

# Improving the Status of Women & Safeguarding Reproductive Rights in Pakistan - The Lynchpin to Achieve Sustainable Development

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Pakistan's latest estimated population is 207,774,520 (excluding autonomous regions Azad Kashmir and Gilgit). This makes Pakistan the fifth most populous country in the world, just behind Indonesia and slightly ahead of Brazil. Women form around half of the population of the country. Pakistan particularly struggles with high maternal mortality ratios, adolescent birth rates and unmet need for contraception. Pakistan has the third highest burden of maternal, fetal and child mortality globally. According to WHO, fertility is considerably higher in rural communities than in urban areas. On average, most rural women have 4 children. Contraceptive prevalence rate remains low at 35 per cent, meaning that most people are not using birth control methods. Even though 96 per cent of married Pakistani women are aware of at least one modern contraceptive method, but only 26% are using modern method of contraception.

Major gaps remain at both service delivery and policy level, preventing adequate access to basic health facilities. Denying these rights leads to greater vulnerability to disease, ill health, unintended pregnancies, maternal death, harmful cultural practices and sexual and gender-based violence. Ensuring healthy lives and promoting the well being for all at all ages is essential to sustainable development. Women and girls, everywhere, must have equal rights and opportunity, and be able to live free of violence and discrimination. This is not possible without achieving

SDG 5. It is essential to empower women and girls and to ensure action on gender equality so that we can make progress towards sustainable development by 2030.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), up to three per cent of girls are married in Pakistan before the age of 15 years and 21 per cent are married before they turn 18. These statistics are based on the findings of the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) for 2012-13. These underage marriages are a form of violence that occurs in the country's most ostracized and vulnerable communities, and has devastating consequences, robbing them of their childhoods and restricting their education. These girls are limited to household work and without effective contraception conceive at a very young age thus increasing their chances of serious morbidity and mortality. These young girls are also more vulnerable than their older counterparts to intimate partner violence and sexual abuse.

Child abuse, whether physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect, or psychological abuse, indicates a gross violation of children's rights. In 2016 alone, 4139 cases of child sexual abuse were reported – approximately 11 children daily and around 100 were murdered after sexual assault. Out of these cases 76% were reported from rural areas and 59% out of them were girls. This number of reported child sexual abuse cases in Pakistan has risen by 10 per cent in the last year. The most

vulnerable age group is between 11 and 15 years of age and the second most vulnerable group is between the ages of 6 and 10.

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights are an important pillar of the human rights framework and without addressing these rights sustainable development cannot be achieved. There exists very little awareness amongst the population about these rights amongst the and both the communities and health care providers. The health care providers also lack the necessary skills to implement these rights in their everyday practice, specially amongst the young and adolescent population. These twelve rights include the right to be free of torture and ill-treatment, right to information and education, right to decide, right to liberty and security, right to the benefits of scientific progress, right to life, right of freedom of thought, right to equality and to be free from all forms of discrimination, right to political freedom of assembly and participation, right to privacy, right to health care and health protection and the right to choose. The sexual and reproductive health and right concerns remain unaddressed at the policy level as well in terms of implementation. Lack of emancipation, inequity, and low status of women make it difficult for girls and women to exercise autonomy and make informed decisions related to their own bodies and health.

Domestic abuse in women is pervasive; Violence is not only physical and sexual, but also psychological. Verbally reprimanding a woman because she is easier to target, taking away opportunities from her, domesticating her and not considering her opinion — are all ways of psychological torture which inhibit the freedom and development of women. According to a study carried out in 2009 by Human Rights Watch, 70 to 90% of women in Pakistan have suffered some form of abuse, with around 5000 killed from domestic violence every year. The Thomson Reuters Foundation ranked Pakistan as the third most dangerous country for women in the world.

This is a frightening situation and something needs to be done to improve the situation in a significant fashion. This needs inclusion of all stake holders including the young adolescents and women, men and communities and the government to ensure enactment and implementation of laws to ensure

sexual and reproductive rights and prevent violence against women. The age of legal marriage needs to be increased and this alone can produce a significant dent in reduction of maternal morbidity and mortality. Proposal to increase the legal age for marriage from 16 to 18 years was unfortunately rejected in May 2017 by the National Assembly. However, in the same year, the Parliament adopted an amendment to the Penal Code to toughen punishment against child marriage, in which the offenders face five years of jail and a heavy fine. From the year 2013 – 2016, the Punjab, Sindh and Baluchistan Assemblies have passed a (Prevention and Protection) Act against Domestic Violence but the awareness, enactment and follow up of this are lacking immensely.

In Pakistan's rapidly changing milieu, the protection of women in legal terms is simply not enough — the society needs to change. At the very basic level, women need to be treated equally — the absence of such equality is the root cause of abuse against women. The start of this equality begins at home. Community education and awareness in support of the girl child is essential. Providing equal opportunities to education, ensuring equal status at work and same wages for both genders are some of the steps that can be taken to ensure support to women. Health care staff, medical practitioners and the Gynaecological community needs to take an active role in the campaign and act as leaders for change.

Education and use of media can play a pivotal role in dealing with this issue. The most important way to bring about a change, however, is to consciously create a shift in thinking which makes the subject of sexual and reproductive health and rights more inviting and open for consideration. Life skills-based education needs to be incorporated at the school level which introduces critical reproductive health information and management skills in line with the emerging capacity of children and adolescents. It also focuses on self-protection, awareness about harassment and child sexual abuse and critical skills in communicating discomfort and mistreatment. Rights within the nikah nama, positive health seeking behaviours and the importance of planning a family are introduced and explored.

There is general lack of awareness and many misconceptions about reproductive health problems which lead them to seeking unsafe and traditional means of health care. In this regard, information concerning different perspectives on sexuality, and appropriate health behaviour is required. Effective programs are needed for clarifying the commonly held myths and notions concerning RH, and for raising the level of awareness regarding these issues. Keeping in view the importance of the sexual health issues and a lack of ability of health care providers to handle it effectively, deficient areas of sexual health must be integrated into the medical

curriculum. Medical educators have the responsibility to train physicians and other health professionals in the core competencies to improve the sexual and reproductive health of their communities.

Ensuring healthy lives and promoting the well-being for all at all ages is essential to sustainable development. If Pakistan wishes to move towards sustainable development, all stake holders should join hands with the government and harness their potential to create awareness, work for social reform and create and implement laws to protect women and to make them economically viable.

