

Social Workers' Role in Promoting Women's Health and Women's Access to Healthcare

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Abstract

This study explores the critical function that social workers play in improving women's access to healthcare in India. It highlights how social workers are essential middlemen who fight for fair access and remove structural barriers that prevent women from getting the healthcare they need. Geographical obstacles, cultural stigmas, and socioeconomic limitations are some of these difficulties. The study emphasizes the important roles social workers play in putting into practice efficient health interventions and raising public health awareness by looking at current healthcare policies and practices. The research highlights the varied ways in which social workers influence different healthcare environments, enhancing women's health outcomes. Its goal is to raise awareness among policymakers, medical professionals, and social workers regarding the need for integrated approaches to improve women's access to healthcare and general well-being in India. The study promotes more support and acknowledgment of social workers' roles in addressing healthcare disparities and advancing women's health in the nation through thorough analysis and insightful findings. In the end, the research recommends that social workers and other stakeholders work together more closely to guarantee that women have better access to healthcare.

Keywords: women health, public Health care, social worker, health-related tactics.

Introduction

Healthcare policies, cultural norms, and socioeconomic disparities all play a role in the complex challenge of providing healthcare access for women in India. Significant obstacles still exist, despite advancements in some areas, and they contribute to differences in women's health outcomes among various geographic and demographic groups. These disparities are clearly demonstrated by indicators such as institutional delivery rates, maternal mortality, and access to reproductive health care. In order to address these issues and improve women's access to healthcare, especially in underprivileged and marginalized communities, this paper looks at the critical role that social workers play. As educators, advocates, and mediators within the

healthcare system, social workers are essential. Through community outreach initiatives, counseling and support services, and local and national advocacy for women's health rights, they close gaps in healthcare delivery. Their interventions not only increase the use of healthcare services but also provide women the confidence to navigate complicated healthcare systems and make educated health decisions. This study intends to highlight successful social worker strategies and evaluate their influence on women's health outcomes using up-to-date data from sources such as government health reports and the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5). Policymakers and healthcare stakeholders can create focused interventions to remove enduring obstacles and advance fair access to healthcare for all Indian women by being aware of these contributions. The aforementioned study highlights the significance of incorporating social work into healthcare policies and procedures in order to attain all-encompassing and inclusive healthcare solutions that are customized to meet the requirements of women from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds (Bango & Ghosh, 2022).

Social Workers in Public Health

Public health refers to efforts to help a group or community of people prevent disease, improve overall health and live longer. Social workers' efforts at both the micro and macro levels support public health.

Health Education and Promotion in Social Work

A key role of social workers, particularly those specializing in health care and wellness, is outreach to communities, with an emphasis on health education and promotion. These efforts help people gain control over their own health by learning and practicing healthy habits. Health education and promotion initiatives advance public health and social work goals related to:

Equity: Offering opportunities for all people and populations to engage in healthy behavior

Advocacy: Promoting the practices and policies that contribute to good health

Collaboration: Integrating the efforts of different health care professions to support people's well-being.

Public Health Social Worker Skills

Gaining skills that apply to both social work and public health is also an important step on the path to becoming a public health social worker. Helpful skills for the role include:

Communication: To discuss clients' challenges with them and share information with the public.

Organization: To manage multiple clients and projects.

Problem-solving: To identify health challenges and how to overcome them, particularly complex issues rooted in the social determinants of health.

Compassion: To practice empathy and patience in helping people cope with their problems

Cultural competency: To ensure that public health strategies address the unique needs of different populations.

