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Women and Health: Issues Behind

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Abstract

Women health is very crucial as they are considered to be the central and key person in the families. However, women are not very conscious about their health related issues, and always take these issues very lightly. These mindsets have to be changed by different communication interventions. Women have many elements which prevent them to consider their own personal health issues, like –shyness and hesitations, lack of health literacy, lack of awareness, lack of interest for interpersonal communications by the healthcare professionals, lack of proper health communication, to name a few. These complications can be mitigated with the help of properly drawn target based health communication strategies which can not only inform, but also influence the health behaviors of the women. Mainly the initiatives are to be taken by the programme or policy implementing agencies with the help of target audience, which will help bringing better health outcomes and significant social changes.

Key Words: *Women, health, literacy, communication, intervention, interpersonal, awareness, health behaviors, social change.*

Women are said to be more casual than men in terms of health related issues. They are usually not very interested or conscious about the issues which are related to their individual benefits, rather they are more worried for their children, husbands and other members of the family. Mothers or the wives of every family are the most caring bodies as observed in the society, and they work like pillars in the families. The level of care and anxiety they possess for the other members of the family and their kinships is sometimes so very high that they even suffer from some other diseases due to hypertensions. But, when it comes to themselves, they become more expert to assume that they are alright and they ignore their personal problems. Hence, they are more vulnerable to diseases. I can cite one such instance of a woman who hid about her breast cancer with the view that there will have a very high financial expense for her treatment which may hamper the ongoing engineering education of her son. As a result, the women had gone to the last stage of cancer, and survival chances have become very poor. These types of mentalities cause many dangers to women in the society as the diseases become more and more severe (*chronic*) and come to its ultimate stage, thereafter there is no use of treatment. Women are still sacrificing for the

male counterparts in today's so called advanced and modern socializations, even in the sensitive areas like health too. These happen mainly in the rural societies as evidenced by the reports of poor women health indicators that are published in various recent reports. A recent report reveals that India alone contributes 25.7% to the global maternal deaths every year and it is estimated that 55,000 women die due to preventable pregnancy-related causes in India annually ^[1]. In some rural (*or even in some urban*) families, women have less participations in any kind of decision making process, and their views are not given much importance in some intellectual issues due to the prevailing patriarchal dominants in the society. They are assumed to be intellectually less advanced and creative than the men folk. These social practices sometimes discourage women in considering their own personal issues including health in most of the cases.

Social Norms: A big issue related to women health in the prevailing societies is that women are still very shy or hesitant, and more conservative when it comes to their personal or internal health problems including sex issues. They are reluctant to share such issues with others, even to the Doctors, rather they try to avoid any discussions on these topics. Lady Doctors can reduce this gap to some extent if they are really ready to take extra pain (*intellectual*) to treat the patients. In some of the cases, there is a necessity of treating some women patients integrated with counseling. For accessibility to women health, their psychological status may also be required to be studied. Then only the women will mentally be ready to be treated. So, there is an importance of providing with psychiatrists to most of the hospitals along with the other regular Doctors. Because, going separately to mental hospitals for any kind of consultations or counseling with the experts still creates an extra image of the person of being mentally ill as the social norms and myths. Therefore most of the people, especially the women, do not prefer to go for any kind of consultations to the mental healthcare institutions even if they possess any major mental problems or diseases. In all possible sectors, women should be equally employed so as to take care of issues related to women with more confident manner erasing the societal barriers or taboos.

Interpersonal Communication: Another common issue in health, mostly in case of women is –lack of interpersonal communication between patients and Doctors or other healthcare professionals ^[3]. This problem is generally applicable to both men and women, but women are many a time, mentally demoralized when any healthcare professional do not show much interest in listening their personal health problems and thus discouraged to further the interaction. Lack of interpersonal communication amongst the patients and healthcare professionals has been emerging in the society in very large scale at present. Human being is considered to be the best amongst the creatures in the earth as they have both intelligence and ability to communicate to each other very effectively and clearly. However, it is seen that as the human civilization is progressing, the level of interpersonal relations and communications have been decaying which have resulted very poor social values. In families of the society, interpersonal communication amongst the family members are so unsatisfactory that the members have been far away from each other both physically and mentally, resulting zero level of mutual intimacies. They have no time to

