



Intersecting: Gender Equality and Public Health - 25 November 2024

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Following the Millennium Development Goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by UN Member States in 2015, aiming to provide “peace and prosperity for people and the planet” (United Nations, n.d.). Among the 17 goals, SDG 5 underscores the importance of equal opportunities for all genders and encourages the empowerment of women and girls. It highlights the role of gender equality as a fundamental human right but also acknowledges the necessity of achieving equality to meet the other SDGs (WHO, 2019).

Gender disparity and gender-based violence are major violations of human rights and remain a highly common issue across the world. It is defined by the UN as

[...] any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

Therefore, acts of violence against women is a crucial component of gender discrimination. A study carried out across 161 countries from 2000 to 2018 by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2023) found that one in three women were subjected to either physical and/or sexual violence and 38 percent of women who were murdered had experienced it at the hand of their partners. In addition to these concerning numbers, this issue is often subject to concealment. Stigma, dependency, and the absence of judicial support result in only six percent of women globally reporting cases of sexual assault by someone other than their husband or partner (WHO, 2021).

Furthermore, gender-based violence is not restricted to women. It is important to consider that the concept of gender is often misunderstood and mistaken with sex or only used in reference to women (Shannon et al, 2019). Gender itself is a social construction that influences the distribution of power and resources, including divisions of labour and differentiations between production and reproduction, which results in unequal expectations and opportunities to people in all societies (Hawkes, 2020). Through discriminatory practices, values, and biases in health systems and research, gender inequality can be directly translated into a health risk, driving excesses in mortality and morbidity globally (Shannon et al, 2019). Despite recognition of gender issues, research often fails to address the issue adequately and only provides insufficient indicators across gender spheres. While sex-based research has made some progress (even though unpaid household labour is still widely disregarded), the inclusion of non-gender-binary individuals is generally missing (Shannon et al 2019).

Taking into account its extent and dimensions, gender-based violence in every domain can be directly linked to public health concerns of the whole population, including males (Sarfraz, 2022). While this form of violence is a global issue, harmful acts directed at a person explicitly because of their gender are extremely prevalent in Pakistan. 35 percent of randomly selected people in health facilities in Pakistan (Punjab) are subjected to physical violence and nationwide 70-90 percent of Pakistani women experience domestic violence (Ali and Gavino, 2008). Furthermore, up to 33 percent of LGBTQIA+ people experience physical violence, and up to 36 percent experience sexual violence. The actual numbers are expected to be much higher, especially when considering that the national conviction rate in rape cases was only 0.3 percent in 2021 (OHCHR, 2023).

Despite Pakistan having ratified several international conventions, women and LGBTQIA+ people are often discriminated against and can be restricted from participating fully in public life. According to the United Nations Development Programme, the gap remains substantial, especially regarding legislative outcomes. International law itself does not have much enforcement power and relies on governments to implement laws on the national or municipal level (Ahmad and Bhatti, 2023). The gap resulting from gender disparity also encompasses a digital divide with only 50 percent of women owning a mobile phone compared to 81 percent of men as the report on *Human Rights Violations in Pakistan* of GHRD concluded (Walczyk, 2024). With the absence of the rule of law and missing tools to connect or seek help, it is almost impossible for affected people to stand up for their rights. Through reporting and documenting, the action of other actors such as NGOs is crucial to shed light on these issues and make the global community attentive to these unjust and appalling forms of violence.

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