

## The Role of Community Health Workers in Promoting Public Health: A Comprehensive Approach

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**Abstract:** The community health workers (CHWs) play a vital role in promoting public health, particularly in underserved communities. The aim of the research is discussed the important role of Community Health Workers (CHWs) in improving public health in underserved areas and explore the difficulties CHWs face, their contribution to providing essential health services, and the challenges they encounter during their fieldwork. By conducting in-depth interviews with ten CHWs, the study utilized thematic analysis to identify key patterns. The results highlighted the various obstacles CHWs encounter, such as issues with trust, cultural barriers, and limited resources. Despite these challenges, CHWs are crucial for connecting communities with healthcare systems. To enhance their effectiveness, it is essential to invest in training, support systems, and fair compensation. Strengthening the CHW workforce is vital for enhancing public health outcomes and addressing disparities in healthcare access.

**Keywords:** Community, Health Workers, Public Health, Comprehensive

### Introduction

Community health workers (CHWs) are community-chosen individuals tasked with connecting people to healthcare services and empowering them to take charge of their health (World Health Organization [WHO], 2010). Being part of the community, CHWs have a profound grasp of local customs, traditions, and difficulties, allowing them to efficiently cater to the health requirements of their communities (Nasrin, Hossain, & Rahman, 2013).

CHWs have a diverse role in advancing public health. They are typically involved in tasks like health education, disease prevention, early detection of cases, and guiding individuals to more advanced healthcare when needed (Karki et al., 2018). Acting as a vital link between communities and healthcare systems, they enhance access to crucial health services, especially for marginalized and underserved groups (Glanz, Rimer, & Viswanath, 2015).

By collaborating closely with members of the community, CHWs can effectively tackle a broad array of public health concerns, including maternal and child health, infectious diseases, chronic conditions, and mental health (World Health Organization, 2010). Their capacity to establish trust and connections with community members facilitates health promotion initiatives like vaccination drives, nutritional guidance, and health screenings (Nasrin, Hossain, & Rahman, 2013). Additionally, CHWs can play a vital role in responding to health emergencies, such as outbreaks or natural disasters, by offering crucial assistance and information to impacted communities (Karki et al., 2018).

Community health workers (CHWs) have become essential assets in tackling the intricate health issues faced by communities worldwide (World Health Organization [WHO], 2010). Their duties go beyond providing healthcare and include community development, disease prevention, and health promotion (Nasrin, Hossain, & Rahman, 2013). As frontline health workers, CHWs are in a unique position to comprehend and address the specific needs and priorities of their communities (Karki et al., 2018).

However, the effectiveness of CHWs is often hindered by various factors, including inadequate resources, limited training, and challenging working conditions (World Bank, 2015). Despite these challenges, CHWs continue to play a critical role in improving health outcomes, particularly among vulnerable populations (Glanz, Rimer, & Viswanath, 2015).

### Literature review

The Community Health Workers (CHWs) have a significant role in the healthcare system. They serve as essential providers of healthcare services, especially in resource-constrained settings (Njororai et al., 2021). CHWs act as a vital link between the community and formal healthcare systems, enhancing medical access and promoting behavioral changes (Andrews et al., 2004).

CHWs are instrumental in addressing various health issues, such as child morbidity, mortality, malaria management, smoking cessation, and responding to health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Brenner et al., 2011; Ghanashyam, 2020). Their involvement in community-based health programs contributes to promoting healthy behaviors, improving healthcare access, and enhancing overall quality of life (Verhagen et al., 2013).

Through their unique position, CHWs enable community-based participatory research, fostering collaboration between community members and researchers (O'Brien et al., 2009). They also play a crucial role in meeting the specific healthcare needs of diverse demographic groups, including elderly immigrants and teenagers from ethnic minorities (Andrews et al., 2004).

Studies emphasize the importance of empowering and recognizing the valuable contributions of CHWs in the healthcare sector (Kalne et al., 2022). The engagement of CHWs is considered vital for establishing social healthcare networks and strengthening primary healthcare services (Zambruni et al., 2017).

Training and support for healthcare workers, including CHWs, have been shown to enhance their knowledge, skills, and confidence, ultimately improving the quality of care provided to the population (Elias & Munirah, 2021).

### Objectives

1. This study aimed to explore the challenges experienced by the Community health workers in carrying out their daily duties.
2. To explore the role of community health workers in providing essential health services in the community.
3. To analyze the crisis, they face during the field work.

