

GENDER STUDIES - 2017

Q.5.

STATUS OF WOMEN'S HEALTH IN PAKISTAN AND WAYS TO IMPROVE IT

• Introduction:

The term 'health' means complete mental, physical and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. It refers to a state where a person is not only free from physical illness but is also healthy mentally. The role of women's health in a society is very critical as women are considered to be primary caretakers in a household. The health of a nation and of a family is greatly dependant and related to the health of women as indicated by Sue Wilkinson in her publication **Health: Feminist Perspectives**. A healthy woman is often an indicator of a healthy household as she

is best able to take care for her family if her health is great and vice versa.

Unfortunately, Pakistan is plagued with poor health conditions for women. Pakistan lags behind most of the developing countries in providing women basic health care. In recent studies it is seen that 1 in every 38 women dies during childbirth because of lack of availability of proper healthcare. There are several contributing factors towards this issue such as poor access, limited awareness, lack of resources etc. However, it is about time that solutions be implemented if future generations are to be saved.

Status of women's health in Pakistan:

The women in Pakistan face severe limitations when it comes to healthcare. It may be due to geographical barriers or tribal and rural concept of not visiting healthcare professionals. In some places in Pakistan, travel is the major

Limiting factor as indicated by Anne C. Tinker in 'Improving Women's Health in Pakistan'.

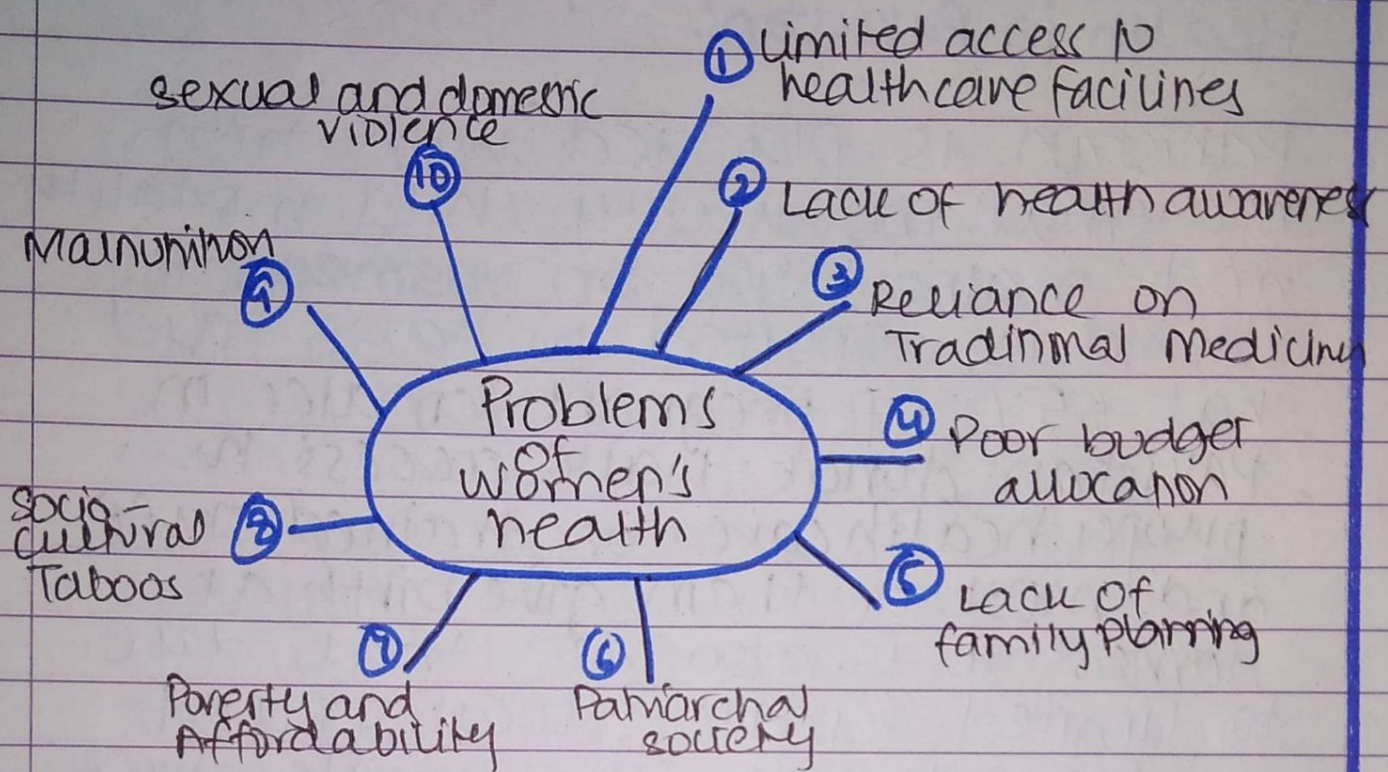
Pakistan is plagued with high maternal mortality, child mortality and malnutrition. Dr. Yasmeen Rashid is reported to have said that 55% of pregnant females in Pakistan do not have access to proper healthcare or trained staff and most of them give birth at home. It is also true that due to limited female education and employment rates, the female staff is very less and thus people from rural areas do not allow women to visit doctors.

