Understanding the knots in mothers' social ties with child health: Ethnographic reflections from the Indian Sundarbans

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Background

Livelihood transitions like seasonal male out migration are coping mechanisms against poverty and poor health for people living in geo-climatically challenged disadvantageous regions, like the Indian Sundarbans. In such contexts the ability of mothers to command social resources through support networks makes an important difference to child health. The study ascertains key community players and health institutions that characterise mothers' support network and identifies the gaps in the network that might impact on child health.

Method

The study involved ethnographic observation for two months followed by participatory social network mapping with randomly selected two sets of mothers with migrant husband and with non-migrant husband both with at least one 0-6 years child in a geo-climatically vulnerable village of Kultali Block in Indian Sundarbans. In-depth interviews with same respondents undertaken provided a textured and nuanced understanding of networks categorised into material, practical, cognitive and emotional. SNA data was analysed using software Gephi while grounded theory helped analyse ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews.

Results

Mothers with migrant husband have larger material, practical and cognitive networks than their non-migrant counterpart excepting emotional support. Very few women in both groups have large networks overwhelmingly dominated by older females. Presence of 'structural hole' due to sub-optimal social grouping and weak grassroot health provider linkage was a major barrier within the existing community health system. The study also explored the triggers embedded within the network nodes through the lens of the women's community network.

Discussion and linkage with field building dimension

Community based health systems, are alive with social networks that facilitate or hinder people's livelihoods and good health. Understanding mother's support networks provides vital evidence of the crucial nodes through which women, other key actors and institutions broker ways to ensure child health. Understanding such social networks is crucial to supporting community resilience as a part of alternative approaches to community based health systems.