

Female Healthcare : A forgotten cause.

1. Introduction:

Thesis statement:

Ever since the inception of the world, women around the globe have been considered as lesser beings. This discrimination is evident in all spheres of life, including the health sector, where they are deprived of their basic right to a healthy life. With growing challenges of 21st century, the female healthcare ought to be prioritized in order to strengthen upcoming generations.

2. The grave situation of female healthcare in Pakistan ✓

3. How is the female healthcare a forgotten cause: ✓

+2 a. Lack of facilities resulting in increased maternal mortality rate. ✓

b. Pregnant women are the most vulnerable during natural calamities ✓

c. Lack of menstrual awareness. ✓

d. High level of breast cancer cases ✓

e. Mental health perils owing to domestic violence. ✓

4. Why has female healthcare always become a forgotten cause:

+1 a. Lower number of serving female doctors ✓

b. Growing culture of quackery. ✓

c. Prevalence of cultural and societal taboos ✓

d. Early girl-child marriage and related sexually transmitted diseases. ✓

- e. Lack of interest of stakeholders
5. Wayforward to strengthen female healthcare sector:
- Introduce family planning programmes
 - Empowering local governments and urban health centres
 - Providing female-friendly work environment
 - Use of technology and telemedicine.
6. Conclusion. Need 3 more points!

Good "You do not believe the sky is falling until a chunk of it falls on you." As Margaret Atwood rightly points out the human psyche of neglect and procrastination about all existing issues, until they pile up and start showing their repercussions. The topic of female healthcare has ^{always} been ~~equally~~ neglected one, and has only come forth in the mainstream when it reached a vulnerable point. This vulnerability is seen in high maternal mortality rates under routine circumstances and exacerbated impacts during times of natural disasters. Lack of menstrual hygiene awareness, increasing cases of breast cancer and ever-growing mental health perils owing to domestic abuse are just a few manifestations of this neglect. Multiple reasons account for ~~this~~ the backwardness of ^{female} healthcare sector including unavailability of female doctors, growing trend of quackery,

cultural taboos, early child marriages and lack of government interest in the health sector. In order to curtail the disastrous impacts of neglected female health, robust measures need to be taken. These include promoting family planning, empowering local governments and urban health centers, providing female-friendly work environment and introducing technology to increase accessibility to healthcare. In a nutshell, ~~thus~~, ever since inception of the world, women have been considered as lesser beings. This discrimination is evident in all spheres of life, including the health sector where they are deprived of their basic right to healthy life. Thus, with growing challenges of 21st century, the female healthcare ought to be prioritized in order to strengthen the upcoming generations.

The power centers, leaders, monarchs; all come and go only promoting their vested interest. But, one thing has remained constant; tabooing the female health.

It has never made into any developed or developing country's priority list. Although, the ^{effects in} developed countries are less obvious due to overall developed healthcare sector, but the vulnerabilities in developing world are not concealed and Pakistan is no exception to this. Dr Syed Sher Shah in his book "Gulmohar" points out the gravity of situation and says; "The country that has the most sophisticated

armed weapons and leaders who are included in richest men of the world, also has underprivileged women who die due to lack of timely care during childbirth." Thus, these words ^{itself} speak volumes of the misplaced priorities of the rulers since decades.

The ~~most~~ ~~obvious~~ gravest implication of this neglect is the increasing maternal mortality rate. MMR rate accounts for death of ~~the~~ women during pregnancy due to any complication. The MMR in Pakistan, reported in 2017, is 140; meaning 140 pregnant women die during the taxing process, out of 100,000 total pregnancies. For reference, the MMR in Sri Lanka is 36 and that of United Kingdom is 7.

Out of those women who ~~Not only are the women~~ survive the childbirth have second highest chance ^{in the world} ~~worldwide~~ of losing their child ^{during} ~~before~~ their first month - the neonatal mortality rate of Pakistan is 40; 40 neonates out of 1000 lose their lives within a month. ~~loss~~ (Pregnancy before floods, Zafar Mirza, 2022).

