

Brooks, C., Mirzoev, T., & Madill, A (Nov, 2020). How does stigma influence the role of evidence for setting the mental health policy in agenda in Assam, India? New Frontiers in Health Policy Graduate Student Conference 2020: Health Policy in a Time of Transformation, 23-25 November 2020.

*Background:* The mental health landscape in Assam is changing and evidence-informed policies can more effectively and efficiently meet a population's needs, particularly important in resource-constrained settings. The Assam State Report of the recent National Mental Health Survey recommended that Assam develops a stand-alone mental health policy, presenting an opportunity to explore the role of evidence in agenda-setting. A review of evidence to (mental) health policy frameworks identified beliefs, values and interests as a factor requiring further research. In Assam, stigma is central in shaping this lens through which evidence is used.

*Methods:* Semi-structured interviews with purposefully sampled stakeholders, fieldwork observations, and document analysis were conducted. First, Stangl et al.'s 'The Health Stigma and Discrimination Framework' was applied to gain a comprehensive understanding of stigma at multiple socio-ecological levels. Second, this understanding of stigma was embedded in the refined overall evidence-to-policy framework.

*Results:* Assam is a very heterogenous state with much socio-cultural diversity. This is reflected in the considerable variation in the beliefs, values and interests surrounding mental health between and among stakeholder groups. Direct (targeting policymakers) and indirect (targeting communities) approaches to strengthen the use of evidence are affected differently. Stigma affects all stages, including the supply, production, interpretation and use of evidence. Stigma is also changing, in different ways, and rates within Assam.

*Policy implications:* Stigma is a barrier to evidence-informed policymaking in Assam and does not presently uniformly nor statically. For approaches to strengthen the use of evidence, understanding the beliefs, values, and interests of the full range of stakeholders is important. Numerous factors interact in complex ways to influence the use of evidence and stigma must be considered alongside multiple interacting factors including power and capacity.