

“They Know Everything”: the Role of Community Health Workers in Abortion Access

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Community health workers (CHWs) are community members trained in health promotion and basic services, but are not considered healthcare professionals. As the key interface between public health systems and rural communities in many low- and middle-income countries, they play a significant role in people’s pathways to care.

In India, female CHWs provide information on maternal and new born health, including contraceptive advice. Equipped with pregnancy kits, they are often privy to women’s first acknowledgement or confirmation of pregnancy. As trusted confidants and sources of health knowledge, women turn to them for advice and support in their abortion decision-making. Thus, CHWs’ knowledge of, and attitudes towards abortion, can influence abortion decisions and pathways, including how safe they are.

Field research in rural Indian communities reveals that CHWs can enable or prevent abortion access based on the advice or support provided. They also display some stigmatising attitudes towards abortion including negative stereotypes and moral qualms, which can affect the quality and nature of their advice. For example, some CHWs accompany women to trusted providers and keep their abortion secret, while others may insist on first establishing family permission or consent.

In contexts where abortion is legal, recognising CHWs as pivotal actors in abortion care and investing in their training can make safe abortion more accessible. By providing accurate information and identifying safe providers, CHWs can enable women’s decision-making and their agencies; and reduce their risk of death or injury.