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A Commentary on the United Nations Perspectives on the Exemplary Role of Women Workforce in Global Polio Eradication Efforts

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Introduction

The Americas were declared polio free in 1994, the World Health Organization (WHO) region of Western Pacific Region in 2000 and the European Region in 2002. The World Health Organization declared that polio has been eradicated from India in January 2014- a feat considered impossible for decades [1]. Concerted efforts to eradicate polio globally were initiated in 1988 by the WHO in association with the UNICEF and Non-Governmental organizations (NGOs) along with government planning groups and as a result, the numbers of annual diagnosed cases from the hundreds of thousands were reduced to less than 100 in the last few years [1-4]. In March 2014, the WHO announced the eradication of poliomyelitis in the South-East Asia Region, which includes eleven countries including India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, North Korea, Indonesia, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri-Lanka, Thailand and Timor-Leste [2,5]. With the addition of this region, the proportion of world population living in polio-free regions has reached 80%. In the global efforts to eradicate polio, it was indeed the result of the focused efforts of all the forces in action with the social-mobilization campaign as the core spearheaded mostly by women, that the virus finally saw its end from the majority of the developing countries.

A variety of international and national forces including the national governments, the World Health organization (WHO), Melinda and Bill Gates foundation, UNICEF, World bank, Centers for disease control and prevention (CDC), The Rotary foundation along with the Core Group Polio Project (CGPP) - led by PCI (project concern International) implemented with additional partners contributed to the polio eradication process, by continuing the strategy to expand the immunization map [1-4]. According to the WHO global polio eradication initiative, in 1995, India reported more than 51% of the polio cases of the world. Thereafter, a decrease in the number of children affected by polio from 1000 per day in 1988 to about 5 per day in 2006 was achieved which was a phenomenal reduction, with the last case in 2011 [1,2]. Active media support, constant rallying, popularization of national immunization days (NIDs) and above all, strategies of employing specialized staff and social mobilizers (SMRs), majority of whom were women, for concerted and relentless efforts in this direction finally bore fruit with polio being eradicated from most of the world today.

Social Mobilization (SM) -- The Cornerstone of the Core Strategy to Eradicate Polio

Expansion of social mobilization program played a key role in the polio eradication roadmap for the developing world. By UNICEF's definition social mobilization is "a broad-scale movement to engage people's participation in achieving a specific development goal through self-reliant efforts. It involves all relevant segments of society: decision and policy-makers, opinion leaders, bureaucrats and technocrats, professional groups, religious associations, commerce and industry, communities and individuals." The active, broad-based support garnered accelerates the attainment of a social goal, which usually is difficult to achieve when left to an automatic process of development.

The Role of Women as Central Players of the Social Mobilization Program

According to the UN agencies, while widespread mass media campaigns continued to ensure national visibility and public awareness of the immunization initiatives, augmentation of interpersonal communication and social mobilization interventions became crucial to reach the remote and hard-to-reach populations. In practice, these strategies relying on cadres of trained health workers and communicators were intensified to address the context in which the wild

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poliovirus was thriving [4,5].

Recruited women workforce were very successful social mobilizers -- this was because of the communication skills and the ease of connection with key family members i.e., grandmothers or mothers for vaccinating children that the women members of the vaccination team were naturally equipped with.

It is estimated that on a global level, more than 10 million volunteers have administered about 10 billion doses of polio vaccine on the numerous national and subnational immunization days at a cost of US\$ 4.5 billion since the World Health Assembly resolution of 1988, mostly by cadres of women workers involved tirelessly at the grassroots level of policy implementation [6-8].

