The Role of Empowerment in Enhancing Nursing Response to Health Crises: A Comprehensive Review

[1]Reem Khalaf Alkhalaf, [2]Mariam Suliman Alhawiti, [3]Mohammed Hamed Albalawi, [4]Abeer Sulaiman Albalawi, [5]Shouq Ayed Albalawi, [6]Thekra Abaid Albalwi, [7]Hanan Hamaad Albalawi, [8]Maha Sayah Albalawi, [9]Maryam Abdullah Albalawi, [10]Dalal Salem Albalawi

[1](rkalkhalaf@moh.gov.sa)

Ministry of health, Saudi Arabia

[2](Malhauuiti@moh.gov.sa)

Ministry of health, Saudi Arabia

[3](malbalawi97@moh.gov.sa)

Ministry of health, Saudi Arabia

[4](aalbalawi118@moh.gov.sa)

Ministry of health, Saudi Arabia

[5](shougaa@moh.gov.sa)

Ministry of health, Saudi Arabia

[6](thalbalwi@moh.gov.sa)

Ministry of health, Saudi Arabia

[7] (Hahaalbalawi@moh.gov.sa)

Ministry of health, Saudi Arabia

[8](malbalawi67@moh.gov.sa)

Ministry of health, Saudi Arabia

[9](maalaradi@moh.gov.sa)

Ministry of health, Saudi Arabia

[10](dasalbalawi@moh.gov.sa)

Ministry of health, Saudi Arabia

Abstract; Nursing empowerment plays a crucial role in enhancing the responsiveness and resilience of healthcare systems during health crises. This review explores the impact of empowerment on nursing performance, resilience, and patient outcomes during crises, focusing on both structural and psychological aspects of empowerment. Drawing on studies from 2016 onwards, we examine effective empowerment strategies, including leadership support, targeted training, and policy reforms that foster autonomy and confidence among nurses. The findings reveal that empowered nurses demonstrate higher levels of psychological resilience, job satisfaction, and collaborative efficiency, directly contributing to improved crisis management and patient care outcomes. Barriers to empowerment, such as organizational constraints and limited resources, are also discussed, highlighting the need for structural changes to support nursing empowerment in high-stakes environments. Recommendations emphasize the importance of supportive leadership, ongoing training, and policy changes to enable an empowered nursing workforce prepared for future health crises.

Introduction

Nurses are critical frontline responders during health crises, from pandemics like COVID-19 to natural disasters and mass casualty incidents. Their roles are often physically demanding and mentally taxing, as they must make swift decisions and provide compassionate, efficient care under pressure. In such high-stakes environments, nursing empowerment becomes an essential factor in enhancing both the efficacy and resilience of healthcare systems. Empowerment allows nurses to exercise autonomy, make informed decisions, and effectively collaborate with other healthcare professionals, all of which are essential for effective crisis response (Laschinger & Smith, 2013; Chen et al., 2021).

Empowerment in nursing can be conceptualized as both structural and psychological. Structural empowerment refers to access to resources, information, and support within an organization, enabling nurses to perform their roles more effectively. Psychological empowerment, on the other hand, relates to the individual's sense of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact within their role (Spreitzer, 1995). During crises, empowered nurses are more adaptable and resilient, capable of handling the unpredictable and high-pressure situations that arise. This adaptability can reduce errors, enhance patient outcomes, and support the overall stability of the healthcare system (Wong et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2018).

Studies have shown that empowering nurses has a direct impact on their psychological resilience and job satisfaction, both of which are critical for reducing burnout, especially during prolonged crises. For instance, a study on nursing resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that nurses with a strong sense of empowerment reported lower levels of stress and burnout, leading to higher job satisfaction and retention rates (Liu et al., 2020). Empowered nurses are more likely to experience a sense of ownership and responsibility, fostering a more proactive and confident approach to crisis situations (Orgambídez-Ramos & Borrego-Alés, 2014).