Loss of a child is followed by forced and unwanted pregnancies and the vicious cycle continues. Thus the gravest manifestation of neglecting female healthcare is seen in ultimate loss of life.

Pregnancy during normal circumstances is already an emotionally, mentally and physically draining period. When this time period overlaps with any natural calamity, the effects are even worse with long-term implications on

both mother and the child. A study conducted on the children that were in womb during the Hurricane Sandy in US, revealed that ~~they~~ ~~had~~ 55 percent of them suffered from mental ^{and physical} health issues. (Mental Health Peil, Huma Yusuf²⁰²²).

Furthermore, deprivation of basic life necessities adds to the malnutrition of both mother and child. An estimated amount of 650,000 pregnant women were present in the flood affected areas — the outcomes of which will be seen in years to follow. Thus, pregnancy in times of disasters have over-riding effect on mental health of both mother and child.

Not only are the pregnant women at risk, but ~~every~~ ^{all} women ~~that~~ ^{every month} undergoing menstrual cycle ~~are~~ are at increased risk of developing serious health complications due to poor hygiene facilities as well as lack of awareness about a process as natural as menstruation. A study conducted by the UNICEF in 2017 revealed that 44 percent of girls do not have access to menstrual hygiene. Sanitary napkins are a luxury only to the privileged class and a concept alien to the vast population of girls in underdeveloped areas. Therefore, lack of facilities and awareness have greatly affected women health.

Furthermore, the rising cases of breast cancer are an exhibit of forgotten female healthcare. Cancer itself

takes a huge toll on mental as well as physical health.

Huge number of women die every year ~~due~~^{of} to breast cancer worldwide. In Pakistan alone, the figure is

40,000 - meaning 1 in every 8 women die fighting breast cancer. In 21st century cancer has become a curable disease with high level of recoveries, but

increasing deaths due to breast cancers testify the fact that women health is ~~indeed~~ a forgotten cause.

Lastly, the female health suffers greatly at the hands of her own loved ones, in the form of domestic violence. The increasing menace of domestic abuse negatively affects mental health of the victims, which resultantly also transmits to the children, and the vicious cycle continues. Any type of violence, whether great in intensity or not, has adverse effects on women's psychological health, and vary from anxiety disorders to suicidal thoughts. ^(Violence against women - Ayesha Fakhr) Thus, the female health ~~is~~ begins at home and gradually finds its way through society.

Numerous individual, society and state level factors ^{have} contributed to the failing female health sector, chief among them is paucity of serving female doctors. This is in contrast to large number of females seen in medical colleges, but, as soon as they graduate, a number of responsibilities are weighed upon them and resultantly

they are forced to temporarily or permanently quit their careers for the betterment of their families. This has a domino effect on the health care sector of women, as female patients are uncomfortable discussing their issues with a male physician.

Thus, lack of female doctors for female patients add to the gloomy situation.

In absence of female physicians, the vacuum is filled with quacks - unskilled and unofficial doctors.

The quacks have gained immense popularity in the rural and far-off areas due to lack of registered

physicians. According to a survey, ^{more than} 600,000 quacks

are working in rural health centers (Health: A Love of Quacks, 2018). When these unskilled and non-doctor

doctors step in to cure the patients they ^{either} do more harm than good, or ^{provide} short-term relief with long-term damage.

Thus, the growing quackery culture ^{results in} manifests long-term damage to the female health.

Furthermore, one of the most prevailing causes of compromised female health ^{are} the cultural ^{and religious} taboos. ~~and~~

~~These~~ These taboos include everything from ^{a women} not being able to discuss about ^{her} breast cancer to a 25 year old

female having ten children in ten years of her marriage because children are considered to be God's blessings and

any 'planning' to protect maternal health is against religious

teachings. At the consumer end of all these unmindful practices, myths and customs, ~~is~~ ^{are} the women who endure ^{both} physical and mental challenges at the cost of their lives.

