Engaging Journalists in Reproductive Health

Mobilizing synergies between media and medicine to strengthen the rights based approach to health

Context
Public health practitioners across the globe face a common challenge: How can we extend the reach of culturally acceptable public health messages to improve health outcomes?

In Pakistan, poor maternal and child health conditions continue to be among the leading causes for death and disability. The vast majority of these deaths must be considered preventable. However, despite existing medical knowledge, corresponding policies and strategies as well as substantial financial contributions by donors, Pakistan’s progress in improving maternal and newborn child health outcomes remains unsatisfactory. Using a variety of interventions, the Muskoka-funded Reproductive, Maternal and Newborn Health Project (RMNHP) sets out to engage different segments of society into a dialogue and discourse on maternal and newborn child health issues. As key information communicators, RMNHP considers journalists as important enablers of any such discourse. In this context, media in Pakistan has grown to become a significant source of information and a key influencer in decision making for individuals, families, organizations and governments. Yet, the media coverage of maternal, newborn and child health issues is in no relation to the ongoing health-crisis. Reasons for this are stated to include reluctance of journalists to work in this field due to a general lack of training opportunities, absence of editorial space in mainstream media channels as well as a high level of unfamiliarity between the public health sector and media representatives.

Objective
In keeping in line with the G8 Muskoka-Initiative and working on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ), the RMNHP seeks to improve health service provision for mothers and newborns. The regional focus is on the Haripur and Nowshera districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. In a synergetic collaboration with the FATA-Development Programme, RMNHP is supporting the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Peshawar to sustainably build the capacity of journalists to report on reproductive, maternal and newborn health from a rights perspective.

Approach
The activity engages journalists in reproductive health via three complementary elements:

- A comprehensive training module for journalists which has been developed and integrated into a 3-month development journalism course at the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Peshawar.

- Support to the University of Peshawar to facilitate aspiring health journalists to embark on practical exercises which can result in the publication of media products on reproductive health issues, thereby extending the reach of public health messages.

- Involvement of journalists into RMNHP’s monitoring system via a journalistic external perception check (JEP-Check) mechanism which has been adopted from the Independent Project Reporting (IPR) of the FATA Development Programme.
The three complementary elements combine theoretical knowledge with intense and repeated practical exposure, while their integration into an existing curriculum at the University of Peshawar contributes to the sustainability of the activity.

Results

Journalist trainings: A module comprising of five training sessions, a practical assignment and a panel discussion was developed jointly with the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Peshawar. A detailed facilitator manual, a course reader, evaluation tools and guidelines for practical exercises were designed to assure the replicability of the training at a high level of quality. To this date, 60 journalists have been trained to critically reflect the role, responsibility and potential of the media as a health educator, advocate for health and guardian of accountability. The journalists familiarised themselves with key concepts in reproductive, maternal and newborn child health and were supported in producing their first media product in this field. Given highly encouraging evaluation results, the training is expected to reach an additional 40 journalists per year as an integrated module within a 3-months development journalism course offered at the University of Peshawar.

Extending the reach of public health messages: In collaboration with the alumni network of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, the University of Peshawar is supported in facilitating aspiring health journalists to embark on up to 160 practical exercises, during which field research is conducted. The output of these exercises can result in the publication of media products on reproductive, maternal and newborn health issues, thereby extending the reach of public health messages and fostering public dialogue. The journalists have access to an editorial service at the University of Peshawar to continuously improve the quality of their work as health journalists.

In addition, the Department of Health Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is supported in the development of press-kits addressing reproductive and newborn health issues. The press-kits cover a wide range of reproductive and newborn health topics, include contact information and short biographies of possible interview-partners and provide some guidance as to how to approach the sensitive issue of reproductive health in a responsible, balanced and appropriate manner. The press-kits therefore encourage exchange between the public health care system and the media.

In cooperation with the FATA-Development Programme, sensitisation sessions with editors of mainstream media channels are in preparation to advocate for increased editorial space for development journalism, which includes reproductive, maternal and newborn child health.

Journalistic External Perception Check (JEP-Check): RMNHP is working in the contextually sensitive area of reproductive health. It is committed to the principles of “Do-no-Harm” and is operating under limited access. Inspired by the Independent Project Reporting of the Fata Development Programme, RMNHP introduced a Journalistic External Perception Check (JEP-Check) mechanism as an additional monitoring layer of its results based monitoring system. A total of 20 selected journalists have been trained in applying their competencies as investigative journalists to report on RMNHP’s activities. The reports are not published, but are used to inform RMNHP and its partners for steering purposes. It is an intended side-effect of the JEP-Check that journalists are provided with an additional practical exposure to reproductive health topics as such, which increases both their understanding and experience in how to approach reproductive health topics in the given context.