

Title: Catalyzing Self Help Groups to Support a Community Level Fight Against TB in Himachal Pradesh, India.

Background: A movement for a TB free India can achieve critical mass through wide ranging people's participation. In India, SHGs are seen as one of the most significant tools for adopting a participatory approach that empowers women, and have been noted for strengthening community health systems. The state TB Cell Himachal Pradesh (HP) in India sensitized and catalysed to a) create TB free panchayats b) build support for the Family Care Model for TB by providing home-based care to TB patients c) reduction in TB related stigma d) increase in women's participation in the fight against TB in the state.

Intervention

Between April 2023 – March 2024, 2500 SHGs and 900 Mahila Mandals were sensitized across HP. They co-ordinated with Panchayati Raj Institutions to proliferate community level campaigns against TB in every village. This included awareness activities and education campaigns, identifying and referring presumptive TB cases with the support of community health activists (ASHAs) for early testing. Information on preventive measures such as the promoting of masks, basic hygiene and cough etiquette was disseminated through the groups. SHGs were mobilized to provide counselling support to persons with TB and their families, enabled their access to TB care and nutrition, and encouraged treatment adherence. SHGs were also deployed in stigma reduction by raising TB awareness through campaigns, community meetings, myth busting sessions and building an inclusive environment for TB patients and their families. The SHG intervention also focused on women as a key stakeholder in the fight against TB – as patients, survivors, care givers and community mobilizers.

Results: The SHGs and Mahila Mandals have reached approximately 200,000 people through various activities such as counselling, sample transportation, screening, and awareness initiatives. 25000 people were screened for TB through this intervention and 674 people were tested for TB out of which 12 people were diagnosed with the disease. They further built community support by engaging 540 ASHAs and felicitating 46 TB Champions (TB survivors/advocates).

Conclusion: Integrating SHGs into TB programs proved to be an effective strategy for improving TB control in HP as it enabled women's empowerment, mitigated stigma, built community wide TB awareness and improved accessibility to TB prevention, treatment and care services, including home-based care.

Summary: Using an intervention initiated in the state of Himachal Pradesh (HP) in India, this paper advocates integrating women centric Self Help Groups into TB programs for improving TB prevention and control, stigma mitigation, improving home based care and access to TB services at a community wide level.

