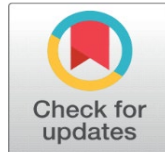
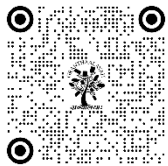


PERCEPTIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH CARE RECIPIENTS ON THE ENGAGEMENT OF COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS IN MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT: A CASE STUDY OF THE RURAL MITANIN PROGRAMME IN CHHATTISGARH.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the perceptions of mental health care receivers regarding the engagement of Community Health Workers (CHW) in the delivery of mental health services in rural Chhattisgarh. In this article, CHW refers to Mitans of Chhattisgarh who are counterpart to ASHA under National Health Mission. Mitans play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between formal health care systems and rural communities, where mental health stigma is prevalent. The study draws on interviews and FGDs with individuals who have accessed mental health care to understand how Mitans are perceived in the context of mental health.

The findings of the study reveal several perceptions of mental health care recipients on the engagement of Mitans in mental health support. Many individuals who have received mental health support from Mitans appreciate their dedication, empathy, and availability. Some mental health care receivers noted that while Mitans are supportive, they often lack in-depth knowledge about severe mental illnesses. Many care receivers observed that Mitans' efforts have contributed to reducing stigma around mental health. While Mitans provide initial support, some care receivers expressed frustration with the lack of accessible professional mental health services.

Keywords: Mental Health, Mitans, ASHA, Community Health Workers, Perception.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health care in rural India remains a complex issue due to stigma, limited healthcare facilities, and a lack of awareness. Despite significant strides in healthcare accessibility, mental health continues to be shrouded in misconceptions and neglect, particularly in marginalized communities. Many individuals suffering from mental health disorders in rural areas either do not recognize their condition or are hesitant to seek help due to fear of social rejection. In this context, community health workers play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between mental health services and the people who need them the most.

In Chhattisgarh, Mitans, the community health workers, serve as a crucial link between communities and the healthcare system. Introduced as part of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), Mitans have been instrumental in

improving maternal and child health, promoting sanitation, and facilitating primary healthcare services. Over time, their role has expanded to include mental health awareness, early identification of symptoms, and support for individuals struggling with psychological distress. They often act as the first point of contact for individuals facing mental health issues, offering counseling, guidance, and referrals to specialized healthcare providers when necessary.

This article explores the perceptions of mental health care receivers regarding the work of Mitadins in Chhattisgarh. It delves into their experiences, highlighting how Mitadins have influenced their journey toward mental wellness. Through real-life case studies, this study aims to present a holistic view of the engagement Mitadins play in mental health care. By understanding these perspectives, policymakers and health professionals can develop more effective strategies to strengthen mental health services in rural India, ensuring that individuals in need receive timely and appropriate care.

2. RATIONAL OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study lies in understanding the perceptions of mental health care recipients on engagement of community health workers in mental health support. There are Programme reports which claim about the work of Mitadins in mental health in the state. The Programme reports are the evidence of tireless work of Mitadins, but there are no reports on the perceptions of mental health care recipients on Mitadins work and support. Thus, it is very much important to study the perceptions of mental health care recipients. The findings can help the policy maker, Programme implementor, manager to engage Mitadins in mental health more effectively.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on community health workers in India has primarily focused on their role in maternal and child health, immunization, and general healthcare. However, the integration of mental health services into these roles has been a relatively underexplored area. Many studies suggest that ASHAs have a potential to bridge the gap in mental health care by promoting mental well-being, providing information on symptoms, and assisting individuals in accessing formal mental health services.

Mental health in rural India remains a stigmatized issue, often relegated to silence due to cultural taboos and a lack of mental health awareness. ASHAs, as trusted members of the community, are uniquely positioned to address this challenge by providing first-contact counseling, referring individuals to proper healthcare providers, and offering follow-up support. However, there are mixed perceptions regarding the effectiveness and limitations of ASHAs in the mental health domain. Some studies indicate that ASHAs are seen as trustworthy figures who can open the conversation about mental health, while others highlight concerns about their lack of formal mental health training, which may affect their ability to offer appropriate support.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach to understand the perceptions of healthcare receivers regarding the work of Mitadins in mental health. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with mental health patients and their families in rural Chhattisgarh. Participants were selected randomly, where Mitadins had been actively involved in mental health initiatives.