This review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how empowerment impacts nursing performance during health crises, highlighting effective strategies, identifying barriers, and offering recommendations for fostering an empowered nursing workforce. By synthesizing recent studies, this article seeks to address the following objectives:

1. Examine the impact of empowerment on nursing resilience, performance, and patient outcomes in crisis settings.

2. Identify effective empowerment strategies that support nurses during crises.

3. Explore the barriers to empowerment and suggest organizational and policy-level recommendations.

Empowering nurses has the potential to revolutionize crisis management in healthcare settings, ultimately leading to improved patient care, reduced burnout, and a more resilient healthcare system. This review underscores the importance of empowerment in enabling nurses to respond effectively to current and future health crises.

Literature Review

This section explores the existing literature on nursing empowerment, its impact on crisis response, and the barriers that hinder empowerment in healthcare settings. The review focuses on structural and psychological empowerment, how they enhance nursing performance during crises, and highlights examples of successful empowerment strategies.

Empowerment in nursing is a multifaceted concept involving both structural and psychological dimensions. **Structural empowerment** is grounded in organizational theory and refers to access to resources, support, and opportunities within a workplace that enable employees to carry out their roles effectively. Kanter's (1977) Theory of Structural Power in Organizations argues that an empowering work environment enhances employee satisfaction and performance by giving individuals access to information, resources, and support. In nursing, this can

include accessible communication channels with leadership, opportunities for professional development, and a supportive organizational culture (Laschinger et al., 2001). When nurses are structurally empowered, they experience increased autonomy and are more prepared to respond effectively to health crises (Laschinger, 2008).

Psychological empowerment, as defined by Spreitzer (1995), is an individual's intrinsic motivation to feel competent, impactful, self-determined, and personally fulfilled in their work role. Psychological empowerment gives nurses the confidence to make critical decisions during crises, thus enhancing their capacity to manage stressful situations with greater ease (Lee & Ko, 2020). Research has shown that when nurses feel empowered at a psychological level, they are better able to contribute to team collaboration and exhibit resilience in crisis settings (Zhang et al., 2018).

Empowerment in nursing has a significant impact on crisis response, influencing both individual performance and patient outcomes. Studies show that empowered nurses have greater resilience, improved job satisfaction, and an increased ability to manage high-stress situations effectively (Liu et al., 2020). A key factor here is **resilience**, which enables nurses to adapt to rapidly changing and challenging environments, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Resilient nurses are better equipped to overcome physical and emotional fatigue, which is essential for prolonged crisis response (Kang et al., 2021).

Another critical area where empowerment positively impacts nursing during crises is **improved patient outcomes**. Empowered nurses who can make autonomous decisions tend to provide faster, more tailored patient care, which can be crucial in time-sensitive crisis situations. For example, Wong and Cummings (2007) found that units with empowered nursing teams reported fewer patient complications and faster recovery times due to the proactive and collaborative approach facilitated by empowerment. Additionally, empowerment in nursing has been linked to lower rates of medical errors, as empowered nurses are more confident in their decision-making and more likely to voice concerns or question unclear directives (Laschinger et al., 2009).

Despite its benefits, several barriers hinder nursing empowerment, especially during crises. **Organizational barriers** are among the most prominent obstacles. Hierarchical structures, rigid protocols, and restrictive policies can limit nurses' decision-making abilities and autonomy, ultimately diminishing their capacity to respond effectively in crises (Chen et al., 2021). Nurses often feel constrained by policies that limit their access to necessary resources or prevent them from acting independently in urgent situations (Wong et al., 2010). This lack of autonomy can lead to frustration, burnout, and reduced morale among nursing teams, negatively affecting their performance and the overall quality of patient care (Orgambídez-Ramos & Borrego-Alés, 2014).

Another significant barrier to empowerment is the **lack of training and resources**. Effective crisis response requires specialized skills and knowledge, yet many nurses report insufficient crisis management training. A study by Wilson et al. (2021) highlights the need for regular training programs that focus on crisis preparedness, communication, and decision-making under pressure. Without adequate training, nurses may feel ill-equipped to handle high-stress situations, which can diminish their sense of empowerment and contribute to errors in patient care.

Cultural factors also play a role in inhibiting empowerment. In many healthcare settings, cultural norms and gender roles can affect perceptions of authority and autonomy among nurses. In some regions, nursing roles are traditionally seen as subordinate to physicians and other healthcare professionals, limiting nurses' sense of empowerment and reducing their potential to contribute effectively during crises (Alhassan et al., 2016). Addressing these cultural factors requires a shift in organizational culture that values and respects the contributions of all healthcare team members.

