

Strengthening Inter-sectoral Co-operation for Improved Women's Health and Nutrition in Rural India

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Abstract: To study the impact of strengthening of inter-sectoral co-operation on health and nutrition of rural community. Under strong political leadership, co operation between multiple interlinked sectors like health, education, agriculture, communication and broadcasting, women and child welfare was strengthened for improving health and nutrition of women and children from rural community. One thousand women of reproductive age, from five villages were targeted to implement health and nutrition education intervention programme, using participatory community radio and intense IEC activities as primary medium of change with the technical support of multiple sectors concerned with maternal health and nutrition. A feed-forward (baseline)survey was conducted using pretested and validated questionnaire to gain an insight into the socio-economic and demographic profile of the community, media practices with special references to radio, and women's and children's health concerns and issues. Three capacity building workshops were conducted for the radio programme production teams and master trainers, who later on produced the participatory radio programmes, using various formats with the central theme of "Science for Women". Educational interventions in the form of 365 live in radio programmes on topics of women's health and nutrition, hygiene, sanitation, healthy environment were prepared and broadcasted from the Community Radio Station(CRS), one each daily. Twenty five village level food and nutrition exhibitions, recipe competitions and diagnostic health camps were organized. Programme resulted in strengthening of inter-sectoral co-operation among various departments like health, women and child welfare, communication and broadcasting, agriculture and education. Programme implementation resulted in empowerment and capacity building of community radio station staff and a team of community volunteers at science centre for agriculture, in producing radio contents for the Science for "Women's Health and Nutrition". There was capacity building of more than one thousand women as "Change Agents" for the local community. Endline evaluation revealed overall 42% improvement in the knowledge, practices and attitude level of women on health issues, health care seeking behaviour and dietary practices. Twenty new women self help groups (SHG) were formed, which helped in women's social and economic empowerment. Coming together and working together resulted in boosting up of their moral and sharing up of their domestic problems related to health, nutrition and domestic violence and gender related issues. Strengthening inter-sectoral co-ordination between health and allied departments under strong political leadership resulted in significant change in knowledge and practices of rural community about their health and nutrition.

Keywords: Inter-sectoral co-operation, Women's Health and Nutrition, Community radio, Women Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Inter-sectoral co-operation between various service departments like health, education, agriculture, communication and broad casting, health and nutrition were documented to be important for improved community participation, accountability of the public system, and service delivery [1].

The health department expects support from other departments, which may not necessarily be willing to take up a shared responsibility for health improvement, whereas the community expects "health" from the health department. Unfortunately, health department does not take initiative to seek help from the allied departments which results into delay in delivery

of health care services to the needy. The health sector is challenged to mobilize all stakeholders for inter-sectoral collaboration through advocacy [2]. In the health literature, the term *inter-sectoral collaboration* refers to the collective actions involving more than one specialised agency, performing different roles for a common purpose. Although *multisectoral involvement is useful*, but it is not sufficient to develop inter-sectoral collaboration [2].

WHO has recently emphasized the importance of inter-sectoral co operation and promoted the concept of inter-sectoral action for health (IAH) as “a recognised relationship between part or parts of the health sector with parts of another sector, which has been formed to take action on an issue to achieve health outcomes in a way that is more effective, efficient or sustainable than could be achieved by the health sector acting alone”[3]. There is need for coordination of efforts between allied sectors as an essential requirement for inter-sectoral collaboration, as highlighted in the 1978 Declaration of Alma Ata, Article VII (4): [3].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Under strong political leadership of a woman, co operation between multiple interlinked sectors including health, education, agriculture, communication and broadcasting, women and child welfare was strengthened for improving health and nutrition of rural community. One thousand women of reproductive age, from five villages were targeted to implement health and nutrition intervention programme, using participatory community radio and intense IEC activities as primary medium of change. A preliminary survey was conducted among 1000 women from five villages to assess the current status of awareness, knowledge and practice in health related issue and nutrition. Based on the finding of the baseline survey, the plan of action for 365 radio episode production with different themes and titles were finalized and relayed before every live in radio programme. The baseline survey of 1081 women participants was conducted by team of experts with the help of selected community volunteers. Survey gave a clear insight into the socio-economic and demographic profile of the community, media practices with special references to radio, and women’s and children’s health concerns and issues. This was followed by conduction of three capacity building workshops for the radio programme production teams and master trainers, who later on produced the participatory radio programmes, using various formats with the central theme of Science for Women.

