

Lifelong Learning Pathways for Working Women Community Health Workers: Enhancing Competency and Professional Credibility

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Abstract

A tripartite collaborative Project for the training and certification of ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activists) was undertaken by NIOS in collaboration with the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (MoHFW) and National Health Systems Resource Centre (NHSRC). The Project was formulated and launched under the supervision of the first author when he was Director (Academic & Vocational) at NIOS. The second author was appointed as Project Director under the first author, and is still working on the Project.

ASHAs, who are nominated by Gram Panchayats (Rural Local Governing Bodies), work in close collaboration with Primary/Community Health Centres and District Hospitals. In order to ensure the quality of services to community through ASHAs, it was considered important to enhance their competency and professional credibility. The goal was to certify approximately 900,000 ASHA workers all over the country. First of all, a training network was established at the state and district level. Self learning materials were also developed. Finally, examinations are being conducted periodically.

In this paper, it is proposed to discuss this unique Project that has initiated a lifelong learning pathway for these community health workers. It will describe/discuss all the steps of this project.

This paper is being submitted under the sub-theme 'Opening up Education' and the strand of 'Lifelong Learning'. The paper is relevant as it reports a learning pathway for working people. Its significance lies in the fact that a very important field - that of rural health - is being addressed. The participants will be encouraged to discuss the following issues: accreditation of state and district training sites, certification of state and district trainers, development of self learning material, training process, conduct of examinations and certification.

Keywords

- Opening Up Education for Working Women
- Lifelong Learning Pathways for Working Community Health Workers
- Training Network
- Training and Certification
- Enhancing competency and professional credibility

Full Paper

1. Introduction: Opening Up Education for Working Women

India launched the National Health Mission in 2005 to address the health care needs of the rural and urban population. The Mission introduced Community Health Worker -the ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activists) as its core component to address health care needs of the people, particularly the rural population. This represents one of the cornerstones of NRHM's strategy to address the millennium Development Goals (MDG) on health related indicators. The ASHA is a trained **woman health activist**, who is selected from the community and is accountable to it. The responsibility of ASHAs is not only limited to provide basic health care vis- a vis Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, Vaccination, Nutrition etc., but also on gender equality, social determinants of health and preparation of the village health plan. The ASHA is required to work as a bridge between the community and the public health system.

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The important roles of ASHA are:

- Facilitation for health services;
- Provider of community level care;
- Making people understand their health rights; and
- Enabling them access to their entitlements.

2. Lifelong Learning Pathways for Working Community Health Workers

The ASHAs undergo a series of modular training that equip them with the necessary knowledge, skills, values and confidence in order to perform their tasks. Certification of ASHAs and accreditation of training institutes involved in ASHA training is essential to improve the quality of training and to ensure desired programme outcomes, to provide assurance to community on the quality of services being provided by the ASHA and to enhance competency and professional credibility of ASHAs.

The ASHA Certification Project is a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding between Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), National Health System Resource Centre (NHSRC) and National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS). The Project is aimed at:

- Certifying all ASHAs;
- Certifying ASHA trainers; and
- Accredit training sites in all States and Union Territories of India.

The certification of ASHAs and accreditation of training institutes contributes to improving the quality of training imparted to ASHAs, in addition to enhancing the competency and professional credibility of ASHAs in providing quality health care services in the community. The mandate of MoHFW was to provide policy support and financial support, while the mandate of NHSRC and NIOS were to providing technical expertise and implementation support to the states.

3. Training Network

The overarching goal of ASHA Certification Programme is to certify 9 lakh (nine hundred thousand) ASHAs in the length and breadth of the country, encompassing all the states and union territories of India. To reach the mammoth target of certification of 9 lakh ASHAs, the primary requisite was that all the training agencies providing training services to ASHA be accredited and all trainers starting from national level to state and further to district level, providing training also be certified. This mammoth task was undertaken by NIOS under this Project.

The objectives of ASHA Certification programme include:

- Certifying nine lakh ASHAs in 29 States and seven Union Territories of India
- Certifying State and District level trainers involved in ASHA training

- Accrediting State and District level training agencies associated with ASHA Training
- Developing training and learning material for ASHA training and certification.

Currently ASHA Certification programme is being implemented in 22 states i.e. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Odisha, Punjab, Sikkim, Tripura, Uttarakhand, West Bengal and two union territories. i.e. Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Delhi.