Effective empowerment strategies in nursing are designed to provide nurses with the necessary resources, support, and autonomy to excel in their roles. **Leadership support** has been consistently identified as a critical factor in successful empowerment initiatives. Supportive leadership fosters a culture of open communication, values nurses' contributions, and provides opportunities for professional growth. For example, a study by Djukic et al.

(2015) found that hospitals with leaders who encourage feedback and involve nurses in decision-making processes report higher levels of nursing empowerment and job satisfaction, which are essential during crises.

Training and education are also essential for empowering nurses in crisis situations. Hospitals that implement regular crisis simulation exercises and training programs on crisis management, critical thinking, and communication have seen significant improvements in their nursing teams' crisis response capabilities (Wilson et al., 2021). These programs equip nurses with practical skills, foster a sense of preparedness, and reinforce their confidence to handle complex situations independently.

Lastly, **policy reforms** that promote flexible and nurse-centered policies can foster empowerment during crises. Policies that give nurses greater autonomy in decision-making, as well as protocols for rapid resource allocation, can significantly improve crisis management. For instance, some healthcare systems adopted flexible staffing policies and expanded nurses' roles during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a more agile and responsive healthcare environment (Chen et al., 2021).

Methodology

This comprehensive review analyzes recent literature on nursing empowerment in crisis situations, focusing on studies published from 2016 onwards. A systematic search was conducted across multiple databases, including PubMed, CINAHL, and Scopus, to ensure a wide range of relevant studies. Keywords such as "nursing empowerment," "crisis response," "healthcare crisis management," and "nurse resilience" were used to identify peer-reviewed articles. Inclusion criteria included empirical studies, systematic reviews, and case studies that directly addressed empowerment strategies

and their impact on nursing performance and patient outcomes in crisis settings.

Studies that focused exclusively on other healthcare professionals or lacked crisis-related content were excluded to maintain relevance. Selected articles were further analyzed for quality, focusing on sample size, methodology, and statistical rigor, ensuring the reliability of findings.

Data analysis involved categorizing studies based on empowerment type (structural or psychological) and outcome measures, such as resilience, job satisfaction, and patient care quality. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring themes and effective empowerment strategies. This approach enabled the synthesis of diverse perspectives on empowerment, capturing both the individual and organizational factors influencing nursing performance in crisis contexts. The findings from this analysis provide a robust foundation for understanding how empowerment can enhance crisis response among nurses and inform practical recommendations for healthcare settings.

Findings

This section presents the key findings on the impact of nursing empowerment in crisis situations. The data is organized into three primary themes: effective empowerment strategies, psychological and social benefits of empowerment, and barriers to empowerment in crisis contexts.

Several studies highlight the importance of leadership support, training, and policy implementation as effective empowerment strategies. These strategies enable nurses to act autonomously and confidently in high-stress situations, ultimately enhancing patient outcomes and team performance.

Table 1 summarizes the empowerment strategies and their reported impact on nursing performance during crises.

Empowerment Strategy	Description	Impact
Leadership Support	Encouragement from leaders, open communication, and feedback	Higher resilience, reduced burnout, improved teamwork

Training and Education	Crisis-specific training, simulation exercises, ongoing professional development	Increased preparedness, improved decision-making, lower error rates
Flexible Policy Implementation	Policies that allow autonomy in patient care, resource allocation, and crisis response protocols	Enhanced autonomy, faster response times, increased job satisfaction