Healthcare disparities in India

India has glaring disparities in healthcare that affect women's access to basic healthcare services on a socioeconomic, geographic, and cultural level. Current data from reliable sources, including the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-6) and other reports, provide a comprehensive picture of these disparities. According to NFHS-6 (2023-24) The accessibility of healthcare varies greatly between rural and urban areas. Compared to rural areas, urban regions typically show higher rates of institutional deliveries and prenatal care visits. For example, according to the survey, 93.3% of births in urban areas take place in healthcare facilities, while this percentage is noticeably lower in rural areas at 83.5% (IIPS & ICF, 2023). This disparity underscores the uneven distribution of healthcare infrastructure and services, posing challenges for rural women in accessing maternal and reproductive healthcare. Healthcare disparities increase in large part by socioeconomic factors. Because of their limited resources and lack of knowledge about the services that are available, women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have more difficulty getting access to healthcare. Significant differences in the antenatal care received by women from the poorest quintile (64.1%) and the wealthiest quintile (88.7%) are shown by the NFHS-5 data. (IIPS & ICF, 2022). This discrepancy emphasizes the necessity of focused interventions to guarantee vulnerable populations equitable access to healthcare. In addition, community-based interventions are essential for enhancing rural residents' access to healthcare. demonstrates how community health workers in Uttar Pradesh can improve women's health outcomes by implementing focused outreach and education initiatives. These programs show how effective community-based interventions can be in reducing regional healthcare inequalities and advancing fair access to healthcare services for women living in underprivileged areas (Singh & Khan, 2020).

Literature Review

- **The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-6, 2023–2024)** indicates that there are still notable differences in women's healthcare use (IIPS & ICF, 2023). According to the survey, there are differences between urban and rural areas even though institutional deliveries have improved, with 88.6% of births taking place in healthcare facilities

(IIPS & ICF, 2021). This highlights the inequitable allocation of healthcare resources and the necessity of focused interventions to improve accessibility in all areas.

- **Das et al. (2020)** highlight how socioeconomic factors, such as educational attainment and poverty, influence how Indian women seek healthcare. Women's access to healthcare services is frequently hampered by financial limitations, especially in rural areas where resources are scarce. Furthermore, women who have low levels of education are less likely to be aware of the healthcare services that are available to them and to engage in appropriate health-seeking behaviors.
- **Government of India (2023)** Increasing maternal and general healthcare access for women in India has been the goal of the implementation of government health programs like Ayushman Bharat and the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY). Nonetheless, obstacles concerning awareness, cost, and care quality still need to be addressed in order to guarantee fair access.

Research Methodology- This research is a descriptive study in which necessary facts have been collected through journals, reports, the internet, publications and various websites etc.

Objectives

1. To study the Socio-Economic Barriers to Healthcare Access.
2. To study the women's Health-related Government Policies and Initiatives.
3. To study the role and challenges faced by social workers in women's health.

1. The Socio-Economic Barriers to Healthcare Access-

Social and Economic Barriers to Accessing Healthcare Socioeconomic factors substantially impede access to healthcare in India, posing significant challenges for women throughout the nation. These obstacles, which have their roots in poverty, inequality in education, and work circumstances, have a combined effect on women's capacity to look for and pay for necessary healthcare services.

a) Educational Levels: Women in India who seek healthcare do so primarily based on their educational attainment. Women with lower levels of education frequently don't know about their rights to healthcare, preventive health practices, or the services that are available to them. These women may not prioritize routine health check-ups or preventive screenings, which leads to a suboptimal use of healthcare resources as a result of this knowledge gap. To provide women with the information they need to make educated healthcare decisions and enhance

their general health outcomes, it is imperative to implement focused health education programs and enhance educational opportunities (Cutler & Lleras, 2010).

b) Poverty: Access to healthcare for women in India is still severely hampered by poverty. Several low-income women struggle to make ends meet and are unable to pay for even the most basic medical care. Due to the high cost of hospital visits, prescription drugs, and medical treatments, these women are frequently forced to put everyday needs ahead of their healthcare requirements. Consequently, they might put off getting medical help or neglect to take prescribed medications, which over time could worsen their health conditions and produce worse results. Government programs like Ayushman Bharat, which offers financial protection to vulnerable populations, are an attempt to lower this barrier; however, there are still implementation gaps and awareness issues, particularly when it comes to reaching marginalized communities (Ghosh & Mondal, 2021).

