Background: Patient dignity in healthcare is an issue of global concern and is open to being violated during childbirth. The study explored in-depth the existing aspects of dignity violation during childbirth at Nsambya hospital, given the importance of the midwife-woman relationship during facility based childbirth.

Methods: An exploratory qualitative study design was used and 12 in-depth interviews were done with 7 post delivery women and 5 with midwives. The study was over one month period in 2013. The interviews were conducted in the local dialect and English using a thematic guide. All data were transcribed into English. Content analysis of the interview data was used.

Results: Dignity was a vague concept that was difficult to define. However, three themes “respect”, “preventing loss of one’s respect,” and “how women perceive midwives” emerged as the main findings. Respect was acquired, lost or threatened through socialisation. Threats to a woman’s respect during childbirth included factors related to the childbirthing woman, her labour companion, the attending midwife or the institutional set up and policy. Actions aimed at preventing loss of respect during childbirth were undertaken by women themselves and midwives through a variety of social processes. Women described qualities in midwives that they felt were associated with less likelihood of abuse during childbirth.

Conclusions: Dignity violations during childbirth do occur at the hospital. Women chose the unit because they felt they were less likely to be abused during the childbirth process.