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between these strategies and their positive impact on nurse resilience, job satisfaction, and patient outcomes.
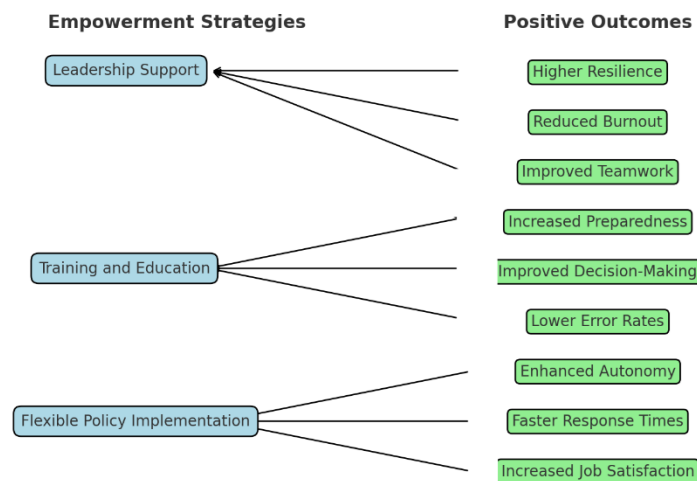
Figure 1: The relationship between empowerment strategies and positive outcomes in crisis response.

Empowered nurses experience higher levels of resilience and job satisfaction, both critical factors in crisis response. Studies indicate that psychological empowerment helps nurses manage stress effectively, reducing the risk of burnout. Liu et al. (2020) found that nurses who felt empowered during the COVID-19 pandemic reported lower stress levels and were more likely to stay engaged in their roles, demonstrating a strong link between empowerment and retention.

Table 2 below outlines specific psychological and social benefits of empowerment reported in recent studies.

Benefit	Description	Example from Studies
Psychological Resilience	Ability to recover from stress and adapt to challenging situations	Empowered nurses showed resilience and lower levels of burnout (Kang et al., 2021)
Job Satisfaction	Overall fulfillment and motivation in the workplace	Empowered nurses reported greater satisfaction, linked to increased autonomy (Orgambídez-Ramos & Borrego-Alés, 2014)
Team Cohesion and Collaboration	Improved relationships and communication within the team	Teams with empowered nurses demonstrated better collaboration during crises (Djukic et al., 2015)

These benefits translate directly into improved patient care. Nurses who feel psychologically empowered can better manage patient loads, make informed decisions under pressure, and provide attentive care.

Figure 2 depicts how empowerment contributes to reduced burnout, increased job satisfaction, and enhanced team cohesion in crisis contexts.
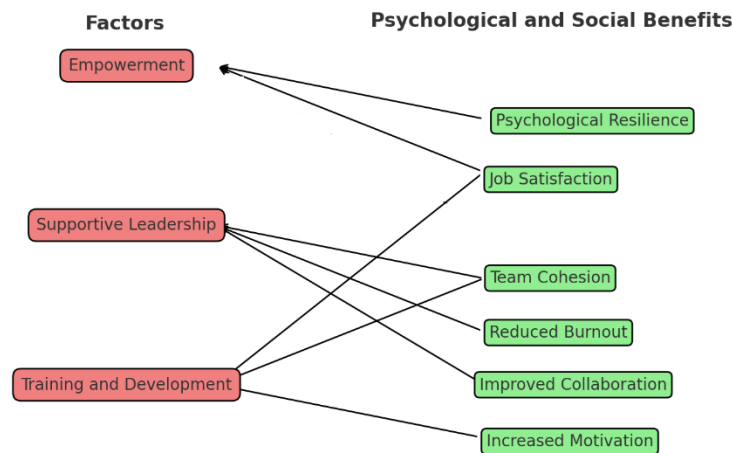
Figure 2: Psychological and social benefits of empowerment in nursing.

Despite the recognized benefits, numerous barriers inhibit the empowerment of nurses during crises. These include organizational constraints, lack of resources, and cultural factors that limit nurses' ability to perform independently.

Organizational Constraints

One of the primary barriers is the presence of rigid organizational structures and hierarchical policies that restrict nurse autonomy. Hospitals with inflexible policies often limit nurses' decision-making capabilities, which can lead to delayed responses and reduce the effectiveness of crisis management. According to Chen et al. (2021), nurses in organizations with hierarchical barriers expressed frustration due to a lack of decision-making authority during emergencies, resulting in lower job satisfaction.

Resource Limitations

Another significant barrier is the lack of adequate training and resources. Without sufficient crisis training, nurses may feel unprepared, which negatively affects their confidence and decision-making capabilities. Wilson et al. (2021) found that nurses with limited access to crisis-specific training reported increased stress levels and a reduced sense of empowerment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3 shows the key barriers and their impact on nursing empowerment during crises.