The study of women's health can be broadly classified as

- Problems faced by women
- Solutions ~~faced~~ of problems faced by women.

(a) Problems faced by women:

Women face many problems regarding healthcare due to personal and cultural issues. They can be explained as follows:



(1) Limited access to health care facilities:

The women in Pakistan face limited healthcare facilities. Pakistan ranks third in maternal mortality rate. According to UN women, 154 women out of 100,000 die during live births in Pakistan. (UN women, maternal mortality, September 2023). There are a lack of resources such as hospitals, clinics and medicines. Around 60% of women in Sindh do not have access to proper health care, even if they want to.

(2) Lack of Health Awareness:

The dogmatic and extremely narrow approach of women towards their own health is one of the main reasons for health depravity. In some households, women do not allow other women to visit doctors. Women are usually told to take painkillers and asked to wait it out. Moreover, there is a stigma attached to visiting gynaecologists especially among the unmarried that leaves them undiagnosed with diseases and hence complications in life later on.

(3) Reliance on Traditional Medicines:

In the tribal and rural areas, the concept of visiting doctors is minimal. Instead, they resort to the use of traditional medicines from hakims that often result in worsening of health. It is highly associated with complication during and after pregnancies. Moreover, these quacks prescribe cheap alternatives that have severe side effects.

(4) Poor Budget Allocation:

The budget allocation in Pakistan for women's health is very low. According to Pakistan Economic Survey, the current budget allocation is about 0.6-0.8%. However, the WHO benchmark of budget allocation is 6% of the GDP. Moreover, according to World Bank, the average expenditure per person is \$36.2 whereas according to WHO it should have been \$36. Poor budget allocation results in lack of healthcare providers, hospital, clinics and medicines.

(5) Lack of Family Planning:

This plays a major role in women's health. People live either unaware of the use of contraceptives, and birth control pills or do not use them because of religious and cultural reasons. The old concept of using contraceptive being equivalent to killing a child is still persistent in the society. It not only results in recurrent and unwanted pregnancies but also result in detrimental effects on women's health. This is the reason that in Sindh average

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fertility rate is 6 children per women and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is 5-6 children per women.

(6) Patriarchal society:

Pakistani society is a patriarchal society where men are primary authority figures and women are subordinates. This results in increased cases of gender based violence that result in complicated pregnancies, including unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions or injuries related to abortion, child bride rape and other psychological problems.

(7) Poverty and Affordability:

Poverty has detrimental effects on women. Poor economic conditions results in poor access to nutrition and health facilities. Additionally, women resort to bearing problems or visiting local doctors. Moreover, the rate of sexually transmitted diseases in women are higher due to poverty. It is also observed that in poor households, men are given more nutrition and food as they are considered to be superior.