The sample included individuals who had either sought mental health care through formal channels or had been in contact with Mitadins for mental health-related issues. In total, 40 participants, 8 each from 5 divisions of the state were interviewed, including 20 individuals diagnosed with mental health conditions, 10 family members, and 10 community leaders. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify common themes and patterns in the perceptions of healthcare receivers.

5. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study was carried-out with following specific objective -

- To know the perceptions of mental health care recipients on community health workers.
- To document the case study of the mental health care recipients.

6. FINDINGS

PERCEPTIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH CARE RECEIVERS

1. **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF MITANINS' EFFORTS:** Many individuals who have received mental health support from Mitans appreciate their dedication, empathy, and availability. Mitans often work tirelessly within communities, visiting households, counseling individuals, and ensuring that those in need feel heard and supported. Their ability to listen without judgment has encouraged many individuals to seek mental health assistance rather than suppress their struggles. Mental health care receivers frequently mentioned that Mitans provide a sense of trust and confidentiality, making it easier for them to discuss their psychological distress. The compassionate approach of Mitans in addressing mental health challenges has contributed significantly to improving the well-being of individuals who previously felt isolated and hopeless.
2. **CHALLENGES IN MENTAL HEALTH OUTREACH:** Some mental health care receivers noted that while Mitans are supportive, they often lack in-depth knowledge about severe mental illnesses. Mitans primarily receive training in basic healthcare and mental health first aid, which means they might struggle to identify and manage complex conditions such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or severe depression. As a result, individuals experiencing critical mental health crises may not receive the urgent care they require. Additionally, due to societal stigma, Mitans encounter resistance from family members when trying to assist individuals suffering from mental health issues. Furthermore, their heavy workload, which includes responsibilities beyond mental health, sometimes reduces the amount of time they can dedicate to addressing mental health concerns effectively.
3. **IMPACT OF MITANINS ON REDUCING STIGMA:** Many care receivers observed that Mitans' efforts have contributed to reducing stigma around mental health. By openly discussing mental health issues in community meetings and individual counseling sessions, Mitans have played a crucial role in challenging traditional beliefs and misconceptions. Their consistent engagement through awareness campaigns has led to increased acceptance of mental health conditions as legitimate medical issues rather than signs of personal weakness or supernatural affliction. Some mental health care receivers shared that they initially faced discrimination from their own families and neighbors, but after Mitans provided education on mental illnesses, they received more support and understanding. Moreover, by involving local leaders and religious figures in mental health discussions, Mitans have been able to further influence societal perceptions, creating a more supportive environment for those struggling with psychological disorders.
4. **BARRIERS TO ACCESSING PROFESSIONAL CARE:** While Mitans provide initial support, some care receivers expressed frustration with the lack of accessible professional mental health services. In many remote areas, the nearest psychiatrist or mental health specialist is located far away, making it difficult for individuals to travel for treatment. Financial constraints further exacerbate this issue, as many care receivers cannot afford transportation or consultation fees. Even when Mitans successfully convince individuals to seek medical help, logistical challenges often prevent them from following through with treatment. Additionally, government-run mental health facilities are limited, leading to long waiting times and inadequate resources for those in need. Some mental health care receivers also noted that the medications prescribed to them were either unavailable or unaffordable, resulting in inconsistent treatment adherence. While Mitans play a critical role in connecting individuals with healthcare services, their efforts are sometimes hindered by systemic issues that make professional mental health care inaccessible to large segments of the rural population.

