informed consent, confidentiality, emergency medical treatment, access to health information, referral procedures, and the rights and duties of healthcare providers.[163] Sections 20 to 23 impose legal obligations requiring healthcare providers to obtain informed consent before treatment except where statutory exceptions apply, while section 27 guarantees patients' rights to confidentiality and access to medical information.

The Act significantly strengthens patient protection by codifying legal duties that previously depended largely upon common law principles. In particular, the statutory recognition of informed consent has enhanced professional accountability by requiring practitioners to communicate material information before undertaking medical intervention.[164] This development is especially significant in obstetrics and gynaecology where disputes frequently arise concerning emergency caesarean sections, sterilisation, hysterectomy, infertility treatment, blood transfusion, and other reproductive health procedures.

Despite these advances, the National Health Act contains notable limitations. The legislation does not comprehensively address professional indemnity insurance, clinical risk management, mandatory incident reporting, patient safety systems, or institutional liability arising from inadequate staffing and deficient infrastructure.[165] Furthermore, implementation remains inconsistent because many healthcare institutions lack sufficient awareness, administrative capacity, and financial resources to ensure full compliance with statutory obligations.

Medical and Dental Practitioners Act

The Medical and Dental Practitioners Act constitutes the principal legislation regulating the licensing, registration, discipline, and professional conduct of medical practitioners in Nigeria.[166] The Act establishes the Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria (MDCN) and empowers it to regulate professional standards, accredit medical education, investigate allegations of professional misconduct, and discipline practitioners found guilty of infamous conduct in a professional respect.

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162 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Ratification and Enforcement) Act, Cap A9 LFN 2004.

163 National Health Act 2014.

164 *Medical and Dental Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal v Okonkwo* (*supra*).

165 World Health Organization, *Global Patient Safety Report 2024* (WHO 2024).

166 Medical and Dental Practitioners Act, Cap M8 LFN 2004.

The disciplinary jurisdiction of the Medical and Dental Practitioners Tribunal provides an important mechanism for maintaining professional accountability independently of ordinary civil litigation.[167] Unlike negligence actions instituted by private claimants, disciplinary proceedings focus primarily upon whether the practitioner has complied with accepted ethical and professional standards. Available sanctions include suspension from practice, erasure from the register, reprimand, and mandatory retraining depending upon the seriousness of the misconduct.[168]

Notwithstanding these strengths, concerns persist regarding delays in disciplinary proceedings, limited public awareness of complaint mechanisms, inadequate institutional capacity, and the absence of detailed statutory guidance regarding contemporary medico-legal issues such as electronic health records, telemedicine, artificial intelligence, multidisciplinary liability, and systemic clinical governance.[169] The Act also places primary emphasis upon individual professional responsibility while providing comparatively limited regulation of institutional accountability within public and private healthcare facilities.

Code of Medical Ethics in Nigeria

The Code of Medical Ethics issued by the Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria supplements statutory regulation by prescribing detailed ethical obligations governing medical practice. The Code regulates competence, confidentiality, professional relationships, informed consent, record keeping, communication with patients, emergency treatment, advertising, research ethics, and professional integrity.[170] Nigerian courts and disciplinary bodies frequently rely upon the Code when determining whether a practitioner's conduct satisfies accepted professional standards.

For obstetricians and gynaecologists, the Code provides valuable guidance concerning reproductive health services, confidentiality, emergency care, patient autonomy, and documentation. Compliance with these ethical obligations substantially reduces exposure to professional liability because meticulous documentation, effective communication, and adherence to accepted clinical standards frequently determine the outcome of negligence litigation.[171]

Nevertheless, ethical codes possess inherent limitations. Although disciplinary bodies may enforce compliance, the Code does not itself create independent civil causes of action nor does it comprehensively address gender-specific workplace challenges confronting female practitioners, including workplace harassment, excessive workload, occupational burnout, discriminatory employment practices, and institutional support mechanisms capable of reducing medico-legal risk.[172]

Common Law of Negligence

The Nigerian law of professional negligence derives substantially from English common law principles adopted through judicial precedent. The essential elements of medical negligence include the existence of a duty of care, breach of that duty, causation, and legally recognisable damage.[173] Nigerian courts

167 ibid ss 15–16.