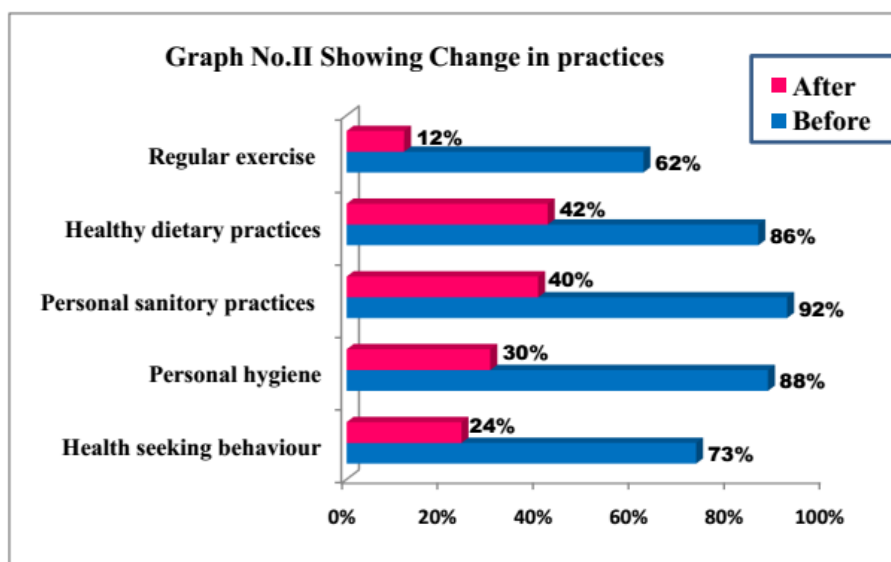
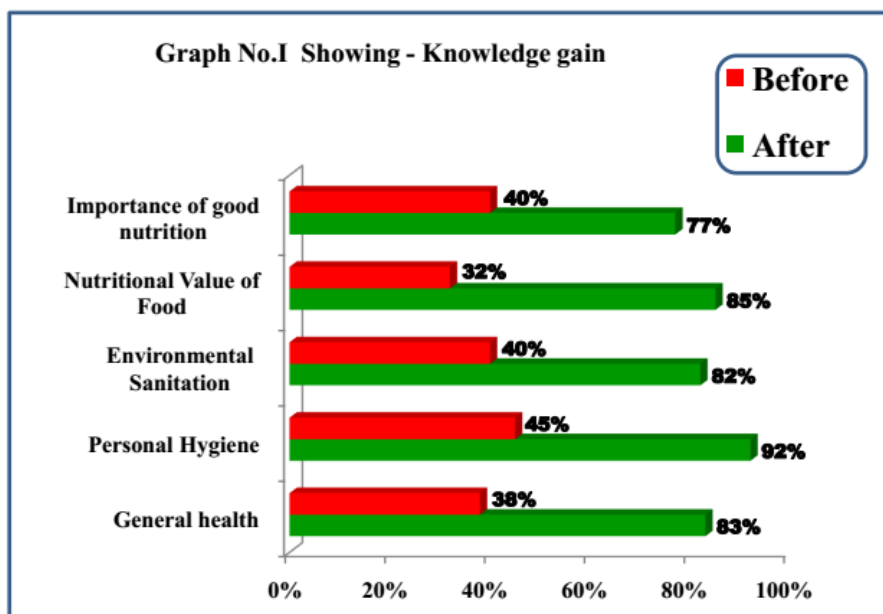
The major project activities included creation of 365 community radio episodes of 30 minutes duration each, on eight important themes that were identified through baseline survey. The community

