

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION REPORT

Lead in Children's Cosmetics Study - Nigeria

Gombe State Caregiver Focus Group Discussion

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted in Gombe State as part of the Lead in Children's Cosmetics Study in Nigeria. The discussion explored caregivers' knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and practices relating to the use of traditional cosmetic products on infants and young children, with particular attention to products that may contain lead or other harmful substances.

The findings reveal that traditional cosmetic and skincare practices remain deeply embedded in newborn care across many communities. Products such as kohl (kwalli), henna (lalle), herbal mixtures, oils, powders, and locally prepared remedies continue to be widely used due to cultural beliefs, perceived health benefits, and intergenerational influence.

Participants generally demonstrated limited awareness of the potential health risks associated with these products. While some caregivers reported adverse reactions such as skin irritation and eye discomfort, such outcomes were often viewed as normal or temporary rather than indicators of possible toxicity.

The discussion also highlighted the significant influence of grandmothers, mothers-in-law, and older female relatives in shaping childcare decisions. Although cultural practices remain strong, participants expressed considerable openness to adopting safer alternatives when recommended by trusted healthcare professionals and supported by appropriate public education efforts.

The findings suggest that effective risk communication and behavioural change interventions should focus not only on mothers but also on influential family and community gatekeepers.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Traditional cosmetic products have been used for generations across many Nigerian communities as part of newborn and child care practices. These products are often associated with beautification, disease prevention, treatment of common childhood ailments, and cultural identity.

Recent evidence has raised concerns regarding the presence of lead and other potentially harmful substances in certain traditional cosmetics. Exposure to lead during infancy and early childhood can result in serious developmental, neurological, and behavioural consequences.

To better understand community perceptions and practices, a Focus Group Discussion was conducted among caregivers in Gombe State.

1.2 Objectives

The FGD sought to:

- Understand current cosmetic and skincare practices used on infants and young children.
 - Explore beliefs and motivations underlying the use of traditional products.
 - Assess awareness of potential health risks associated with traditional cosmetics.
 - Examine household decision-making dynamics related to child care.
 - Evaluate community receptiveness to safer cosmetic alternatives.
 - Generate evidence to inform future awareness campaigns and policy interventions.
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2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study Design

A qualitative Focus Group Discussion approach was employed to facilitate in-depth exploration of caregiver experiences, beliefs, and behaviours.

2.2 FGD Details

Item	Details
Date	26 May 2026
Location	Gombe State
Duration	60 Minutes

Item	Details
Language	Hausa
Number of Participants	8
Facilitator	Abubakar Haruna
Note Taker	Ibrahim Bakoji

2.3 Participant Composition

The discussion involved a diverse group of caregivers including:

- Mothers (4)
- Grandmothers (2)
- Other Caregivers (2)

Participants ranged approximately from 20 to 60 years of age and represented six different communities within Gombe State.

3. PARTICIPANT DYNAMICS AND GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Participants were highly engaged throughout the discussion and demonstrated willingness to openly share personal experiences and cultural practices related to newborn care.

Several notable observations emerged:

- Elderly participants were particularly influential and often guided the direction of discussions.
- Traditional practices were discussed confidently and without hesitation.
- Participants frequently expressed agreement through non-verbal gestures such as nodding and verbal affirmations.
- No major discomfort or resistance was observed during discussions.

Overall, traditional baby care practices appeared to be viewed as normal, beneficial, and culturally appropriate.

4. FINDINGS

Theme 1: Traditional Cosmetic Practices are Deeply Embedded in Newborn Care

Participants described numerous traditional products routinely applied to newborns shortly after birth.

Frequently mentioned products included:

- Kohl (Kwalli)
- Henna (Lalle)
- Traditional oils
- Dusting powders
- Herbal preparations
- Salt mixtures
- Toothpaste applications on umbilical cords

These products were typically applied by mothers, grandmothers, or senior female relatives.

Many participants described the practices as longstanding traditions inherited from previous generations.

Illustrative Quotes

“Kwalli are rubbed on children eyes so as to remove dirt.”

“Lalle are rubbed on a baby for a full day duration.”

“The Lalle does not have any complication that we know of.”

Interpretation

Traditional cosmetics appear to function not merely as beauty products but as integral components of neonatal healthcare and cultural identity.

Theme 2: Strong Cultural Beliefs Sustain Product Use

Participants reported that many products are believed to:

- Prevent illness
- Improve infant appearance
- Protect babies from spiritual or physical harm
- Treat jaundice and skin conditions
- Support healthy growth and development

Several participants emphasized that these practices have been passed down through generations and continue because previous generations used them successfully.