These cultural taboos are further manifested in marrying-off girl-children as soon as they hit puberty, and in many instances, even before puberty. Females are considered as a burden on their paternal families and as baby-breeding machines by their in-laws in most of the rural setups. According to a report by UNICEF, 2018, around 21 percent of girls are married before the age of 18. They have lack of knowledge about maintenance and protection of sexual health, resulting in increased number of cases of sexually transmitted diseases, like Hepatitis C and AIDS. Thus, early child marriages ~~are~~ is one of the key factors that add up to the pile of problems pertaining to female health.

In addition to all the individual and societal level factors, the state has an equally responsible role for neglecting health sector at large, and female health as its component. Political, democratic and autocratic governments come and go but, furthering their own vested interests ~~has~~ been constant. The political class priorities coupled with ever-looming economic crisis has always put development of hospital and health-care centers at the backfoot. Total

budget spending on health care sector in year 2021-2022 was 1.2 percent, whereas WHO recommended spending is a minimum of 6 percent. Undoubtedly, lack of facilities equally affect both genders, but the fault lines are deepened when men have the privilege to travel to city health centres while women continue to endure pain and suffering because ~~no one~~ ^{rarely is} anyone willing to take them to city hospitals. Thus, the vulnerable ~~gender~~ ^{target} ~~impacts~~ of government's flawed policies and inefficiency is again the women.

In order ~~to~~ ^{to counter the} ~~bring~~ ^{to} magnanimous issues of female health that have sprunged from decades of neglect in the health sector, robust and swift measures need to be taken ~~to~~ ~~to~~ to protect ~~the~~ half of the global population.

• The most fundamental step in this regard should be the introduction of family health centers and family planning campaigns at mass level, particularly in the far-off villages. Although the government has already set up related centres in rural areas but, there have been no quoted success stories. ^{only} In first ten days of birth registration campaign ^{in December 2022} of the government, 50,000 babies were registered in a single city - Faisalabad (Dialogue Pakistan). This alone manifests ~~the burden~~ lack of any family planning measures by the individuals as well as the state.

The promotion of family planning programmes can be further strengthened by devolving the subject of health to lower tiers of local government. A Health minister sitting at the center, or the health secretary sitting in any provincial capital is not aware of the issues women face in far-off areas but, a local government including women representatives are very-well aware of the issues of the region female counterparts of the region. In order to solve any problem, it needs to be considered an issue in the first place. A male-dominated government stakeholder would be alien to these concepts, that are home to half the population. Hence, strengthening local governments by including female representatives is the need of the hour.

Inclusion of females in the local governments, as well as the hospitals, is possible only if the work environment is made suitable for them. The reason why female patients do not go to the nearest available medical centres is because they are overwhelmingly male dominated. No female physician is willing to leave a family and go serve in the suburbs. Hence, the only solution to these two sides of the same coin is providing female physicians with facilities where neither their careers nor their family has to suffer. One such example would be establishing day-care

centres in all work places, equipped with well-trained staff and utilities. They should be incentivized to work in less-developed areas in order to create a balanced way out of the dilemma.

Lastly, the growing use of technology can be utilized to make health services accessible to women in all corners of state. Online platforms like 'Masham' and 'OlaDoc' ~~are working in~~ were introduced during the lockdown post-COVID-19 and these apps help patients consult doctors via video link from the comfort of their homes. ~~These telemedicine~~ Women in rural areas should be made aware of such telemedicine initiatives.

In order to overcome the vacuum created by lack of healthcare facilities and staff in villages and small towns, internet facility should be provided at designated centres where women could come and consult a doctor online, in absence of a physical staff. Thus, technology can be used to bridge the gap between female patients and doctors.

Conclusively, one can say that the edifice on which the strength of an entire generation lays is the female health. ~~An under-nourished mother~~ like an illiterate mother raising an illiterate child, an under-nourished mother gives birth to a malnourished child with stunted mental growth. Social factors coupled with

religious doctrines and states inefficiency all end up deepening the ~~existing~~ already fragile feminine health. This is beautifully summed up by Michelle Obama in the following words: "The communities, countries and the world are only as strong as the health of their women."

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