7. CASE STUDY REFLECTING PERCEPTIONS OF CARE RECEIVERS-OVERCOMING DEPRESSION WITH MITANIN'S SUPPORT

Meena Devi (pseudonym), a 40-year-old woman from a rural village, faced severe depression after the sudden loss of her husband. As the sole caretaker of her two children, she struggled with overwhelming grief, stopped interacting with neighbors, and lost interest in daily activities. During a routine household visit, Mitanin Sunita, noticed Meena's withdrawal and weight loss. Initially hesitant to open up, Meena eventually confided in Sunita about her emotional pain. Understanding the severity of the situation, Sunita provided psychological support by visiting her frequently, offering

comfort, and encouraging her to engage in daily routines. She also convinced Meena's relatives to be more supportive and patient rather than dismissing her sadness as a phase.

Recognizing that Meena needed medical intervention, Sunita accompanied her to a nearby health center, where a doctor diagnosed her with clinical depression. With counseling, medication, and community support, Meena gradually regained her strength and resumed her daily life. She later joined a self-help group facilitated by the Mitandin, where she shared her experience and helped other women facing similar struggles. Today, Meena credits Sunita's timely intervention for saving her life, expressing gratitude for her dedication and compassion.

8. BREAKING THE STIGMA AROUND ANXIETY DISORDERS

Ramesh Kumar (pseudonym), a 32-year-old farmer, had been struggling with persistent anxiety for over a year. He experienced frequent panic attacks, restlessness, and sleepless nights, but he and his family dismissed these symptoms as stress caused by financial burdens. His productivity at work declined, and he became increasingly irritable, leading to conflicts with his family. Mitandin Kavita noticed his behavior change and approached him during a community meeting. After speaking with him privately, she identified signs of an anxiety disorder. However, Ramesh's family resisted seeking medical help, believing that mental health issues were a sign of weakness rather than a legitimate health concern. To address this, Kavita organized a small awareness session for Ramesh's family and neighbors, explaining common mental health conditions and their treatment. She shared success stories of individuals who had recovered from anxiety disorders with medical support. Slowly, Ramesh's family began to understand the seriousness of his condition.

With Kavita's encouragement, Ramesh visited a government health center, where he was prescribed mild medication and therapy. Over time, his anxiety reduced, and he regained control over his emotions. Now an advocate for mental health, Ramesh actively shares his experience, emphasizing the role of Mitandin in changing rural perceptions of mental illness. He acknowledges that without Kavita's persistence, he might have continued suffering in silence.

9. ADDRESSING POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

Amina Begum (pseudonym), a 26-year-old mother from a remote village, faced postpartum depression after the birth of her first child. She frequently experienced mood swings, persistent sadness, and overwhelming fatigue. Her disinterest in caring for her baby raised concerns among family members, who believed she was simply being negligent. Instead of recognizing her symptoms as a medical condition, they criticized her for failing to embrace motherhood.

Mitandin Reeta had been monitoring Amina's health since her pregnancy and immediately noticed the signs of postpartum depression. During home visits, she gently encouraged Amina to talk about her emotions and assured her that she was not alone. She also educated Amina's husband and in-laws about the condition, explaining that it was a common yet treatable issue among new mothers. After much persuasion, Amina's husband agreed to take her to a government hospital, where she was diagnosed and provided counseling. Reeta continued supporting her through regular visits, ensuring that she followed the treatment plan and received encouragement. Gradually, Amina regained her confidence and developed a strong bond with her child.

10. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that Mitandins are widely viewed as helpful figures in the mental health care ecosystem in rural Chhattisgarh, but their effectiveness is limited by resources and the complexities of mental health care. While their role in raising awareness, providing initial support, and making referrals is invaluable, there is a clear need for improved access to resources, and more collaborative frameworks with mental health professionals. The stigma surrounding mental health remains a major barrier to care and Mitandins due to their familiarity within communities, may play an essential role in breaking down these barriers. However, their role must be supported by additional capacity building, access to mental health resources, and a more robust referral system to ensure that they can provide meaningful and effective support.

11. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that, Mitanins are perceived positively in the context of mental health care in rural Chhattisgarh. Their work is appreciated, especially in terms of building trust, offering basic information, and facilitating access to resources. However, to enhance the effectiveness of Mitanins in mental health care, there is a need for next level of training, better integration of mental health services into the community health framework, and continued community awareness programs to further reduce stigma.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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