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Technical Brief

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN IMPROVING RESPECTFUL CARE

An Overview of the Technical Report

Respectful care has been drawing increasing interest within the field of reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health (RMNCAH). Concurrently, there has been an increased call for health systems to be answerable to the populations they serve for delivering quality care through social accountability approaches. This brief provides an overview of a technical report conducted by MOMENTUM Knowledge Accelerator (MKA) exploring the use of social accountability approaches to improve respectful care in RMNCAH services.

DEFINITIONS

Respectful Care

The technical report defines respectful care as care that maintains all individuals' dignity, privacy, and confidentiality; ensures that interactions with individuals or carers enhance informed decision-making, without inducement or coercion; promotes continuous support (as appropriate); is compassionate and responsive to their preferences, needs, and values; and is free from stigma, discrimination, mistreatment, and harm (Streifel et al., 2022).

Existing research and programs related to respectful care mainly focus on respectful maternity care, with less exploration of family planning, reproductive health, and adolescent health, and very little attention to newborn and child health. Factors that shape whether care is respectful or not include the extent to which the health care system and facilities are more broadly oriented to patient care, the level of engagement and feedback from patients and communities, provider knowledge and expertise, the health policy and legal context, and the prevalence of providers' prejudicial and discriminatory beliefs. These factors are influenced by many considerations, including training, incentives, and leadership, among others. The existing research assessing ways to promote respectful care is somewhat limited, generally focusing on efforts at the facility level, as opposed to addressing social norms and other structural factors, such as stigma or national-level policy.

Social Accountability

Social accountability consists of "citizen-led, collective processes for holding duty-bearers (including politicians, government officials, and/or service providers) to account for their actions" (Squires et al., 2020). There are many different types of social accountability efforts that seek to improve health care access and quality. The majority of programs implemented to address health include social accountability as a process of providing information to communities about their rights and entitlements; community and health provider assessments of current service provision against these rights and entitlements; and an "interface" meeting or dialogue, wherein community members and health providers identify priorities and create an action plan.

METHODOLOGY

The report is informed by a rapid literature review, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions on the empirical evidence and the theoretical basis of social accountability interventions' influence on respectful care across the RMNCAH continuum. The rapid literature review included peer-reviewed and gray literature from searches on Google Scholar and PubMed. It focused on identifying and synthesizing germane literature in the social accountability and respectful care fields. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with 34 individuals working at the intersection of social accountability and respectful care in RMNCAH. The qualitative explorations served to collect information on current and planned work related to social accountability and respectful care in RMNCAH, including who are the key stakeholders, and to identify gaps in work. A background paper informed by these findings served as the fulcrum for discussions in a two-day convening of USAID and key external stakeholders and a session for USAID stakeholders. The inputs solicited, points discussed, recommendations, and conclusions from these discussions were incorporated into the background paper to form the technical report.

MAIN FINDINGS

Social Accountability and Respectful Care

The link between social accountability mechanisms and respectful care appears intuitive. However, while some studies and programs address respectful care or collect related data, respectful care is not typically identified as a distinct outcome in social accountability efforts. The extant evidence demonstrates that social accountability interventions have influenced outcomes related to respectful care, including increases in patient satisfaction, the (observed) provision of respectful maternity care, greater information provision during a clinical/counseling encounter, attention to privacy and confidentiality, polite treatment, perceived quality of care by the patients, patient willingness to seek care, a perceived commitment of service providers, trust in service providers, and mutual interest between clients and providers.

Social accountability may be a promising strategy for improving respectful RMNCAH care. Social accountability programs typically entail members of the community assessing health system performance, and respectful care can and should be monitored—at least in part—by communities themselves. Among the elements of quality of care, respectful care might be the most amenable to community monitoring. Health care providers know that patients with knowledge about respectful care may be assessing care as it is delivered, and that lack of respectful care may be brought up in the course of social accountability activities, such as community dialogues. Further, as many elements of respectful care are within the control of local health providers, such as polite treatment, respect for privacy, the provision of information, and compliance with consent processes. Thus, local-level social accountability efforts could engender improvements in respectful care.

Conceptual Framework

Synthesizing and building on existing empirical evidence and theory in social accountability, health, RMNCAH, and respectful care, the technical report presents a possible theoretical pathway from social accountability to respectful care in RMNCAH that can be used by implementers to design social accountability interventions that engender improvements in respectful care.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The technical report identified several challenges and gaps related to social accountability and respectful care in RMNCAH, including limited evidence for social accountability as a strategy to promote respectful RMNCAH care, variation in the ways social accountability and respectful care are operationalized and measured, short implementation periods and a lack of flexibility in the way projects are structured, and challenges related to the scalability and sustainability of interventions. While there is work underway and plans to generate more evidence, serious gaps remain.

The technical report concludes with a series of recommendations for refining the conceptualization of social accountability and respectful RMNCAH care; improving how key constructs (e.g., social accountability, respectful care, RMNCAH) are measured and operationalized; building a stronger evidence base for social accountability as a strategy to promote respectful care; developing consolidated tools and guidance for social accountability specific to respectful care and RMNCAH; and strengthening implementation of social accountability and respectful care interventions.

REFERENCES

Streifel, C.; Mandal, M.; Schaaf, M.; Ivankovich, M.; and Vaz, L.M.E. (2022). The role of social accountability in improving respectful care. Washington, DC: USAID MOMENTUM.

Squires, F., Hilber, A.M., Cordero, J.P., Boydell, V., Portela, A., Sabin, M.L., & Steyn, P. (2020). Social accountability for reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health: A review of reviews. *PLoS One*, 15,(10), e0238776.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For the full [technical report](#) and a visual of the conceptual framework, please see: Streifel, Cathryn; Mandal, Mahua; Schaaf, Marta; Ivankovich, Megan; and Vaz, Lara M. E. 2022. *The Role of Social Accountability in Improving Respectful Care*. Washington, DC: USAID MOMENTUM.

For a [research brief](#) on the conceptual framework, please see: Streifel, Cathryn; Mandal, Mahua; Schaaf, Marta; Ivankovich, Megan; and Vaz, Lara M. E. 2022. *Can Social Accountability Improve Respectful Care?* Washington, DC: USAID MOMENTUM.

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