

Women, Health and Development

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All human life on the planet is born of woman and through the ages the woman has been charged with the responsibility of maintenance of health and nutritional needs of her family. The traditional role of the woman in most societies still continues which includes:-

1. Keeping the home and environment clean
2. To fetch fuel
3. To carry, bear and rear children
4. To wash family clothes and
5. To cultivate land.

A woman's work is never done and she is undervalued in society. She works long hours for no pay and is often expected to manage the family budget on little or no money. Compared with man, the status of woman is low. She is considered inferior to man and does not have the same access to education or to other opportunities. She is not expected to state her views in community decisions or religious affairs.

While woman like man is subjected to entire spectrum of human disease, the demand for child bearing, the heavy work load of woman in both rural and urban areas, and her generally lower status in society exposes her to wide range of additional health problems. Woman is also exposed to domestic violence female circumcision (common custom in some societies) sexual exploitation and assault. Frequent pregnancies lead to poor health of the woman which in the long run turns into vicious circle.

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Woman and health care system addresses the importance of the most prevalent health problems affecting woman including mortality and morbidity patterns. While recognising the woman's responsibility for the health of her family it is equally important to recognise the special problems that impinge on woman. Since the health provider herself is in poor health, the whole household is affected. This shows that the status of woman as a health care provider is at stake. Whether we measure status in terms of income or in terms of more quantitative factors, such as responsibility for her own health, control over her own work input into, institutional decision making or societal prestige, it is the same thing. Woman is cast as maintenance and reproducer role and man as a producer. According to Rice and Rice (1973) the society rewards those in achievement roles, while motherhood is sanctified, it is not esteemed. The customer society encourages woman to be an object rather than person, consuming other objects become a substitute for identity and relationship.

The woman is different biologically, psychologically and socially and her needs in various stages of her life are not being looked after in various developing countries. In fact the approach to woman's health should be comprehensive, dynamic and sensitive to the life cycle, consisting of girl-hood, menstruation, pregnancy child birth, post partum, nursing and menopause. These events not only cause changes in woman's body but also may induce changes in woman's social network and society at large. Actual programmes to meet the specific needs of woman and to improve woman's health are not reflected as a

priority to the budgets and policies of most Governments.

Health as defined in the constitution of the World Health Organisation is the state of complete, physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Health is not a luxury, it is an essential human right. It is also a basic requirement for the development of human resources and is closely linked with education, employment, and political participation. As a fundamental element in the full integration of woman in development, health has implication for society as a whole, and for future generation. The woman's health and her participation in the delivery of services has a direct bearing in achieving the economic target set by the various countries.

Social inequality between and within nations and sex discrimination underlie woman's health problems. Poor health is an important indicator of economic deprivation and marginalization. This results in uneven distribution to good nutrition, environmental health, adequate housing and health care services. The woman in the low income group faces greater risk to her health

"Woman everywhere works as much as man or more, as much as 13 hours more each week in Asia and Africa. Even when woman does the same work as man, she typically receives less pay - 30 to 40 percent less throughout the world. Woman's living conditions and her contribution to the family, the economy and the household have generally been statistically invisible. What woman does is therefore often unrecorded, undervalued or not valued at all. The majority still lag far behind man in

power, wealth and opportunity"¹.

Most women are engaged in agriculture and there has also been a large entry of women into the labour force in several countries and they sought employment in positions traditionally reserved for men. At the same time women voiced their increasing dissatisfaction with health services and reclaimed control over their health. The paid employment enhanced the economic and social position of women and contributed to equality between sexes. The women developed certain progressive social attitudes and the desire for upward social mobility.

UNO's declaration between (1975 - 1985) of women decade highlighted various aspects including:-

1. Problems faced by women
2. Better understanding of their position
3. Pleading for support of women's right and
4. Questioning the inferior role of women in society.

This provided a great impetus and raised the consciousness of women towards equality.

"The issue of inequality, as it affects the vast majority of women of the world, is closely linked with the problem of under development, which exists as a result not only of unsuitable internal structure but also of a profoundly unjust world economic system."²

"Despite these shortcomings women every where contribute significantly to economic production. As officially measured, 828 million or 41 percent of world's women aged 15 and above are economically active. Another 10 to 20 percent are economically productive but not counted as part of the labour force because of inadequate measurement."³

For realising the full potential of

women in the economic and social development it is essential to draw the world's attention to the specific difficulties faced by women for example in work place, the family, education, economic, legal, technical, political system, in matters of health, nutrition and infertility. The women themselves should recognise their own capabilities, build up their knowledge, confidence and highlight the positive contribution made by them.

The world community should recognise the objectives of equality and development. These objectives are comprehensive and enormous. The equality has been referred to the equality between men and women. This involves removal of discrimination and providing equal opportunities in all spheres such as education employment, salaries for similar jobs, equality in making formal and informal work and in decision making at all levels. Equality in relationship between relations, for example, husband and wife - is for more than investment in women alone. Rather, it is an investment in their families and societies.

"It is a way to lift people out of poverty." "It is a way to slow population growth. It is a way to protect the environment. And it is a way to get onto a path of equitable, sustainable development."⁴

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