168 Ibid.

169 Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria, *Code of Medical Ethics in Nigeria* (*supra*).

170 Ibid.

171 *Ojo v Gharoro* (2006) 10 NWLR (Pt 987) 173 (SC).

172 World Medical Association, *Statement on Women in Medicine and Healthcare Leadership* (2023).

173 *Donoghue v Stevenson* [1932] AC 562 (HL); *Bolam v Friern Hospital Management Committee* [1957] 1 WLR 582.

have consistently applied these principles in determining professional liability while recognising that healthcare practitioners are not insurers of successful medical outcomes.[174]

The objective standard of the reasonably competent practitioner provides an important safeguard against unfair liability because negligence is determined according to accepted professional practice rather than retrospective evaluation of adverse clinical outcomes.[175] This approach protects doctors from liability arising solely because treatment proves unsuccessful, particularly within high-risk specialties such as obstetrics and gynaecology where complications frequently occur despite appropriate clinical management.

However, continued reliance upon traditional common law principles presents certain limitations. Much of Nigerian negligence jurisprudence evolved before the emergence of contemporary patient-centred healthcare, evidence-based medicine, electronic health records, and modern clinical governance systems.[176] Furthermore, judicial analysis frequently concentrates upon individual practitioner conduct while giving insufficient consideration to institutional failures including inadequate staffing, deficient equipment, delayed referrals, and systemic resource constraints that substantially influence clinical outcomes in Nigerian hospitals.

The Evidence Act 2011

The Evidence Act 2011 performs an essential function within the professional liability framework by regulating the admissibility and evaluation of evidence in medical negligence litigation. Medical records, expert testimony, hospital documents, electronic records, radiological reports, laboratory investigations, and digital communications constitute critical evidentiary materials in determining whether the applicable standard of care has been satisfied.

The statutory recognition of electronic evidence under section 84 has significantly improved the ability of healthcare institutions to rely upon electronically generated medical records where appropriate certification requirements are fulfilled. This development is particularly relevant given the increasing adoption of electronic hospital information systems. Nevertheless, inconsistent implementation of electronic record systems across Nigerian healthcare institutions limits the practical effectiveness of these evidentiary reforms.

Judicial Development of Professional Liability

Nigerian appellate courts have made significant contributions to the development of professional liability through judicial interpretation of negligence principles and patients' rights. Decisions of the Supreme Court have affirmed that doctors owe enforceable duties of care to their patients and have recognised informed consent, confidentiality, and adherence to accepted professional standards as essential components of lawful medical practice.[177] These judicial developments have strengthened patient protection while clarifying the legal obligations imposed upon healthcare professionals.

Despite these positive developments, relatively few reported appellate decisions concern complex obstetric negligence, resulting in limited judicial guidance on issues such as delayed caesarean delivery, fetal monitoring, institutional negligence, multidisciplinary liability, and emergency obstetric decision-

174 *Ojo v Gharoro* (*supra*).

175 *Bolitho v City and Hackney Health Authority* [1998] AC 232 (HL).

176 See, Brazier, M. and Cave, E., *Medicine, Patients and the Law* (*supra*).

177 *See, Medical and Dental Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal v Okonkwo* (n 4); *Ojo v Gharoro* (*supra*).

making.[178] Consequently, trial courts frequently rely upon persuasive foreign authorities, particularly from the United Kingdom, when addressing novel medico-legal questions.

Institutional and Regulatory Challenges

The effectiveness of Nigeria's professional liability framework is substantially undermined by institutional deficiencies within the healthcare sector. Many hospitals continue to experience shortages of specialist personnel, inadequate diagnostic facilities, insufficient blood supplies, obsolete equipment, overcrowded maternity units, and inconsistent implementation of clinical governance systems.[179] Female obstetricians often provide care under circumstances where institutional shortcomings significantly influence patient outcomes.