3.1 Enhancing Competency and Professional Credibility: Training Materials

In order to prepare the ASHAs and trainers for the Certification process, a Supplementary book was jointly developed by NIOS and NHSRC. It is mandatory for ASHA Trainers as well as ASHAs to undergo training on the supplementary book before the certification. The Supplementary book was developed in English and Hindi, and further translated into 14 other languages of India, namely, Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Kannada, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Urdu, Maitey, Mizo, Garo, Khasi and Angami.

The themes covered in the supplementary book are:

- Being an ASHA
- Maternal Care
- Home based Newborn Care
- Sick New Born Care
- Child Care
- Women's Health & Gender Concerns
- Abortion, Family Planning, RTI/STI & HIV/AIDS
- Malaria and Tuberculosis
- Village Health Planning

3.2 Training and Certification of Trainers

The training of the trainers (TOT) is based on a cascade model, in which State trainers train the District trainers and District trainers further train the ASHAs. At the State level, the trainers have an educational background on nursing/clinical/social work with 7 to 10 years of work experience.

Assessment and certification of trainers is required to enhance their skills and competencies, in order to improve their work efficiency and quality of training. During the certification process, trainers undergo series of refresher training to sharpen up their knowledge and skills listed in the ASHA modules.

The State and District trainers are registered at the Accredited Vocational Institutes (AVIs) functioning under the ASHA Certification Programme at State and District level. The AVIs act as nodal institutions for providing supportive services related to application of trainers, conducting training programmes, examinations, distribution of study material and certificates.

The trainers are assessed on three components:

- Theory
- Practical and
- Training skills.

Training skills of the trainers are assessed during the training programme. Theory and Practical skills of the trainers are assessed at the end of the refresher training on the supplementary book. Maximum Marks allocated are 300 (100 marks each for Theory, Practical and Training skills), as per the following table:

S. No	Type of Assessment	Maximum Marks	Weightage for assessment	Time Allotted
1	Theory	100	30%	90 minutes
2	Training skills	100	30%	30 minutes
3	Practical skills	100	40%	90 minutes

To pass the examination, the trainer has to score minimum 60% marks in each of Theory, Training skills and Practical skills as per the following table:

S. No	Type of Assessment	Weightage of Marks	Pass Percentage	Pass marks
1	Theory	30	60%	18
2	Training skills	30	60%	18
3	Practical skills	40	60%	24

- (i) Theory, Practical and Training assessment for each trainer are at the end of refresher training at the AVI.

- (ii) Practical skills of each trainer are assessed on a set of skills from the listed competencies in ASHA modules. The Practical skill assessment is divided into 3 parts - Compulsory skills, Random Skills and Spot assessment. Both Compulsory skills and Random Skills are assessed through demonstration by trainers. Spot assessment is conducted by displaying pictures /visuals aids on health topics and related questions asked.
- (iii) Training skills of trainers are evaluated during the training session based on five components, i.e, Content Delivery, Presentations, Problem solving, Summary & Evaluation and Use of Training Method. A trainer has to secure minimum 50% marks in individual components of training (Content delivery, Presentation, Problem solving, summary and evaluation and Training method) overall combined score of all five components of trainers should be at least 60% to clear the training skill assessment.
- (iv) If a trainer fails to secure minimum 60% marks in any component (Theory, Training skills and Practical skills) of assessment, he/she will have to reappear for all the components of assessment.
- (v) Maximum two chances are given to the trainers to clear the examination.

3.3 Accreditation of Institutions

In an Open and Distance learning (ODL) system, NIOS expects its learners to be self-learners undergoing learning from a package of Self Instructional Materials (SIM). However, it does not completely do away with human support. In ODL system, learners need handholding, help and support from other people not only to be successful in their endeavour to continue learning but also in using the package effectively.

Keeping this in view, NIOS provides planned institutional support in different ways from the time a learner joins the system till successful completion of the course. In this context, NIOS considers utilization of existing available resources in formal schools and in certain other institutions by accrediting selected institutions to be its partners. Till 2015, NIOS had 1427 such partner institutions called Accredited Vocational Institutions (AVIs) in India, Nepal and Middle East. These assist NIOS in its various functions related to the Vocational Education Programme.