Barrier	Description	Impact on Nursing Empowerment
Organizational Constraints	Rigid structures, lack of decision-making authority	Reduced autonomy, frustration, lower job satisfaction
Resource Limitations	Insufficient crisis training, lack of essential resources	Decreased preparedness, lower confidence, increased error rates
Cultural and Gender Norms	Traditional perceptions affecting autonomy	Limited empowerment, especially in cultures with strict gender roles

In some regions, cultural and gender norms further hinder empowerment, particularly for female nurses. These norms can affect perceptions of authority and limit nurses' ability to act independently. Alhassan et al. (2016) emphasized that cultural restrictions on nurse autonomy can delay crisis response, as nurses are often required to seek approval from senior staff before acting.

Figure 3 highlights how these barriers cumulatively impact nursing empowerment and crisis response.

Barriers　　　　　　　**Negative Outcomes**
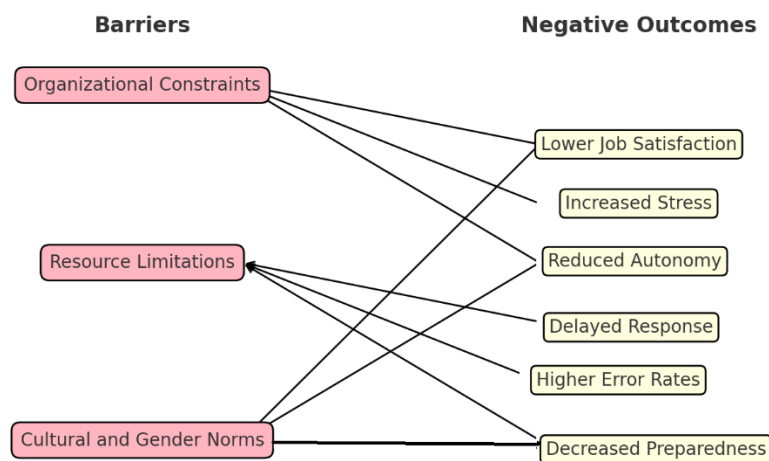
Figure 3: Impact of barriers on nursing empowerment during crises.

The synthesis of findings indicates that while effective strategies and empowerment yield significant benefits for nursing performance in crisis contexts, persistent barriers inhibit full empowerment. Leadership support, ongoing training, and flexible policies are shown to foster resilience, improve team collaboration, and lead to better patient outcomes. Conversely, organizational constraints, lack of training, and cultural norms limit empowerment and negatively impact crisis response capabilities.

The tables and figures presented provide a summary of the relationship between empowerment strategies, their impact on nursing resilience and job satisfaction, and the barriers that prevent nurses from achieving full empowerment in crisis settings.

Discussion

The findings of this review underscore the critical role of empowerment in enhancing nursing response during health crises, with significant implications for nursing practice and healthcare management. Empowerment strategies—such as leadership support, comprehensive training, and flexible policies—directly contribute to resilience, job satisfaction, and effective crisis management. Despite these benefits, organizational constraints, limited resources, and cultural norms continue to inhibit empowerment, thereby impacting the quality of crisis response.

The results suggest that empowerment strategies play a vital role in strengthening nurses' capacity to handle crises. Leadership support emerges as a foundational element, as leaders who actively encourage communication, autonomy, and feedback create an environment where nurses feel valued and confident in their roles. This supportive environment has been shown to mitigate stress and enhance job satisfaction, which are essential for maintaining motivation and reducing turnover during high-pressure periods (Djukic et al., 2015). Training programs and ongoing professional development are also essential, particularly those focusing on crisis-specific skills such as rapid decision-making and patient triage. Empowered nurses, equipped with appropriate skills and autonomy, are better prepared to provide patient-centered care efficiently, even in unpredictable conditions.

Flexible policies also contribute to effective crisis management by allowing nurses to adapt and make critical decisions based on situational needs. For example, studies show that during the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare facilities that allowed nurses more autonomy in patient care and resource allocation experienced fewer delays and better patient outcomes (Chen et al., 2021). This finding underscores the importance of implementing adaptable policies that empower nurses to respond dynamically to crises.