Existing legislation inadequately addresses the allocation of responsibility between individual practitioners and healthcare institutions. Although hospitals may incur vicarious liability for the negligence of their employees, Nigerian law contains limited statutory guidance regarding institutional duties relating to staffing ratios, clinical risk management, mandatory patient-safety reporting, workplace wellbeing, or organisational responsibility for preventable adverse events.[180] This legislative gap disproportionately affects practitioners working within poorly resourced public healthcare facilities.

Adequacy of the framework in protecting female Obstetricians and Gynaecologists

From the perspective of female obstetricians and gynaecologists, the present legal framework demonstrates both strengths and significant shortcomings. It provides clear rules governing professional competence, informed consent, confidentiality, ethical conduct, and disciplinary accountability.[181] These rules contribute substantially to patient protection and professional regulation.

However, the framework remains largely gender-neutral and therefore insufficiently responsive to the practical realities confronting female practitioners. Neither the National Health Act nor the Medical and Dental Practitioners Act expressly addresses workplace discrimination, occupational burnout, maternity-related employment issues, workplace harassment, psychological support following adverse clinical events, or institutional measures designed to minimise litigation risks associated with excessive workloads. Contemporary research increasingly demonstrates that these factors influence patient safety and clinical performance, particularly within demanding specialties such as obstetrics and gynaecology.

Similarly, Nigerian legislation does not impose comprehensive statutory obligations requiring healthcare institutions to maintain robust clinical risk management systems, mandatory professional indemnity insurance, regular simulation training, confidential incident reporting, or structured medico-legal education programmes. Such measures have become integral components of patient-safety frameworks in many jurisdictions and have contributed significantly to reducing preventable medical errors and professional liability.[182]

Overall, the Nigerian legal and regulatory framework governing professional liability provides a reasonably sound doctrinal foundation for regulating medical practice and protecting patients' rights. The combined operation of the Constitution, the National Health Act 2014, the Medical and Dental

178 Brazier and Cave (*supra*).

179 Federal Ministry of Health, *National Strategic Health Development Plan II*.

180 *Cassidy v Ministry of Health* [1951] 2 KB 343 (persuasive).

181 Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria, *Code of Medical Ethics in Nigeria*.

182 World Health Organization, *Global Patient Safety Action Plan 2021–2030.*

Practitioners Act, the Code of Medical Ethics, the Evidence Act 2011, and judicial precedent establishes a coherent legal structure capable of addressing conventional medical negligence disputes.

Nevertheless, the framework remains only partially adequate in responding to the realities of contemporary obstetric practice. Its principal weaknesses lie not in the absence of legal rules but in deficiencies relating to implementation, institutional capacity, healthcare funding, regulatory enforcement, gender responsiveness, and adaptation to evolving patient-safety standards. Legislative reform should therefore prioritise mandatory clinical governance systems, professional indemnity insurance, institutional accountability for systemic failures, protection of healthcare workers' wellbeing, electronic health record regulation, and gender-sensitive workplace policies. Such reforms would strengthen patient protection while ensuring that competent female obstetricians and gynaecologists are not unfairly exposed to avoidable professional liability arising from systemic deficiencies beyond their personal control.

Conclusion

Obstetrics and gynaecology remain among the most legally demanding and professionally challenging areas of medical practice because they involve the protection of two lives simultaneously while requiring rapid clinical decision-making in circumstances where adverse outcomes may occur despite adherence to accepted medical standards. In Nigeria, the increasing awareness of patients' rights, expanding judicial recognition of medical negligence, and growing willingness of courts to award compensation for professional malpractice have significantly transformed the medico-legal landscape. Consequently, female obstetricians and gynaecologists now practise within an environment characterised by heightened legal scrutiny, increasing professional accountability, and evolving standards of patient-centred healthcare.