In a similar structural set-up, a network of Accredited Vocational institutes (AVIs) has been established in various States and Districts under the ASHA Certification Programme. These AVIs are accredited training sites. They act as nodal centres for providing support services related to

- Registration of ASHAs;
- Conducting training programmes;
- Supply of study materials i.e Supplementary books and audio-visual aids to ASHAs; and
- Conducting Examinations

The training sites are certified by NIOS and actively assist NIOS under the ASHA Certification Programme.

3.4 Functions of AVIs (Accredited Vocational Institutes)

An Accredited Vocational Institution (AVIs) under the ASHA certification programme serves as the Accredited Training Centre and is required to perform the following academic and administrative functions:

- i. To act as a Nodal Centre for dual purpose viz., (a) conducting training programmes and (b) examinations for ASHAs and ASHA Trainers.
- ii. To inform and facilitate the ASHAs in their registration and schedule of examinations.
- iii. To conduct training programmes and refresher courses for ASHAs as per the training schedule designed.
- iv. To establish, facilitate and arrange for practical classes/skill corners by making available, workshop facilities of the institution to ASHAs and ASHA Trainers.
- v. To make available the self learning materials and audio-visual aids to ASHAs like ASHA Modules, Supplementary book, IEC materials to ASHAs supplied by NIOS/NHSRC/SHSRC.
- vi. To act as examination centre in order to conduct examinations for ASHAs and ASHA Trainers in a free and fair manner, smoothly, without any malpractices and without use of unfair means.
- vii. To participate in academic activities like conferences, workshops as and when planned by NIOS.
- viii. To cooperate and coordinate with NIOS in activities related to research and data collection as and when needed.

4. Certification of ASHAs

The main objectives of assessment and certification of ASHAs are as follows-

- (i) To assess the skills and competencies of ASHAs.
- (ii) To recognize the learning acquired by ASHAs through certification.
- (iii) To inspire ASHAs to fulfil their work responsibility to the optimum level.
- (iv) To establish a mechanism to improve knowledge, skill and competencies among ASHAs across the country.

4.1 Assessment

ASHA are assessed through Internal assessment, Theory and Practical skills. Internal Assessment is done during and after the refresher training. The summative assessment for Theory and Practical skills is done by NIOS after the refresher training programme.

The fundamental principle underlying the process of assessment of ASHAs includes the following:

- (i) Internal assessment, Theory and Practical Assessment

- (ii) Maximum Marks are 100 (30 marks each for Internal Assessment and Theory and 40 marks for Practical Assessment)
- (iii) Types of assessment, total marks and pass marks are as follows:

S. No	Type of Assessment	Total Marks	Pass Percentage	Pass Marks
1	Internal	30	50%	15
2	Theory	30	50%	15
3	Practical	40	60%	24

- (iv) The Internal Assessment of 30 marks is done during two rounds of refresher training (15 marks each round) by the state.
- (v) Maximum four (4) chances are given to ASHA to clear the examination.
- (vi) Qualified ASHA is awarded a certificate by NIOS.

4.1.1 Designing and Development of Summative Assessment Tool /Question Papers (QPs)

- (i) The summative assessment for ASHA is done through theory and practical examination.
- (ii) The theory summative assessment is based on the ASHA Supplementary Book. The Question Papers include questions of similar nature/type as those given in the Supplementary Book.
- (iii) Practical skills assessment is conducted at AVIs.
- (iv) The Summative assessment tools on theory and practical skills are developed by NIOS.
- (v) The Question Answer Booklet (QAB) has spaces for writing answers. The learner is required to write the answer in the space provided. No separate sheet is provided for writing answers. The learner is not allowed to take QAB out of the examination hall.
- (vi) The required number of QAB are printed by NIOS and sealed, packed and dispatched to AVIs.
- (vii) The total marks for two components (Theory and Practical) are 70 marks with the following break-up and allotted time:

S. No	Component	Maximum Marks	Time allotted
1	Theory	30	1:30 hour
2	Practical	40	1 hour 15 min

4.1.2 Periodicity, Time and Date for Assessment

Assessment for ASHAs is done twice a year. It starts during the second week of July and December every year.

ASHAs who are unable to qualify are given three more chances to clear the examination.

