



## Integrating Mental Well-being policies for community health workers in Kenya to strengthen community health system- Findings from a Qualitative Study

**Background:** Community Health Workers (CHWs) are globally acknowledged as a vital health workforce and a bridge between informal community health systems and formal healthcare systems. In resource-constrained settings, CHWs are often the only point of contact with formal health services for many among the urban and rural poor. CHWs have heavy workloads, are under-prioritized, have minimal supervisory support, and the majority are not fairly compensated. Evidence examining CHWs' mental well-being and agency is scarce. Furthermore, other elements of a CHW experience are more widely documented, but few consider the CHW as an individual with needs related to their mental well-being. This study sought to understand the perceptions and experiences of policymakers regarding community health services and their interaction with Community Health Workers.

**Methods:** Key Informant Interviews (n=24) were conducted, including 5 national-level policymakers, 12 county-level policymakers, and 7 sub-county participants, purposively selected for their roles in Kenya's community health system. The interviews explored policymakers' perceptions of mental well-being for CHWs and the integration of Mental Health services into community health services. Transcripts were verbatim transcribed for accuracy, and NVIVO facilitated data analysis. Concurrently, a policy analysis mapped existing community health policies in Kenya to identify potential gaps. These insights will be used to inform intervention design responsive to the diverse personal and job-related stressors experienced by CHWs, and further policy adaptation and/or implementation.

**Results:** Policymakers highlighted several mental stressors affecting CHWs, such as low or inconsistent stipends, limited supervision support, and absence of structured debriefing sessions. Mental well-being lacks adequate priority in Kenya, with no specific workplace policy framework for CHWs. While the community health system has national-level backing from the current President, county-level decision-making for mental health faces challenges due to perceived lack of support from higher-level county decision-makers.

**Conclusion:** There is an urgent need to promote CHW's mental well-being in Kenya, through designing innovative health system interventions responsive to their diverse personal and job-related stressors. The Kenyan Ministry of Health and county stakeholders should develop policies to support the integration of mental health services within community health systems, and adequate health system financing to enhance CHW well-being, with a specific focus on mental health that is equitable, sustainable, and acceptable in LMIC settings.