Women have been the mainstay of the social mobilization program across the developing world to eradicate polio. According to United Nations estimates, in India, a staggering 80-85% of the 2.3 million vaccinators involved during each round of National Immunization Days were women workers -- this huge work-force included Auxiliary Nurse Midwives, Accredited Social Health Activists, front-line workers of the social welfare department and volunteers. In addition, approximately 70% of the 155,000 supervisors overseeing the work of these vaccinators were female. It is estimated that, in the once traditional polio reservoirs, more than 92% of the 128,000 vaccination teams had at least one female vaccinator as a team-member [3-6]. In addition, UNICEF's 8000-strong Social Mobilization Network, which went door to door spreading messages about polio encouraging and implementing OPV administration and routine immunization, exclusive breast-feeding, nutrition, hand hygiene and oral rehydration, was almost exclusively composed of women [4,5]. The mammoth task of immunizing approximately 125 million children annually was made possible as a result of these efforts [1].

The Role of Women in the Successful Implementation of Core Communication Strategies

Women have played a central role in fostering the desired change i.e, encouraging behavior and social transformation in remote areas and difficult-to-reach populations leading to the widespread acceptance of the oral polio vaccine.

The eradication core strategies refocused on reaching women caregivers through interpersonal communication with an emphasis on the safety and efficacy of oral polio vaccine and its benefits to children. Trained female health workers led these intensified and integrated efforts as the major forces in communication as well as communication support persons. Women workers have had an active role through all the steps of the campaign, especially in the "added-value polio communication" and other public health communication programs, particularly those trying to reach out to the marginalized segments of the population. According to the WHO, strategic communication efforts, in the implementation of which women played a key role, broadly encompassed the following themes-

- Implementation of communication interventions based on routine monitoring of epidemiological, social and behavioral data for the affected populations.
- Intensive use of interpersonal communication and social mobilization skills at different levels to maximize effectiveness,

efficiency and above all, the reach of the programs.

- Mobilization of community leaders, communication and relationship-building, with emphasis on engaging and pursuing families who questioned repeated rounds of polio vaccination;
- Involving religious leaders as spokespeople and using faith-based folk media to maximize the reach among community members;
- Addressing social and gender norms to improve interpersonal communication and increasing access among the hard-to-reach groups;
- Advocacy with intensive grassroots mobilization to reach and communicate with marginalized and poor communities; and
- Working actively as a team with other trained communication outreach workers as part of a house-to-house strategy to reach children missed during National Immunization Days and encourage subsequent attendance.

Overall, this led to synergistic, integrative communication and culturally sensitive advocacy that contributed tremendously to the Global Polio Eradication Initiative's progress in the direction of polio eradication.

Per UNICEF, the communities where social mobilization activities were conducted were consistently less likely to refuse OPV, more likely to attend vaccination booths in a timely manner, more likely to report a better perception of polio risk and positive attitudes towards OPV compared with communities without these activities, hence contributing to an overall lower incidence of the disease [3-5].

Women as the Pioneering Forces of Change

Women have been the harbingers of the face of change to eradicate polio. However, being actively involved in the polio eradication campaign process was not an easy task. Braving all the physical, environmental and geographical obstacles and barriers, these dedicated women chose to accept the bigger challenge of social reform and exemplified the translation of thought and policy into action. As mentioned above, the largest share of social mobilizers were women. This large devoted workforce dedicated time and energy towards bringing about attitude, perception and belief changes among populations spanning from unprepared educated ones to the poor illiterate masses who had little knowledge but many misconceptions about vaccination. These grassroots level women forces helped in demystifying the truth and became the catalysts of exemplary social change.

The reasons why families believed them was because they could easily relate to them. They were a helping hand providing support and reassurance to those struggling with questions about the potency of the vaccine or the ill effects or the long term consequences. They were patient listeners as well as emphatic implementers and activists for the campaign. This workforce was empathetic and sensitive to the populace as well as firm in determination to widely translate the reality of immunization at the remotest level.

Thus, women workforce has played a central role in contributing to the polio eradication campaign across the globe. In the two most populous continents - Asia and Africa, the teams of women vaccinators and large groups of committed teams of women have actively engaged in the momentous task of polio eradication efforts. The UN estimates that in many countries in these continents, a

vaccination team could not be imagined to be functional without a female vaccinator. Among the numerous achievements of women across the world, these remarkable women and the work they have done to ensure that children everywhere are safe from the threat of polio is worth acknowledging in the history of global health for years to come.

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