radio episodes included topics like Nutritional Anemia (22 episodes), Chronic diseases (Cancer, Heart diseases, Diabetes, TB, HIV) (106 episodes), Nutrition management (Cereals, pulses, fruits, vegetables) (125 episodes), Adolescent health issues(16 episodes), Communicable diseases (25 episodes), Pregnancy and post-partum health issues (30 episodes), General health management (domestic fuel, sanitation, cleanliness, drinking water, yoga, exercises) (26 episodes), Orthopaedic problems (15 episodes).Two women’s sensitization programmes and health and nutrition exhibitions with 1215 women participants ,twelve diagnostic health camps at village level with 938 beneficiaries were few other major activities during one year of project period. Health interventions in the form of 365 live inradio programmes on topics of women’s health and nutrition, hygiene, sanitation, healthy environment were prepared and broadcasted from the Community Radio Station, one each daily at fixed time of the day. Twenty five village level food and nutrition exhibitions, recipe competitions and diagnostic health camps were organized .The project concluded with an end line survey to find out the impact of the intervention on same respondents using same questionnaire used during baseline survey. Good involvement of people from all sectors was ensured by the local leadership, from planning to implementation stage.

RESULTS

Programme resulted in strengthening of inter-sectoral co-operation among various departments like health, women and child welfare, communication and broadcasting, agriculture and education. Programme implementation resulted in empowerment and capacity building of community radio station staff and a team of community volunteers at science centre for agriculture, in producing radio contents for the Science for “Women’s Health and Nutrition”. There was capacity building of more than one thousand women as change agents for the local community.

Endline evaluation revealed overall 42% improvement in the knowledge, practices and attitude level of women on health issues, health care seeking behaviour and dietary practices (Graph 1 and 2). Twenty new women self help groups were formed which helped in women empowerment and self reliance. Coming together and working together resulted in boosting up of their moral and sharing up of their domestic problems related to health, nutrition and domestic violence and gender related issues. Large percentage of women understood the importance of having kitchen garden, having latrines at home, importance of visiting hospital rather than trying home remedies when sick. There was economic independence through income generation through self-help group activities (Graph 3).