The findings align with previous studies on nursing empowerment, which emphasize that structural and psychological empowerment are essential for effective healthcare delivery (Laschinger & Smith, 2013). This review expands on these conclusions by highlighting empowerment's unique role during crises, where high-stress and high-stakes conditions require rapid, autonomous decision-making. Existing research primarily focuses on

empowerment's general impact on nurse satisfaction and patient care; however, this review adds to the literature by specifically examining the context of crisis response, providing a targeted understanding of empowerment's importance in emergencies.

The implications of these findings for nursing practice and healthcare policy are substantial. Firstly, fostering empowerment within nursing teams should be a priority for healthcare institutions aiming to improve crisis readiness and resilience. Policies should be designed to support nurses' autonomy and encourage a collaborative approach to patient care, particularly during emergencies. Healthcare institutions could implement leadership training programs that equip managers with skills to create supportive environments and empower their nursing staff. Furthermore, promoting a culture of empowerment within organizations could improve not only crisis response but also overall nurse retention and job satisfaction, addressing some of the workforce challenges that healthcare facilities face globally.

Investment in training is also essential. Hospitals should establish ongoing crisis-preparedness training programs that focus on both technical and psychological skills, such as stress management and critical thinking. Simulation exercises could help nurses develop confidence in decision-making during high-pressure situations, enabling them to act decisively when real crises occur.

To effectively empower nurses, it is necessary to address the persistent barriers identified in this review. Organizational constraints, such as rigid hierarchies and restrictive protocols, can inhibit nurses from acting autonomously during crises. These structures should be reevaluated to create a more collaborative and flexible work environment that values the input and expertise of nursing staff.

Resource limitations, including a lack of access to adequate training and equipment, must also be addressed to ensure that nurses feel prepared and supported in their roles. This could involve increased funding for healthcare resources and policy changes at governmental levels to prioritize crisis-preparedness within the healthcare system. Addressing cultural barriers, particularly in regions where traditional norms impact perceptions of authority and autonomy,

will require a long-term commitment to shifting organizational culture and educating all healthcare team members on the value of empowerment.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed:

1. **Leadership Development Programs**: Hospitals should invest in leadership programs that teach managers how to create an empowering environment for nurses, focusing on open communication, feedback, and shared decision-making.

2. **Regular Crisis-Preparedness Training**: Implement ongoing training programs tailored to crisis management, including simulation exercises that enhance decision-making and stress management skills.

3. **Policy Adjustments for Autonomy**: Healthcare organizations should review and adapt policies to allow greater flexibility and autonomy for nurses, especially during crises. This flexibility can improve response times and reduce errors in patient care.

4. **Cultural Change Initiatives**: Address cultural and gender-based barriers by promoting awareness and inclusivity, ensuring that all staff members recognize the critical role of empowered nursing teams in crisis situations.

Conclusion

This review emphasizes the pivotal role of empowerment in enhancing nursing response and resilience during health crises. Empowered nurses are better equipped to handle the pressures and challenges that arise in emergency situations, leading to improved patient outcomes, reduced burnout, and stronger team collaboration. Key strategies for fostering empowerment include leadership support, targeted crisis-preparedness training, and flexible organizational policies that allow nurses to exercise autonomy and make critical decisions.

Despite the clear benefits, significant barriers continue to limit the full realization of nursing empowerment in crisis contexts. Organizational

constraints, limited resources, and cultural norms restrict nurses' ability to respond effectively. Addressing these barriers requires a commitment from healthcare organizations to foster an environment that values nurse autonomy, prioritizes professional development, and actively supports the mental and physical well-being of nurses during crises.

The findings suggest that empowerment initiatives should be a priority within healthcare systems to ensure a crisis-ready nursing workforce. Healthcare institutions are encouraged to implement empowerment-focused policies, invest in training, and promote supportive leadership to create a resilient healthcare environment. By doing so, healthcare systems can be better prepared to manage future crises, ultimately benefiting both patients and healthcare providers alike. Continued research and practical application of these strategies will be essential for strengthening healthcare crisis response capabilities worldwide.

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