Adapting a South African social innovation for maternal peer support to migrant communities in Sweden: a qualitative study

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Introduction and aim

Social and health disparities persist in Sweden despite a high quality and universally accessible welfare system. One way of bridging social gaps is through social innovations targeting the most vulnerable groups. The South African Philani model, a social innovation for peer support aimed at pregnant women and mothers of young children, was adapted to the local context in southern Sweden. This study aimed to document and analyze the process of adapting the Philani model to the Swedish context.

Methods

Eight semi-structured interviews and three workshops were held with eleven stakeholders and peer supporters in the implementing organization and its steering committee. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results

The analysis resulted in five main themes and fifteen sub-themes representing different aspects of how the peer support model was contextualized. The main themes described rationalizations for focusing on social determinants rather than health behaviors, using indirect mechanisms and social ripple effects to achieve change, focusing on referring clients to established public and civil society services, responding to a heterogeneous sociocultural context by recruiting peer supporters with diverse competencies, and having a high degree of flexibility in how contact was made with clients and how their needs were met.

Conclusion

The South African Philani model was contextualized to support socially disadvantaged mothers and expectant mothers among migrant communities in Sweden. In the process, adaptations of the intervention’s overall focus, working methods, and recruitment and outreach strategies were motivated by the existing range of services, the composition of the target group and the conditions of the delivering organization. This study highlights various considerations that arise when a social innovation developed in a low- or middle-income context is implemented in a high-income context.