This study has demonstrated that the legal risks confronting female obstetricians and gynaecologists extend far beyond conventional negligence claims. They encompass civil liability for medical malpractice, disciplinary proceedings before the Medical and Dental Practitioners Tribunal, criminal liability in exceptional cases involving gross negligence, constitutional and human rights litigation, employment-related disputes, and reputational damage arising from adverse publicity and digital media scrutiny. The multidimensional nature of these risks illustrates that professional liability in modern healthcare is no longer confined to determining whether a medical error occurred; rather, it now involves evaluating compliance with statutory obligations, ethical standards, informed consent requirements, documentation protocols, institutional policies, and accepted principles of clinical governance.

The article has further established that although Nigerian law applies the same objective standard of professional care to all medical practitioners irrespective of gender, female doctors frequently experience workplace realities that indirectly increase their medico-legal exposure. Excessive workloads, persistent shortages of healthcare personnel, workplace discrimination, occupational burnout, inadequate institutional support, work-family conflicts, pregnancy-related career interruptions, and gender-based harassment constitute practical challenges capable of affecting clinical performance, communication, documentation, and decision-making during medical emergencies. These realities do not excuse professional negligence, nor should they diminish patients' entitlement to competent medical care. However, they reveal that professional liability cannot be evaluated solely from the perspective of individual fault without considering the institutional and systemic conditions within which healthcare is delivered.

The analysis also reveals that Nigeria possesses a reasonably comprehensive legal framework governing professional liability through the combined operation of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), the National Health Act 2014, the Medical and Dental Practitioners Act, the Evidence Act 2011, the Code of Medical Ethics in Nigeria, and judicial precedents on medical negligence. Collectively, these legal instruments establish enforceable standards concerning competence, informed consent, confidentiality, documentation, emergency medical treatment, professional discipline, and patients' rights. They provide an important foundation for ensuring accountability and protecting the public against professional misconduct.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this legal framework remains constrained by significant institutional and practical deficiencies. Weak implementation of statutory obligations, inadequate healthcare funding, shortages of specialist personnel, poor clinical infrastructure, inconsistent documentation practices, limited access to professional indemnity insurance, insufficient medico-legal education, delayed disciplinary processes, and the absence of comprehensive statutory regulation of clinical governance substantially weaken the framework's capacity to achieve both patient protection and fairness to healthcare professionals. Existing legislation continues to focus predominantly on individual professional responsibility while paying comparatively limited attention to institutional accountability for systemic failures that frequently contribute to adverse obstetric outcomes.

The study further demonstrates that litigation in obstetrics and gynaecology is often precipitated not only by clinical error but also by failures in communication, inadequate informed consent, poor documentation, delayed referrals, deficient record management, unrealistic patient expectations, and organisational weaknesses within healthcare institutions. These findings reinforce the contemporary understanding that many medico-legal disputes are preventable through effective clinical governance, multidisciplinary collaboration, continuous professional education, robust risk management systems, and patient-centred communication rather than through litigation alone. Consequently, improving maternal healthcare outcomes and reducing professional liability require reforms that address both legal accountability and institutional capacity.

Importantly, the article argues that protecting female obstetricians and gynaecologists from litigation should never be interpreted as creating immunity from legal responsibility or weakening patients' rights to obtain effective remedies for genuine medical negligence. Rather, legal protection should be understood as establishing institutional, professional, and regulatory mechanisms that minimise avoidable errors while preserving high standards of clinical practice and ensuring fair adjudication of malpractice claims. Such protection promotes not only the welfare of healthcare professionals but also patient safety, public confidence in healthcare institutions, and the overall effectiveness of the Nigerian health system.

Finally, as Nigeria continues to pursue reforms in healthcare delivery and maternal health services, equal attention must be devoted to strengthening the legal environment within which healthcare professionals operate. A modern professional liability regime must incorporate effective clinical governance, mandatory professional indemnity insurance, comprehensive medico-legal education, digital health regulation, institutional accountability, and gender-responsive workplace policies capable of supporting female medical practitioners in high-risk specialties. Achieving this balance will not only reduce avoidable litigation but will also enhance patient safety, improve maternal and reproductive health outcomes, strengthen public confidence in the healthcare system, and foster a professional environment in which female obstetricians and gynaecologists can deliver high-quality healthcare with confidence, competence, and legal security.