c) Employment Status: The work environment presents major challenges for women's access to healthcare, especially in the unorganized sector. Due to their frequent lack of access to employer-sponsored benefits or health insurance, women in precarious employment are particularly vulnerable to high medical expenses. It's also challenging for these women to schedule and keep up with medical appointments or to get care when it's needed because of their inconsistent work schedules and unstable jobs. The removal of these obstacles necessitates support systems that allow women in variable work environments to have flexible access to healthcare as well as policies that guarantee fair access to healthcare benefits for all employees, regardless of employment status.

d) shortages of medical facilities, trained healthcare professionals, and essential medications, contributes to disparities in healthcare access. Furthermore, long distances to healthcare facilities and limited transportation options amplify these challenges, making it difficult for rural women to access timely medical care. Bridging geographical disparities requires targeted investments in rural healthcare infrastructure, expanding outreach programs, and improving transportation networks to ensure equitable healthcare access for women living in remote and underserved areas (Grail & Humphreys, 2015).

e) Cultural Norms: Women's healthcare decisions are heavily influenced by patriarchal norms and conventional gender roles in India. Women are frequently expected by cultural norms to put their families before their own health needs, which causes them to put off seeking medical attention or ignore preventative care. Furthermore, women may be discouraged from seeking the necessary medical attention or talking openly about their health concerns due to the stigma associated with some health issues in society. In order to overcome these cultural barriers, it is

important to support gender-sensitive healthcare services, give women the confidence to stand up for their rights to healthcare, and create community conversations that question damaging gender stereotypes and support fair access to healthcare for all.

f) Government Initiatives: Via policy interventions and healthcare reforms, government initiatives are essential in addressing socioeconomic barriers to healthcare access. The goals of initiatives like Ayushman Bharat are to give vulnerable groups, including women, access to universal health care and financial security. However, there are still gaps in healthcare service quality, accessibility, and awareness, making it difficult to effectively implement these initiatives. To ensure equitable access and improve health outcomes across the country, strengthening these initiatives will require consistent efforts to upgrade the nation's healthcare infrastructure, strengthen service delivery mechanisms, and give priority to the healthcare needs of marginalized communities.

2. Women's health-related Government Policies and Initiatives-

a) National Health Insurance Schemes

National health insurance programs aim to safeguard vulnerable groups, particularly women, financially and enhance their access to healthcare services. Among the examples are:

- **Ayushman Bharat:** Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY) in India, which provides health insurance coverage to over 500 million beneficiaries from economically weaker sections. PM-JAY covers hospitalization expenses, ensuring that women have access to necessary treatments without financial strain (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, 2023).

b) Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY): An initiative by the Indian government to provide benefits to mothers is called PMMVY, which was previously called the Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana. In 2017, the name was changed from when it was first introduced in 2010. A conditional cash transfer is given to pregnant and nursing women who are 19 years of age or older during their first live birth as part of a program that is managed by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. Along with encouraging safe deliveries and healthy eating and feeding habits, the initiative seeks to reimburse women for a portion of the wages they lost during pregnancy and childrearing. The program was integrated into the National Food Security Act, 2013 to ensure that the Act's specified cash maternity benefit of ₹6,000 (US\$72) was provided (Rajagopal, 2015).

c) Maternal and Child Health Programs

Maternal and child health are centered on lowering infant mortality rates and enhancing maternal health outcomes through focused interventions. Frequently, these programs consist of:

- **Safe Motherhood Initiatives:** these support prenatal, postnatal, and institutional delivery services. These programs seek to lower maternal mortality and complications by guaranteeing access to trained birth attendants and offering incentives for facility-based deliveries (World Health Organization, 2021).

d) Community Health Worker Programs

Programs known as "community health worker" (CHW) send out qualified medical professionals to provide basic healthcare at the community level, especially in underserved and rural regions. These activities:

- Enhance Healthcare Access by bridging gaps in healthcare delivery, conducting health screenings, providing health education, and facilitating referrals to higher-level healthcare facilities (Bhutta et al., 2020).

Governments can ensure that all women have access to high-quality healthcare and that health equity is achieved by prioritizing women's health within larger health agendas and by implementing creative policies and focused interventions that ensure comprehensive coverage.

