

Press Note

Consultation on The Role of Traditional Birth Attendants in the National Rural Health Mission

Dais from 11 states and their sangathans, along with civil society organisations, came together in New Delhi for the first time on May 1 and 2 for a national consultation to advocate for a concrete role for dais in public health programmes such as the National Rural Health Mission. It is estimated that there are over 10 lakh dais serving rural and urban communities across the country.

Organised by the Advisory Group on Community Action (a standing committee of the NRHM), the Gujarat Dai Sangathan, Population Foundation of India and the Centre for Health and Social Justice, they were joined by representatives from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, United Nations Population Fund, German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), WHO and USAID.

The objective of the meeting was to gain central and state recognition for the longstanding contribution of dais in the community. The meeting also sought to re-define and expand the role of dais, as caregivers and health promoters beyond childbirth.

Babiben Parmar, President of Dai Sangathan Gujarat, opened the discussion: "We dais are providing care day and night in our villages. Apart from support during childbirth, we promote immunisation, we help prevent tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and even promote health insurance. We have learned to recognise danger signs in pregnancy and we ensure that these women reach the lifesaving referral services that they need."

Participants heard the story of Bijla, a dai from Jharkhand, who recognised the life-threatening complications of a woman undergoing her third delivery. She related that, as Jharkhand did not have a hospital where a cesarean section could be performed, she took her to the adjoining state of West Bengal where such facilities were available. When the women went into labour and a doctor could not be found, Bijla raced around to rush a doctor to the woman, and ensured a safe caesarean delivery.

Narmadabai from Chittorgarh in Rajasthan, advocated for upgradation of dais' skills through training at the village level. This would ensure that her community respected her skills and the public health system recognised the role of dais.

Dr. Manisha Malhotra, Assistant Commissioner, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, said "The NRHM has not disowned dais. It is up to state governments to be innovative and integrate dais. NRHM is considering guidelines for financial incentives for dais."

After an animated discussion that raised issues such as: conflicts between dais and ASHAs; lack of respect for dais in formal health facilities; and lack of functioning health facilities. While government figures indicate that 100% of primary health centres in Madhya Pradesh are operational around the clock, Janakibai from Khargone District, MP said that none of the ten PHCs in her area are open 24 hours a day. In fact, three of them are not even functional. In such a situation, the role of dais is even more critical.

The meeting came out with the following key recommendations:

1. Dais must be recognised and supported concretely in the NRHM, as active partners along with ASHAs, ANMs and anganwadi workers.
2. The rich traditional support practices that dais provide through counseling, massage, traditional medicines, and nutrition must be recognised, documented and preserved.
3. Recognise the broader role of dais beyond childbirth, to the continuum of care that they provide in the community. Dais are critical to mobilising communities for public health programmes, both as health workers and as emotional and physical support for pregnant women.
4. Establish an accreditation council for dai training to ensure quality standards
5. Strengthen recognition and a collective voice for dais through supporting local, state and national dai organisations and federations, following from the examples of Gujarat and Rajasthan where 20,000 dais have been organised.
6. Invest in dais and their capacity building and in establishing their grassroots organisations.