DEFINING INFORMATION NEEDS: REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH INFORMATION AND MATERNAL LITERACY IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

In *Reproductive health information needs and maternal literacy in the developing world: A review of the literature*, Margaret S. Zimmerman of the School of Library and Information Science at the University of Iowa addresses the information needs of a particular population. In particular, she addresses reproductive health related information needs of women, infants, and children in developing countries. Within that population, she focuses on pregnant women and women of childbearing age. Zimmerman defines develosping countries or the ‘developing world’ as “countries with relatively lower scores than other countries on the Human Development Index” (Zimmerman, 2017). Although the population being studied is these women and their children, the information would be invaluable to health related professionals all over the world as they work to combat maternal and child mortality rates. This information need is motivated by the desire to drastically decrease unnecessary loss of life and provide better public health services to women and their children in developing countries by learning more about the connection between access to information and health.

Zimmerman writes that “despite the fact that unsafe sex is the most important risk factor for disability and death in the developing world, ‘sexual and reproductive health services are absent or of poor quality and underused in many countries because discussion of issues such as sexual intercourse and sexuality make people feel uncomfortable’” (2017). This highlights the need for information on reproductive health by women in developing countries and its effects on these women as well as their children. In her paper, Zimmerman primarily focuses on the relationship between the education of mothers and the health of themselves and their families. Research performed in Ghana in the 1960s as well as Asia in the 1970s indicates that the more education a mother receives, the higher the likelihood of child survival. Zimmerman then mentions a “1972 United Nations study of 115 countries” which “found that the correlation between literacy and expectation of life at birth was higher than between any other specific factor considered against expectation of life” (2017). The correlation is often thought to be related to the mother’s intelligence and ability to care for her child. There is also a connection between maternal literacy and use of certain health services such as vaccinations. Another research project studied by Zimmerman found “that improvements in the education of women of reproductive age might account for half of the reduction in mortality in children aged under five years since 1970” (2017). This research illustrates the importance of this information need as more efforts to provide access to information and education would likely further reduce mortality rates in these populations. Zimmerman conducts this research in order to test the effects of maternal literacy and access to reproductive health information on maternal and child mortality rates so as to better understand what can be done to improve the situation.

Through her research, Zimmerman has found that “There are many substantial and hugely detrimental gaps in knowledge suffered by women in the developing world that negatively impact their and their children’s health and well-being” (2017). The methodology used to determine the information need involved searching multiple scholarly databases for information to help define an answer to the question, “What is the relationship between female literacy and education and child and maternal mortality?” (2017). In order to begin looking for this answer, information about, “female literacy and education, or reproductive health educational interventions” was collected from several databases and articles (2017). Any literature that was found on this topic was then examined to find correlations between education, literacy, and reproductive health in the developing world. Zimmerman connected what she had learned from the various research projects in order to learn more about the information need. She also took into account factors that may affect the results of her research such as paternal literacy, income rates, and level of education. By taking these factors into account, she could focus more on the specific effects of reproductive health information needs and maternal literacy. During this analysis, data was collected and themes were developed in order to answer the initial question. The data was collected from numerous research projects that each had their own strategy in carrying out research. Most of the research projects were long term and included a large groups of subjects. For example, one research team studied over four thousand Nigerian women to investigate whether the mortality rate and nutritional status was affected by whether the women were literate or not. It also studied whether becoming literate later in life was as effective as learning to read at a young age. The project discovered, amongst other things, that the “children of illiterate mothers were approximately three times as likely to be malnourished as those whose mothers” who became literate later in life (2017). Zimmerman’s research led her to ask more questions such as “what are the pieces of information necessary for a woman to maintain her own reproductive health?” (2017). According to Zimmerman, health information needs include family planning, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections, violence against women, sexuality, pregnancy education, and emergency obstetric care (2017). Research projects like the one stated above provided crucial data to Zimmerman and allowed her to determine the need for reproductive health information and maternal literacy in the developing world.

References

Zimmerman, M. S. (2017). Reproductive health information needs and maternal literacy in the developing world. *IFLA Journal, 43*(3), 227-241.