Duration of Practical assessment is one hour and 15 minutes and duration of Theory assessment is one hour.

ASHAs/ASHA Facilitators who have undergone four rounds of trainings on ASHA Modules 6 & 7 are eligible for the certification process. The ASHAs undergo at least ten days (two rounds of 5 days each) of refresher training on the supplementary book. At the end of the refresher training, ASHAs/ASHA facilitator are evaluated on Theory and Practical skills by NIOS. The Internal assessment is conducted by the concerned State, National Health Mission.

An Evaluation framework for ASHAs/ASHA Facilitators is provided that gives an overview about the type of examination, scheme of evaluation, blueprint of examination, and pattern of question paper. This is also helpful for designing the question paper, as it indicates the type of questions, numbers of questions along with the marks assigned to each question and marks allotted to each section.

The medium of examination of ASHA/ASHA facilitators would be in Hindi, English and Regional languages.

The question paper for the theory assessment of 30 marks and allotted time 90 minutes consists of Very Short Answers (VSA), Fill the blanks, Short Answer and Long Answer type questions.

The Practical exam of 40 marks consists of 8 skills of 5 marks each. The ASHAs are evaluated on a set of skills from the listed competencies in ASHA modules. Provision of a Skill Corner with Home Based Newborn Care (HBNC) and other equipments/kit is a necessary pre-condition through which the practical skills of the ASHAs be assessed. The Practical assessment is divided into 2 parts as follows:

Skill test I: These skills are **Compulsory** and have to be performed by the ASHA/ASHA Facilitators through demonstration. **There are 6 Compulsory skills of 5 marks each which every ASHA has to demonstrate.** Each skill involves steps which need to be performed in a correct sequence. Each step carries marks. The skills include

- I. Hand washing
- II. Temperature measurement
- III. Newborn weighing
- IV. Keeping the Newborn warm
- V. Preparation of ORS
- VI. Diagnosis of Pregnancy using Nischay Kit

Each skill and steps involved in the skill are standardized by giving them equal marks. This indicates that

- **Full marks for the step:** If done as per the Standard
- **No marks for the Step:** If not done as per the Standard or any missing step

▪ Skill test II

The **skill assessment II (Random skills)** are assessed through Viva and Demonstration. **In this category, each ASHA is required to perform 2 skills only, of 5 marks each.** Again, each skill involves steps which need to be performed in a correct sequence as per the checklist developed. Of course, each step carries marks. The skills are as follows:

- Tracking beneficiaries and updating MCH card
- Diagnosing the Last Menstrual Period (LMP) and calculating Expected Date of Delivery (EDD)
- Observation of baby at 30 seconds and 5 minutes for movement of limbs, breathing and crying
- Conduct examination of new born for abnormality
- Provide care of eyes and umbilicus
- Counsel for exclusive breastfeeding
- Ability to identify hypothermia in newborns
- Diagnose and management of newborn sepsis
- Weighing of children below five years of age and assessing grades of malnutrition.
- Diagnosis of dehydration and ability to ascertain if referral is required.
- Skill to make adaptation of the message of six essential feeding advise to each household.
- Signs of Acute Respiratory Infections (ARI) – fever, chest in drawing, breath counting; and ability to manage mild Vs moderate ARI with CTM, and refer the severe ones.
- Skill in counselling the mother for feeding during diarrhoeal episode
- Testing for anaemia and ensuring appropriate treatment
- Counsel for delay in age of marriage, delay in age of first child bearing and in spacing the second child.
- Managing fever in the young child when to suspect malaria, how and when to test, when to refer, when and how to treat

5. Conclusion

The ASHA Certification Project has been functioning successfully since its launch. By the end of 31st January 2019, a total of 34 State Training sites and 95 District Training sites were accredited by NIOS. These training sites are providing training and administrative services for training and certification of trainers and ASHAs.

179 State Trainers in 21 States and 466 District trainers across 104 districts have been certified in the programme till date. The result of 25 State Trainers and 343 District Trainers is under process.

NIOS has successfully conducted three examinations of ASHAs. The first examination was conducted on 31st January 2018 in which 2214 ASHAs were certified. In the second examination conducted on 22nd July 2018, a total of **3994** ASHAs were certified. A total of **10960** ASHAs appeared in third examination conducted on 20th January 2019.

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