

Abstract

The thesis addresses factors associated with high maternal mortality in Indian state of Assam through examination at disaggregated level. Motivation for taking up this research is twofold. First, according to recent estimates of Sample Registration System (SRS) report 2013, Assam exhibits the highest Maternal Mortality Rate in India with 300 per 1, 00,000 live births. An adverse pregnancy has lifelong effects on women's health and her new-born as well. However, studies which have investigated the context-specific reasons behind such a dismal statistics are limited in both number and scope. To the best of our knowledge, this thesis attempts to fill up the gap in literature in a more comprehensive fashion. Second, in 2010, Planning Commission of India came up with a proposal of increasing government financing of health sector from 1 percent of GDP to at least 2.5 percent by the end of 12th Plan i.e. 2017. The fund is purported to be utilized for improving health care workforce, quality of care, governance and accountability. For effective and productive use of such enhanced funding, it is imperative to identify the sectors where public money should be spent to improve maternal health outcome. To this end, the thesis identifies certain barriers to maternal health seeking behavior at disaggregated level.

We provide a brief outline of the thesis here. First, a broad range of literature is reviewed to understand the relationship between prevailing maternal health scenario and reasons for higher maternal deaths, both at national and international levels. Given this background, the thesis first analyzes how well the secondary data (obtained from various Government sources) fits the literature. To provide answer to this research question, we use rank correlation and cluster analysis. Surprisingly, districts with better socioeconomic conditions and better availability of maternal care facilities have higher maternal mortality compared to the ones with lower level of socioeconomic variables and maternal care facilities. This shortcoming may result from the fact that, data were taken from different sources and years, given the paucity of quality secondary level data for this region. This also highlights the fact that, any meaningful research and policy prescription, at least in the context of Assam and North Eastern India, should not be based on secondary data sources alone.

Observation from field survey indicates that anemia is one of the major causes of maternal deaths in sample districts of Assam. Medically speaking, maternal anemia is the result of the lower concentration of hemoglobin level in red blood cells. The evidence from the field

shows that such lower hemoglobin level is due to dietary imbalance resulting from low hem product in daily dietary intake. Further, analysis based on regression model indicates that concentration of low hemoglobin level is significantly associated with literacy, land landownership and teagarden habitats. However, evidence in favor of literacy rate (in terms of level of significance) is a bit weak. In addition, maternal health seeking behavior is shaped by organizational factors such as non-availability of ambulance and non-availability of female health providers; cultural factors such as ignorance and hesitation; socioeconomic factors such as long queue at facilities, non-availability of persons at home to take care of pregnant women and heavy workloads.

Based on the findings, one of the major implications is that policymaker should consider context-specific identification of factors affecting maternal health. For example, according to our results, food-based approach might be effective and preventive measures to reduce iron bioavailability (rather than supplements). Health promotion action needs to encourage people to seek medical help, ensuring availability of physical infrastructure and female health providers. In addition, community level awareness of maternal problems, tracking, monitoring of pregnant women are needed to enhance maternal health seeking behavior of the population.