3. The role and challenges faced by social workers in women's health-

The Role of Social Workers

Social workers are essential in providing a wide range of services related to women's health, from creating long-term treatment programs to raising awareness. Connecting women in need with healthcare services is a critical role that social workers play. Among their inputs are:

a) Advocacy & Empowerment: Social workers are essential in promoting the rights and self-determination of underprivileged groups, particularly women who are seeking healthcare services. By promoting policies that support equitable access to healthcare and removing structural barriers that impede access, they seek to guarantee that women's voices are heard in healthcare settings. Social workers improve health outcomes and advance social justice by giving women the confidence to navigate healthcare systems and stand up for their rights (Austin, 2019).

b) Crisis Intervention and Support: Social workers provide vital support to women and their families in times of crisis or emergency related to healthcare. They help people deal with

medical emergencies, hospital stays, or unexpected health-related difficulties by offering crisis intervention, emotional support, and useful assistance. In order to strengthen coping strategies and resilience in trying times, social workers also connect women with local resources and support systems (Watson, 2021).

c) Case Management & Coordination: Social workers coordinate women's care across multiple healthcare providers and services by offering them comprehensive case management services. On behalf of their clients, they evaluate each person's needs, create care plans, and negotiate complicated healthcare systems. This all-encompassing strategy guarantees continuity of care and facilitates women's access to prompt and effective medical interventions (Reamer, 2020).

d) Health Education and Promotion: Social workers participate in health education programs designed to increase women's health literacy and encourage preventive care practices. To teach women about health risks, disease prevention, reproductive health, and lifestyle management, they hold workshops, support groups, and one-on-one consultations. Social workers provide women the tools they need to make educated decisions about their health and wellbeing by encouraging health literacy (Mikkonen, 2010).

e) Interaction with the Community and Advocacy: Social workers participate in community outreach initiatives to connect with marginalized communities and increase knowledge of available healthcare resources and services. To identify gaps in healthcare access and create focused interventions to address these disparities, they work in partnership with local organizations, healthcare providers, and community leaders. Social workers seek to advance health equity for women in marginalized communities, enhance the availability of services, and strengthen the healthcare infrastructure through community advocacy initiatives (Berkman, 2014).

f) Policy Development and Implementation: Social workers support policies that address systemic inequalities and offer insightful information about the social determinants of health, which helps shape healthcare policy. In an effort to impact healthcare reform initiatives that prioritize women's health needs and advance equitable access to healthcare services, they take part in policy forums, advisory committees, and legislative advocacy.

g) Research and Evaluation: Evaluate healthcare interventions and determine the best practices for enhancing women's health outcomes. Social workers carry out research and program evaluations. To provide recommendations for evidence-based practices and policies, they gather information, examine trends, and share findings. Social workers shape

interventions to better meet the health needs of women by advancing research on healthcare disparities and social determinants of health (Rubin, 2016).

The versatile roles of social workers in encouraging women's health-

a) Role as a Health Services Broker: Social workers are essential as mediators for women and healthcare resources. They evaluate women's unique health needs, including those related to education, nutrition, prenatal and postnatal care, and illness treatment. Social workers match women with the right healthcare resources after identifying these needs, either through their own organization or by partnering with outside agencies. To make sure women receive appropriate care on time, they navigate the healthcare system, learning about eligibility requirements, costs, and service quality (WHO, 2020). Furthermore, social workers represent women in situations where healthcare resources are inadequate or uncooperative, guaranteeing that they obtain the support and care they require.

b) Role as a Counsellor: Social workers offer individualized counseling to women who are dealing with a range of health issues. This covers seeking medical attention for gynecological problems, reproductive health, and counseling on available contraceptive methods. They assist women who are disabled or suffering from terminal illnesses in navigating challenging situations and making wise decisions. The goal of counseling sessions is to give women the tools they need to effectively manage their health, increasing their autonomy and general well-being. Social workers utilize therapeutic approaches to attend to women's emotional and psychological needs, promoting adaptable coping mechanisms and resilience in a variety of healthcare environments (American Psychological Association, 2022).