### Research methodology

The research method is the procedure followed by researchers to carry out a study to achieve the research objective (Ortiz & Greene, 2007). This research was qualitative in nature and thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Qualitative research means presentation of data in text, statements and picture forms (Busetto Wicka & Gumbinger, 2020) Research participants were community health workers (CHWs). Key informants' interviews method was used for data collection. Key informant interviews are conducted to get deep and in-depth point of views of the participants regarding the under studied phenomena (Islam, Khan, & Baikady, 2022) Interview schedule was used for collecting data from participants. The research participants were 10 community health works because they are those people who interacts with the community members on daily basis. The interview was carried out in native language of participants and translated and transcribed in English by the researchers. The collected data were analyzed through thematic analysis, taken out from the data. In thematic analysis researcher develop themes and collected data is analyzed the data accordingly (Braun & Clark, 2012)

## Result and Discussion

### The bridge between the healthcare system and the community

In the community the community health workers provide health services to promote a healthy lifestyle and prevent diseases. (Olaniran, 2017).

*"I believe that we are the people that can be used to give any kind of message to the community".*

Most community health workers mobilize and encourage community members to utilize available health services for the sake of good health. Community health workers play a crucial role in promoting health system accountability to communities, with factors like local political context, community interactions, and health system treatment influencing their role (Olaniran et al., 2017).

*"I have seen that people are still living in the traditional era, most of the people are not aware of the medical digital technology and their uses".*

Community health workers play an important role in society, greatly benefiting the public. They perform tasks in the community that ensure everyone receives some sort of benefit. Without community workers, the healthcare system would be incomplete, as they are the pillars of the health system.

### Trust issue in the community

Community health workers (CHWs) are individuals with cultural understanding and shorter training, providing culturally appropriate health services to communities. (Abimbola Olaniran, 2017). Strengthening community health workers' roles and integrating them into community health teams can lead to comprehensive healthcare system that supports community and tribal wellness. (Hector Balcazar, 2011).

*"Since last 10 years, I'm working as the community lead in the field, I have seen that the major issue of the society is that they cannot trust you easily and therefore they are not ready to listen you"*

*"I have experienced that people has checked my ID card of my organization, sometimes they call the police and their local politics leader for our verification"*

It is impossible to work in society without trust, and without trust you cannot accomplish anything. Therefore, it is crucial that community health workers first establish trust and assure people that they will respect their privacy. People need to be confident that there is a relationship of trust and reliability between them and you. To work among the public, it is essential for Community health workers (CHWs) to first earn the trust of the community members.

## **Cultural norms**

Cultural norms in Karachi, like in many places, can pose both opportunities and challenges for community health workers (CHWs).

*“Mostly resident of Karachi city are for from other cities of Pakistan, therefore sometimes it becomes very difficult for us to understand them”*

Karachi, a vibrant and diverse city, presents a unique set of issues that can affect how health services are delivered and received, problems that Community health workers (CHWs) might face due to cultural norms, Gender roles and expectations, family Dynamics, Religious beliefs and Practices, Stigma and Taboos, Education and literacy levels, Economic Constraints, Cultural Practices, Trust and relationship, Communication Barriers. Understanding and respecting these cultural norms and values while safeguarding their privacy is extremely important.

*“I have observed that those families who migrates from their cities to Karachi, most of them are not aware of the medical treatments of many small diseases”*

As community health workers (CHWs), it is crucial for us to understand these cultural values and work accordingly, so that the cultural values remain intact, and our work can be carried out smoothly.

## **Community based Community health workers**

Previous studies have shown that the selection criteria of the organization and institutions for community health workers are based on community membership, knowledge of the community culture and language spoken in the community, personality traits that encourage trust and respect, gender, previous experience providing healthcare, and educational qualifications (World Health Organization, 2006)

*“People believe me because we belong to the same community, and they feel comfortable when I visit them”*

Selecting community health workers (CHWs) based on their community members is a strategic approach that enhances the effectiveness of health interventions. By choosing individuals who are already integrated within their communities, organizations can leverage existing trust and understanding to bridge gaps in healthcare.

*“It has been 15 years since I'm working as community health worker in the community because I have a good understanding of the people over here”*

These workers have an innate understanding of local traditions, language, and social dynamics, enabling them to customize health messages and services in a way that resonates with their peers. Their established connections with community members also enhance communication and collaboration, simplifying the process of addressing health concerns and promoting

behavioral changes. Community health workers (CHWs) who are part of the communities they serve are often more driven and dedicated to enhancing local health outcomes, as they have a personal interest in the welfare of their neighbors. This culturally sensitive approach not only encourages greater acceptance and involvement but also ensures that health initiatives are more pertinent and effective.

