Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) are community health workers tasked with delivering health prevention services and messages within communities, and linking the community services to the health care sector. This paper examines the social, cultural, and institutional influences that either facilitate or impede ASHAs’ ability to deliver services effectively through the lens of the reciprocal determinism framework of social cognitive theory.

This study was conducted through 98 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ASHAs (n = 49) and their family members (n = 49) in Gurdaspur and Mewat districts in India.

We found that while the work of ASHAs led to some positive health changes in the community (which provided them with a sense of self-worth and motivation), community norms and beliefs, as well as health system attitudes and practices, limited their capacity as community health workers.

In the conclusion of this paper, we outline potential mechanisms for improving ASHA capacity, such as improved sensitization about religious, cultural, and gender norms; enhanced communication skills; and discuss how greater advocacy and support of their work by health and state officials could improve their ability to provide effective health messages and services in the community.

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