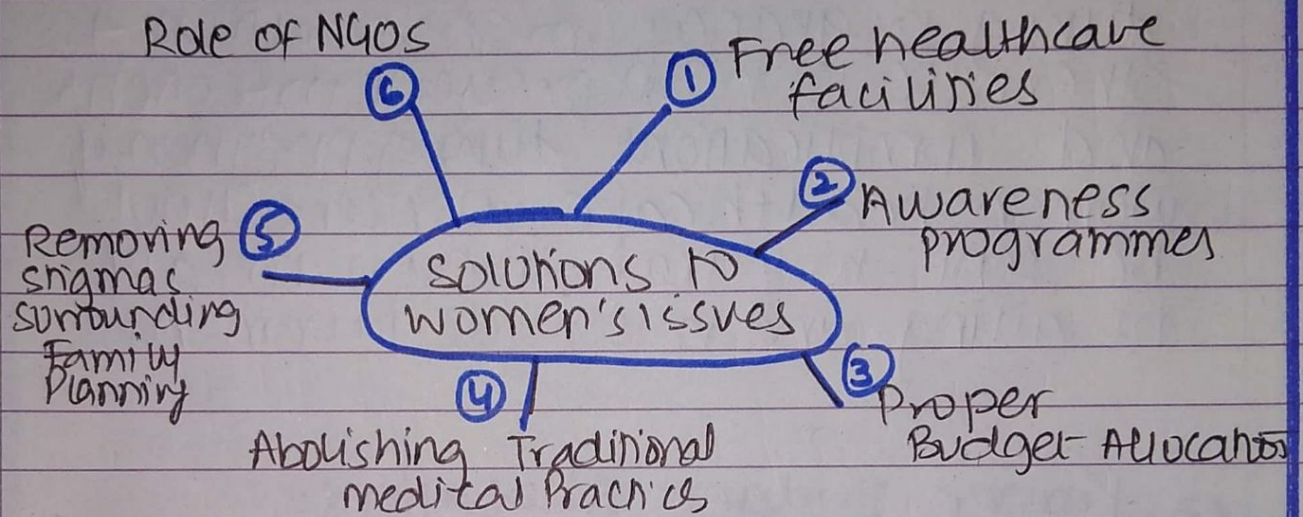
(8) Socio cultural Taboos:

Socio cultural taboos have negative impact on women's health. The use of contraceptives is still considered to be odd and is frowned upon. Such issues are often swept under the rug in the pretense of 'Haya' or 'Namooos'. The tribal and cultural people do not allow their women to leave their houses even if it is to visit a doctor. Furthermore, the cultural need for having more boy children results in unwanted pregnancies, a large number of children and poverty related malnutrition.

(10) Sexual and Domestic violence:

It is a pretty common observation as Pakistan is a patriarchal society. There are a large number of cases where women suffer physical and psychological damage at the hands of men. **Dr. Tareen Ali**, from Agha Khan University said every second woman in Pakistan suffers from some form of violence that has extremely damaging effect on her mental and physical health.

(b) Solutions to women's issues:



(1) Free healthcare facilities:

Access to free healthcare facilities needs to be ensured. Clinics and hospitals should be constructed in remote areas as well. Trained medical personnel's presence should be ensured. Medicines must be available at low cost for easy accessibility. Taxfree female sanitation products should be introduced as current tax of 12% is very high.

(2) Awareness Programmes:

Awareness programmes should be launched in Pakistan in order to remove taboos and stigmas. Lectures and workshops should be arranged to educate women on hygiene during pregnancy, men's situation + otherwise to help prevent infections and complications during pregnancy. Women health care workers should be sent to rural areas ^{as} aid to ailing and misguided women.

(3) Proper Budget Allocations:

Budget should be allocated with accordance to the WHO benchmark of 6% GDP. That money should be used to build hospitals + clinics, buy medicines and hire doctors and nurses.

(4) Abolishing traditional medical practices:

Women need to be made aware of the repercussions of traditional medical practices. It ~~is~~ is a practice that needs to be abolished. This is because they tend to give medicines that are cheap but have

severe side effects. Women need to be encouraged to visit doctors or the women healthcare workers (dais) should be trained according to modern practices.

(5) Removing stigmas surrounding Family Planning:

The government should initiate programmes to encourage the concept of family planning among people. They should be educated that the use of contraceptives is not ethically, morally and religiously wrong. Men should be educated in regard to their want to have a male heir that results in unwanted pregnancies and detrimental women's health.

Conclusion:

Women are the driving force of any nation. Investment of time, energy and money in their health would only increase the life expectancy of our nation. Most of the problems surrounding women today can be solved using proper educational tools and guiding them to the importance of their well-being to ensure a promising future. ✨