Improving access and quality of primary healthcare through women and adolescents’ user committees: a mixed-methods case study in Kinshasa, DRC

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Abstract

Background. Patient engagement is seen as a fundamental strategy for achieving quality patient-centred care, especially in community-based primary healthcare (OMS2023, Haesebaert et al. 2018). Despite growing interest in patient engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa, few patient engagement initiatives have been identified, and those often are limited to lower-levels of engagement, in participation in health research or in health system improvement (Gogovor et al. 2023). With the aim of giving a voice to under-represented community groups in healthcare governance, the ASSK project supported the implementation of primary health services user committees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), designed to enable the representation of two user groups with specific unmet sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs: women and adolescents. Aims and Methods. Using a mixed-method case study design combining quantitative secondary data (DHIS2) and qualitative data from two research World Cafés (WC1:Women user committees (WUC) n=55; WC2: Adolescents user committee (AUC) n=63)(Schield et al. 2022), this paper looks at the implementation facilitators and barriers, and at the results of this initiative. Results. Women and adolescent members of the user committees highlighted that their participation resulted in increased knowledge of SRH and their related rights, as well as in their “soft skills” such as communication and leadership. In addition, participants reported greater transparency and accountability on the part of the community primary health centers (e.g. by displaying fees for procedures to counter over-billing). Ultimately, WUC and AUC were associated with improved health practices in the community such as increased use of sexual and reproductive health services, including adolescent family planning and assisted childbirth (15-49 years old). Conclusions. Patient user committees for specific marginalized or under-represented groups appear to be an effective way of improving the quality of primary health care services. Further research is needed to better understand how to maximize its potential.

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