c) Role as a Teacher: Social workers who specialize in women's health empower women by teaching them vital life skills. They will learn about food preparation, baby care, environmental sanitation, and kitchen hygiene as part of this. Social workers encourage preventive health measures and healthy living habits through hands-on guidance and education. To encourage changes in health-related behavior, they employ strategies like behavior modification, value clarification, and role modeling. Additionally, social workers provide education on primary prevention topics such as parenting, family planning, and marital adjustment (CDC, 2021). This empowers women with the knowledge they need to make better health decisions and live healthier lives.

d) Role as a Workload Manager: Social workers are essential to the management of operational tasks in healthcare organizations. They effectively plan and prioritize their workload to guarantee that clients' needs are satisfied in a timely manner. As social workers

balance administrative responsibilities with face-to-face client interactions, time management skills are crucial. They keep up-to-date records of all services rendered, ensure that healthcare regulations are being followed, and facilitate decision-making and accountability. By processing data, creating thorough reports, and efficiently allocating resources, social workers improve organizational effectiveness. In addition to ensuring efficient service delivery, their management of workloads raises the standard of care given to women in healthcare settings.

e) Role as a Staff Developer: Social workers provide healthcare personnel with training, supervision, and consultation to aid in their professional development. They ensure that new hires understand their roles and responsibilities by providing orientation, especially for women's health services. Social workers provide supervision, mentorship, and guidance to healthcare professionals in order to improve client interactions and service delivery. They encourage staff members to attend workshops or conferences on women's health issues and provide opportunities for ongoing training. Social workers enhance the ability of healthcare teams to address the changing needs of women under their care by encouraging lifelong learning and skill development.

f) Role as a Social Change Agent: Social workers actively participate in identifying health issues in the community and organizing women's groups to push for reform. They evaluate regional health inequalities and work with locals to create programs that address structural obstacles to women's health. Social workers encourage health education, organize resources, and push for legislative changes to enable women to become change agents. They organize support for neighborhood initiatives to enhance women's health outcomes, facilitate community discussions, and increase public awareness of health-related issues. Social workers support long-lasting social change that advances equity and improves the general health and well-being of women in their communities through their advocacy and grassroots organizing.

Challenges Faced by Social Workers-

a) Limited Resources and Funding: Social workers are often faced with a lack of funds and resources, which can limit their capacity to offer comprehensive services. The scope and quality of interventions available to clients are limited by inadequate budgets and competing priorities within the healthcare and social service systems. Encouraging resource allocation and securing sustainable funding sources are ongoing challenges that affect equitable access to support services and the effectiveness of service delivery.

b) High Workload and Burnout: Social workers often have heavy caseloads and experience emotional exhaustion as a result of their demanding jobs. Social workers deal with complicated

cases involving trauma, mental health emergencies, and family dynamics on a regular basis. It is essential to manage workload pressures while upholding professional boundaries and empathy in order to avoid burnout and maintain long-term career satisfaction. In order to lessen the effects of stress and enhance employee wellbeing, organizations must provide effective supervision, self-care techniques, and organizational support.

c) Navigating Bureaucracy and Policy Constraints: Service delivery and client advocacy efforts are hampered by policy limitations and bureaucratic hurdles that social workers must overcome. Timely interventions can be hindered by administrative procedures, complex regulatory frameworks, and inconsistent policies across jurisdictions, which can cause delays in resource access. Effectively navigating these systems necessitates proficiency in policy analysis, advocacy abilities, and cooperation with stakeholders to impact systemic modifications and enhance service accessibility for marginalized communities (Reamer, 2021).

d) Cultural Competence and Diversity Issues: In social work practice, cultural competence is crucial, but overcoming linguistic obstacles and a variety of cultural norms and beliefs can be difficult. Social workers must carefully negotiate cultural differences to guarantee that services are inclusive and considerate of the backgrounds of their clients. Positive client relationships and significant results depend on developing trust, using culturally sensitive practices, and supporting culturally competent policies. The capacity of practitioners to deliver efficient and just services is improved by ongoing training and professional development in cultural humility and diversity awareness.

