

Understanding Awareness, Agency and Autonomy of Mothers and Potential of Digital Technology in Expanding Maternal Health Information Access: A Survey of Mothers in Urban India

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Abstract : Understanding the health-seeking behaviors and attitudes of women towards maternal health in the context of gender roles and family dynamics is tremendously crucial for designing effective and impactful interventions aimed at improving maternal and child health outcomes. Further, as the digital world becomes more accessible and affordable, it is imperative to scope the potential of digital technology in enabling access to maternal health information in different socioeconomic groups (SEGs). In the summer of 2017, we conducted a study with 500 women across different SEGs in urban India who were pregnant or had had a delivery in the last year. The study was undertaken to assess their maternal health information seeking behavior with a particular focus on probing their use of digital technology for health-related information. The study also measured women's decision-making autonomy in the context of maternal health, awareness of their rights to quality and respectful maternal healthcare, and agency to voice their rights. We probed the impact of key variables including education, age, and socioeconomic status on all outcome variables. In terms of health-seeking behaviors, we found that women heavily relied on medical professionals and/or their mothers and mothers-in-law for all maternal health advice. Digital adoption was found to be high across all SEGs, with around 70% of women from all populations using the internet several times a week. On the other hand, use of the internet for both accessing maternal health information and choosing maternity hospitals were both significantly dependent on SEG. The key reasons reported for not using the internet for health purposes were lack of awareness and lack of trust on content accuracy. Decisions around health practices and type of delivery were found to be jointly made by women and other family members. Almost all women reported their husbands to play a key role in all maternal health decisions and for decisions with a clear financial implication like choice of hospital for delivery, husbands were reported to be the sole decision maker by a majority of women. The agency of women was also found to be low in interactions with maternal healthcare providers with a third of respondents not comfortable with voicing their opinions and preferences to their doctors. Interestingly, we find that this relatively low agency was prominent in both lower middle class and middle-class SEGs. Recognition of the sociocultural determinants of behavior is the first step in developing actionable strategies for improving maternal health outcomes. Our study quantifies the agency and autonomy of women in urban India and the variables that impact them. Our findings emphasize the value of gender normative approaches that factor in the key role husbands play in guiding maternal health decisions. They also highlight the power of digital approaches for catalyzing access to maternal health information. These insights into the attitude and behaviors of mothers in context of their sociocultural environments—and their relationship with digital technology—can help pave the way towards designing effective, scalable maternal and child health programs in developing nations like India.

Keywords : access to healthcare information, behavior, digital health, maternal health

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