

Investing in nursing and midwifery enterprise to empower women and strengthen health services and systems: An emerging global body of work

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ABSTRACT

In September of 2014, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) convened a global Rockefeller Bellagio Center workshop focusing on the largely overlooked area of investment in nursing and midwifery enterprise as a means for both empowering women and strengthening health systems and services. The report of this meeting, *Empowering Women and Strengthening Health Systems and Services Through Investing in Nursing and Midwifery Enterprise: Lessons from Lower-Income Countries: Workshop Summary*, was released in February, 2015. This report represents a pivotal point in a growing body of work begun in 2012, providing insights and perspectives of global experts that have resulted in subsequent global discussions and are paving the way for the future. This three-part article summarizes the initial exploration leading to the IOM workshop and report, followed by highlights and insights from the report and related meetings, and authors concluding discussion of implications for the future and next steps.

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A Personal Note of Introduction

Ideas and their development often emerge from the convergence of experience, jarring realizations, and enabling opportunities. The work summarized in this article proceeded in just this way. For decades, I had observed the transformative power of nursing and midwifery for women working in these fields. In 2011,

I became vividly aware of the effects of investment in women's commercial and agricultural enterprise on their empowerment and overall wellbeing. This led me to a realization that was both simple and troubling: in that this appeared to be a very large blind spot for both the health and international development sectors.

In 2012, I had the opportunity to turn my attention to these nagging ideas, thanks to my year-long experience

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as Distinguished Nurse Scholar in Residence at the Institute of Medicine (IOM)/American Academy of Nursing/American Nurses Foundation/American Nurses Association Distinguished Scholar 2012–2013, which was “jump-started” by my month-long residency at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center. Later, support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the IOM enabled the work leading to the IOM’s global workshop, its resulting workshop report, *Empowering Women and Strengthening Health Systems and Services through Investing in Nursing and Midwifery Enterprise: Lessons from Lower-Income Countries: Workshop Summary* (IOM, 2015), and its global discussion meeting held in March of 2015. These efforts have provided an important foundation for work going forward.

Background

Investment in women’s enterprise aimed at empowerment is a long-standing international development practice (Duflo, 2012; International Center for Research on Women, 2015a, 2015b). Often, in the form of micro-finance and philanthropy, investment has focused mostly on women’s commercial and agricultural ventures (Gates, 2014). In contrast, the health sector has generally aimed its empowerment investments on services to women, often focusing on family planning, maternal child, and family health. Empowerment of women working in the health sector appears largely incidental (recent signs of interest in embedding intentional empowerment strategies in health programs at the Gates Foundation may help to raise awareness in this regard; Gates, 2014).

Growing health-related innovation in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) is resulting in the emergence of enterprise that holds promise for empowerment of female health workers. Of particular note are those involving nursing and midwifery practices and associated education/training. A recent study of these enterprises (Krubiner, Salmon, Synowiec, & Lagomarsino, 2015) documented examples of both incidental and deliberate opportunities for women’s empowerment. These NMEs are most often associated with efforts to strengthen health systems and services, aligning with global health agendas (Faye, Bob, Fall, & Fall, 2012; Kra et al., 2012; Lawn et al., 2008; Maeda et al., 2014; World Health Organization, 1978). Increasing engagement of private and philanthropic investors and development of some innovative public–private partnerships (International Partnership for Innovative Healthcare Delivery (IPIHD), 2013) have opened the doors for expansion of nurses and midwives in the delivery of services, leadership roles, and as owners and operators of their own practices. Although there is growing recognition of the value of these arrangements to health services and systems, their potential benefit to the women who make this work possible has been largely overlooked.

This three-part article describes a global body of work elucidating the possibilities for, and impact of, investment in NMEs both to empower women and to strengthen health services and systems. Part I describes the initial inquiry that ultimately led to the IOM initiatives; Part II presents highlights and key perspectives from the IOM summary report and related discussions, followed by implications for the future; and Part III presents the authors’ concluding views.

Part I. Initial Exploration: Laying the Groundwork

Approach

Much is known about the benefits of nursing and midwifery services to women’s health and well-being. However, there is little documentation of their contributions of these disciplines to empowerment of their female members. An initial global review of both conventional and gray literature (original and translated English) yielded no published studies, and few relevant reports. Subsequent investigation involved a broader range of approaches, including review of >700 articles and reports utilizing global search methodologies of literature, unpublished reports, and case studies. Our investigation broadened to include extensive meetings with experts whose knowledge and experience represented the key areas in which our search focused women’s empowerment, social finance and enterprise, health systems and services, and nursing and midwifery, yielding additional important additional resources, insights, and ideas. We ultimately honed in on the intersection among these as the conceptual location of NME that holds promise for empowering women and strengthening health systems and services. Figure 1 is the visual

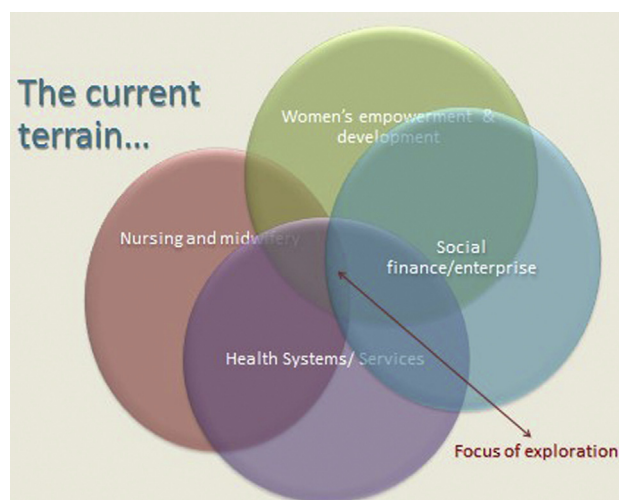


Figure 1 – Focus of initial exploration.

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