Illustrative Quotes

“Kwalli are rubbed on baby eye and eyebrow area for beautification.”

“Lalle are rubbed on baby’s body to treat jaundice.”

Interpretation

The persistence of traditional cosmetic use is driven less by scientific evidence and more by social norms, cultural continuity, and community trust.

Theme 3: Awareness of Health Risks Remains Low

Most participants had little knowledge regarding the possibility that traditional cosmetic products could contain harmful substances such as lead.

While some participants reported:

- Eye irritation
- Skin rashes
- Sticky eyes
- Temporary discomfort

these outcomes were rarely associated with product toxicity.

Participants generally viewed such reactions as minor and expected consequences of treatment.

Illustrative Quotes

“We observed some rashes on our babies’ face after use of certain kwalli but we did not know the cause.”

Interpretation

Knowledge gaps remain substantial, creating an environment where potentially harmful products continue to be used without adequate risk assessment.

Theme 4: Family Influence Shapes Caregiver Decisions

The discussion highlighted the critical role of family hierarchy in newborn care decisions.

Key influencers included:

- Grandmothers
- Mothers-in-law
- Elder female relatives
- Community elders

Many younger mothers reported complying with recommendations from older relatives even when they personally disagreed.

Illustrative Quotes

“Some mothers-in-law insist on use of kwalli.”

Interpretation

Behaviour-change interventions targeting only mothers are unlikely to succeed without simultaneously engaging influential family decision-makers.

Theme 5: High Openness to Safer Alternatives

Despite strong cultural attachment to traditional products, participants demonstrated willingness to consider safer alternatives.

Acceptance appeared most likely when alternatives were:

- Recommended by health professionals
- Approved by government regulators
- Easily accessible
- Affordable
- Respectful of cultural practices

Participants expressed particular trust in healthcare workers and regulatory bodies.

Illustrative Quotes

“I can use a safer alternative any time it is provided.”

Interpretation

There is considerable opportunity for public health interventions if safer alternatives are introduced through trusted channels.

Theme 6: Community Markets Remain Important Sources of Supply

Participants reported that traditional cosmetic products remain readily available through local markets and informal vendors.

Specific market locations dedicated to cosmetic products were identified, suggesting organized supply chains that may require regulatory oversight.

Interpretation

Any intervention strategy should incorporate market surveillance, product testing, and vendor engagement alongside public awareness activities.

5. OVERALL ANALYSIS

The findings suggest that traditional cosmetic use is maintained by the interaction of three major factors:

1. Strong cultural and intergenerational beliefs.
2. Limited awareness of potential health risks.
3. High trust in family-based knowledge systems.

At the same time, emerging exposure to healthcare information appears to be gradually influencing attitudes, creating an opportunity for behaviour change.

Importantly, participants did not reject scientific information regarding lead exposure. Instead, they requested stronger evidence, government regulation, and practical alternatives.

This finding suggests that resistance may be lower than often assumed when interventions are delivered respectfully and through trusted institutions.

6. PROGRAMMATIC IMPLICATIONS

The findings indicate that future interventions should:

- Target mothers, grandmothers, and mothers-in-law simultaneously.
- Use culturally appropriate messaging.

- Leverage trusted healthcare workers.
 - Strengthen market regulation and product testing.
 - Promote affordable safer alternatives.
 - Collaborate with religious and community leaders.
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7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Immediate Actions

1. Conduct community awareness campaigns on lead exposure risks.
2. Develop culturally sensitive educational materials.
3. Train frontline healthcare workers on risk communication.
4. Strengthen surveillance of traditional cosmetic products.

Medium-Term Actions

1. Introduce and promote safer alternatives.
2. Engage community elders and grandmothers as behaviour-change champions.
3. Partner with market associations and vendors.

Long-Term Actions

1. Establish routine testing of traditional cosmetic products.
 2. Strengthen enforcement of product safety standards.
 3. Integrate cosmetic safety education into maternal and child health programmes.
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8. CONCLUSION

The Focus Group Discussion demonstrates that traditional cosmetic products continue to occupy an important place in newborn care practices across communities in Gombe State. While participants generally perceive these products as safe and beneficial, awareness of potential lead exposure and other health risks remains limited.

The study further reveals that childcare decisions are strongly influenced by family and cultural structures, particularly older female relatives. Nevertheless, caregivers expressed substantial willingness to adopt safer practices when supported by credible evidence, trusted healthcare providers, and culturally appropriate alternatives.

These findings provide a strong foundation for designing targeted public health interventions aimed at reducing childhood exposure to hazardous cosmetic products while respecting community traditions and social norms.