*“Being a member of the community, it helps us a lot to make understand the people in our native language”*

Community health workers (CHWs) are also expected to have a close understanding of or share ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status of the community. It is anticipated that these characteristics will ensure that community health workers (CHWs) can better mobilize and increase community members' acceptance of the health service provided. (Ribeiro, 2014)

## **Unpaid volunteers**

According to the studies that many of the community health workers are unpaid. (6)

Unpaid volunteers' community health workers (CHWs) play a pivotal role in enhancing public health, particularly in underserved and resource-limited areas. Their contributions are often characterized by a profound dedication to improving public community well-being despite the lack of financial compensation. These volunteers frequently step into roles that involve providing basic health education, supporting disease prevention efforts, and offering essential services like vaccination and maternal care. Their contributions are invaluable in mitigating the impact of such crises on vulnerable populations.

Unpaid community health worker often provides first aid and emergency medical care those injured or affected by the floodwaters. This includes treating wounds, managing minor injuries and stabilizing patients until they can reach a healthcare facility.

During floods, there is a high risk of waterborne diseases like cholera, diarrhea, and dengue fever. Community health worker educate the community on prevention measures, such as safe water practice, hygiene and sanitation to reduce the spread of these diseases.

Another significant of the research has shared that *“we mobilize the community members to participate in cleanup activities in the society, meanwhile we also involve other volunteer students to participant in it”*. Their emotional support to individuals and families affected by any issues helps them to cope with the trauma and stress associated with them.

## **Challenges in the field work**

To establish and maintain the Community Health Workers (CHWs) workforce, it's crucial to develop a foundation of evidence regarding their roles and

impact, raise awareness about available reimbursement methods, and exchange best practices among employers, supervisors, career development programs, and funding strategies. (6)

*“Sometimes we face the most difficult issues in the field that we need to make decisions on the spot, we cannot coordinate with the upper level of management”*

*“Due to security concerns sometimes we have to take risk and we go to the field work for the sake of those people who contribute with us in the community, and just to maintain the relationship of trust”*

Community health workers (CHWs) face a variety of field challenges that can impact their effectiveness and the communities they serve. Likewise, resource limitations, training and education, workload and burnout, safety and security, compensation and motivation, infrastructure and accessibility, coordination and support, cultural and language barriers. These challenges can significantly impact the ability of (CHWs) to perform their duties and contribute to overall health outcomes in the communities they serve. Addressing these issues requires targeted intervention at both the policy and operational levels.

## Conclusion

Community health workers (CHWs) have become invaluable assets in bridging the gap between healthcare systems and communities. Their role in promoting health, preventing diseases, and enhancing community well-being is undeniable. By mobilizing communities, encouraging healthcare utilization, and addressing trust issues, CHWs have significantly improved public health. Despite their crucial role, CHWs face challenges such as cultural norms, trust-building, and limited resources that hinder their effectiveness. The commendable contributions of unpaid volunteers in supporting CHWs often go unrecognized and unsupported. To maximize the impact of CHWs, concerted efforts are needed. This includes investing in their training, providing adequate resources, and acknowledging their contributions through fair compensation. Establishing robust support systems and addressing security concerns are essential for ensuring their safety and well-being. By overcoming these challenges and leveraging CHWs' strengths, healthcare systems can enhance equity and improve population health outcomes.

CHWs are indispensable for community health and well-being. By recognizing their efforts, investing in their growth, and addressing their challenges, we can harness their potential to create healthier and more resilient communities.

## Recommendation

- The research highlighted a significant gap in the investment allocated for CHW training and

development. This is evident in the limited skills and knowledge many CHWs possess, hindering their ability to effectively address community health needs. To tackle this issue, substantial investment in comprehensive training programs is crucial. This will provide CHWs with the necessary skills to enhance their performance and ultimately improve community health outcomes.

- Additionally, inadequate compensation often results in high turnover rates and a decline in the quality of CHW services. To retain skilled CHWs and motivate them to excel, fair compensation and benefits packages are essential. This will contribute to a more stable and effective CHW workforce.
- The study emphasized the importance of robust support systems, including mentorship, supervision, and access to resources, to empower CHWs. By offering these vital support mechanisms, organizations can boost CHW job satisfaction, reduce burnout, and enhance program performance.
- The findings stress the need for data-driven decision-making to optimize resource utilization and enhance program effectiveness. Regular evaluation of CHW programs will provide valuable insights into program performance, enabling timely adjustments and improvements.
- The study identified several policy gaps that limit the full potential of CHWs. Advocating for policy changes is crucial to create a more supportive environment for CHW programs. This involves securing adequate funding, establishing supportive regulatory frameworks, and acknowledging the value of CHWs in the healthcare system.

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