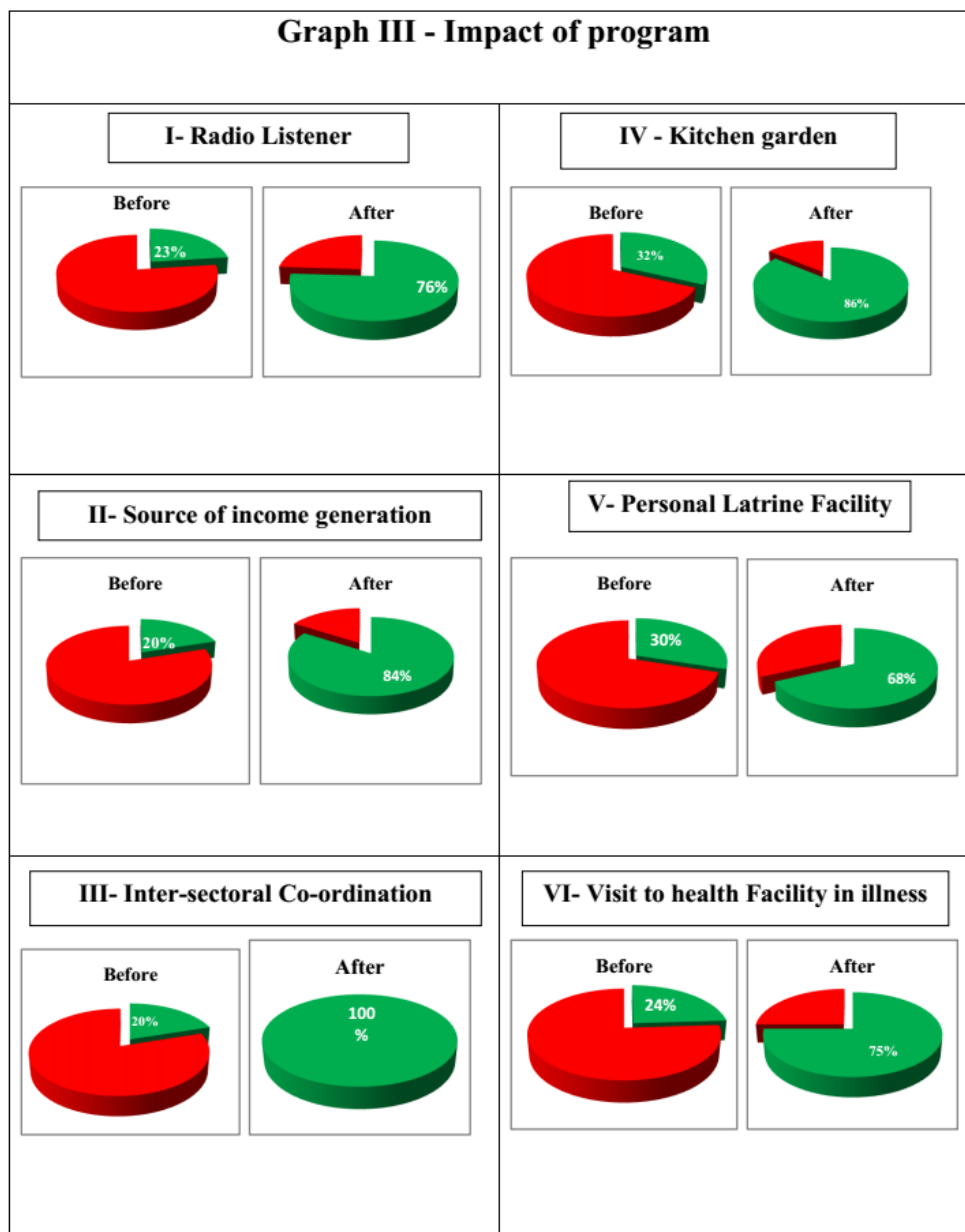


DISCUSSION

Inter-sectoral coordination is considered as a process towards achieving higher efficiency, quality, coverage, and effectiveness or as an end in itself, i.e. holistic approach to public health and nutrition [4]. In the present study, we focussed on developing coordination among all sectors involved in improving the health and nutrition of community, especially the women in the reproductive years. Effective convergence between the health and nutrition sectors relies on various factors for improved inter-sectoral actions and positive outcomes [5-8]. The observations and the results of the present study re affirm the usefulness of the inter-sectoral co-ordination for improvement in the various parameters related to health and nutrition of the women and community as a whole.

Similar observations were reported by various authors [9-13].

The project aimed at creating awareness of rural community, especially women of reproductive age, about good health and nutrition. The unique feature and challenge of the project was to popularise the community radio services in the era of television and smart phones for improving awareness about the health and nutrition of the rural community. The programmes were broadcasted at the time convenient for the rural community. The community participation in making of the radio programmes helped in community involvement. Community felt attached with the radio programmes as they were recorded and broadcasted in their own local language. The programme addressed the issues of health, hygiene, sanitation, environment, and gender equality as identified during baseline survey.



The diagnostic health camps were held with the help of local hospital run by a Non Government organization (NGO) through which villagers received free treatment from the charitable hospital. The specialist doctors and the academia were involved in delivery of radio talks and also conducting diagnostic camps at the village level. The nutrition and food exhibitions helped in imparting knowledge to village women about the nutritive value of locally available food substances. Various food recipes were prepared and exhibited by the village level volunteers, which helped in improving the awareness about healthy and nutritious diet. The food products were prepared and commercially sold by the women from self help groups. Many poster exhibitions were organized by home science college and medical college, which helped improving the awareness about healthy life style, importance of balanced diet, exercise and keeping away

from addictions like tobacco chewing or smoking, which is very common among rural community.

It was possible to develop a strong network of more than 1000 village women volunteers willing to work as change agents in the community. Project helped to increase the awareness, knowledge and skill of women in relation to health and nutrition. The project helped to empower women, built their capacity, increased confidence in public speaking and sharing their experiences.

CONCLUSION

Strengthening inter-sectoral co-ordination between health and allied departments under strong political leadership has shown significant change in knowledge and practices of rural community about their health and nutrition. Community radio, academia and

medical expertise available in the project area played important role in improving the awareness about importance of good health and nutrition. Inter-sectoral co-ordination resulted in avoidance of delay in reaching the services to the beneficiaries. Project resulted in women empowerment, capacity building and improving overall status of women from rural community. Community radio has proven to be a simple, cost effective medium to reach out to villagers in imparting knowledge about healthy life style and good nutrition.

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