e) Impact of Macro-Level Factors: Social work practice is significantly impacted by external factors such as political instability, environmental crises, and economic disparities. The demand for services rises, social injustices are made worse, and attempts to advance social justice are hampered by these macro-level variables. Social workers need to modify their approaches to meet the changing needs of the community and push for legislative changes that will lessen the structural obstacles that disadvantaged groups face. In order to effectively respond to changing social and environmental challenges, interdisciplinary teamwork and community mobilization are essential.

f) Professional Development and Ethical Dilemmas: Maintaining ethical standards and providing high-quality care requires social workers to engage in ongoing professional development. It is imperative to remain informed about legal requirements, ethical standards, and best practices in the face of changing social mores and technological breakthroughs. Moral conundrums, like protecting customer privacy on digital platforms or managing two relationships at once, call for careful thought and adherence to moral standards. Encouraging

ethical decision-making and improving practitioners' ability to handle challenging ethical situations in their professional practice can be achieved by funding supervision, peer consultation, and continuing education.

Case study

Rural Health Programs in Uttar Pradesh: Social workers in rural Uttar Pradesh have started women's health-focused community health programs. These initiatives strive to raise public awareness of reproductive health and maternal care practices through outreach initiatives, health education sessions, and maternal health camps. In order to guarantee that these services are available to women in isolated villages who frequently encounter obstacles like limited transportation and financial limitations, social workers work in conjunction with regional healthcare providers and community leaders.

Impact

Increased Antenatal Care: These programs have improved maternal health monitoring, decreased birth complications, and resulted in a notable increase in the number of pregnant Women receiving routine prenatal care visits.

Reduced Maternal Mortality: The success of social worker-led targeted health interventions is demonstrated by the decreased rates of maternal mortality observed in the communities engaged in these programs.

Rural Health Programs: In rural Uttar Pradesh, social workers have implemented community health initiatives that educate women about reproductive health and provide access to essential services. These programs have led to a 20% increase in antenatal care visits and a reduction in maternal mortality rates.

Policy Recommendations

a) Increased Funding for Community Health Programs: Increasing funding for community health programs run by social workers is one of the most important policy recommendations to improve women's access to healthcare in India. In places where traditional healthcare infrastructure may be insufficient or inaccessible, these programs are essential in reaching marginalized and underserved populations. Policymakers can help women in need directly by extending the availability of basic health services like family planning, maternity care, and preventive health measures through funding these initiatives.

b) Supporting Evidence: Earlier reports from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2024 state that, especially in rural and underserved areas, investments in community-based health

programs have significantly improved healthcare outcomes and access. Initiatives supported by the National Rural Health Mission, for instance, have shown quantifiable results in terms of antenatal care coverage and institutional deliveries among women residing in remote villages.

e) Strengthened Training Programs for Social Workers: establishing comprehensive training programs for social workers that are centered on women's health issues and practical intervention techniques is another essential recommendation. Sufficient knowledge and abilities to tackle intricate healthcare issues faced by women, such as gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and maternal health, are acquired through ongoing professional development, which is crucial for social workers.

d) Policy Support for Integration of Social Workers in Healthcare Systems: Support from policymakers is essential to integrating social workers into official healthcare systems, recognizing their contributions, and giving them the tools and resources they need to successfully serve women in need of healthcare. When it comes to addressing systemic barriers and promoting holistic approaches to women's health, this integration can help social workers, healthcare professionals, and policymakers work together more effectively.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social workers play a critical role in improving women's access to healthcare, as demonstrated by their proactive involvement in advocacy, community outreach, and comprehensive support services. Social workers significantly improve women's health outcomes through focused initiatives to reduce socioeconomic barriers and support inclusive health policies, especially within underserved demographics. In order to advance equitable healthcare access, policy imperatives like increased funding for community-based health initiatives, improved professional development for social work cadres, and systemic integration within healthcare frameworks are essential. Through the provision of essential healthcare, this coordinated approach not only empowers women but also fosters healthier social environments. Maintaining a strong commitment to these approaches is essential to promoting long-lasting progress and guaranteeing that all Indian women have access to high-quality healthcare.

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