interact or communicate with the family members rather they have more time for fun and other amusement activities. This is yet another emerging problem of the society which applies to all right from the bottom to top in terms of so called social status. Now coming to the healthcare set up, the patients are given not much moral chances of talking about their health problems frankly and completely. Even if talked, there is no significant and encouraging response from the healthcare professionals. This lack of interest for interpersonal communication may also lead to negative health outcomes in many cases as has been already established by the researchers in many western countries ^[3]. There are many books in the market which explains about the ways to communicate effectively with the patients and their families. There may be different types of patients and families in healthcare setups which the healthcare professionals have to encounter regularly. According to a source, a doctor has to interact or communicate with around 1,50,000 to 2,00,000 patients on an average in his or her entire career ^[3]. The health behaviors of those patients and families usually varies according to their personal backgrounds in terms of education, tradition and culture, geographical locations, social norms and beliefs, etc. Also, due to various other severe diseases, some patients become very arrogant and passive. In addition, patients behave according to their level of age groups, *i.e.* the health behaviors of the children will be different from that of the adults and olds. It also varies from men to women. Hence, the nature of interpersonal communication to be carried out by healthcare professionals amongst such audiences should also vary from age group to age group and gender to gender depending upon the prevailing situation. Since, every patient and his or her family is not supposed to be active in their health behaviors, therefore healthcare professionals have to take initiatives for furthering mutual communication or interaction with the patients and their families, which can encourage even to the passive individuals. This applies to mostly women patients and family members. Outside the healthcare set up, for carrying out any health programmes for the people, it is necessary to engage people who are professionally trained in the field of health communication ^[6]. Even in designing the health policies and strategies too, health communication professionals should be engaged rather than appointing the doctors alone. Because, it is said that doctors are reluctant to perform health communication ^[4].

Health Awareness and Communication: Awareness is considered to be the *key area* in health related issues. Without having proper knowledge of any kind of disease or its preventive measures, it is almost impossible to treat the same. The awareness issues including health sector are also limited to the male counterparts in the rural families. It is very important to be aware about women health issues like nutrition (*both during prenatal and postnatal stages*), benefits of contraceptive measures and institutional deliveries, breast feeding to newborn infants, information about health benefits or facilities provided by the government, precautionary measures to be taken for various severe diseases such as HIV AIDS, Cancer, water borne diseases, infectious diseases, etc. The reach of health information to the target audience also depends upon the policy makers. The health information and its capability to influence health behaviors of the people are solely based on

the nature of the health messages and the channel designed and used for transmitting the same. The workability or effectiveness of the health messages varies from place to place and situation to situation ^[5]. Therefore proper situation analysis or some formative researches have to be carried out prior to implementing any kind of health programmes, especially for the messages which target the women in particular. It is to be ensured that the accessibility of health messages should not be restricted to the male counterparts alone. There are various types of communication channels or strategies by which health messages can be disseminated not only to inform but also to influence the health behaviors of the audience. This practice is called health communication, for *eg.* health promotions through health campaigns, posters, hoardings, banners, leaflets, radio, TV, newspaper, street plays, folk songs, mike announcements, interpersonal communication directly or through opinion leaders (*considered as the most effective in the rural areas*) ^[5], social networking sites (*like facebook, twitter, blog sites etc.*), computer, internet, etc. The health messages that are meant for women folk should be clear and concise, and also it should be very easy to understand. These may also be designed so as to catch the eyes of the audience in a very quick and effective manner. It is established by Albert Bandura (1986) through his *Social Learning/Cognitive Theory* that people learn from others, knowingly or unknowingly ^[2]. Models can definitely influence anybody if it is placed near to him and shown for long duration. Likewise, film actors, sports stars, real life public figures, etc. can be used to motivate women in acquiring good health practices which will help them in keeping fit and healthy.

Women Independence and Empowerment: This refers not only physical independence, but also refers to the intellectual or psychiatric freedom or independence. In earlier times, women were having very limited creative productivities as compared to men. This is not because that they were mentally not equal to men, but for the fact that they were not provided sufficient space to think about their preferences or choices due to the prevailing patriarchal views in those days. Women had to depend on their male counterparts, either father, brother or spouses, for finances and other supports for which they were treated as the secondary citizens of the families as well as in the societies. Women are, right from their childhood, brought up separately from the men folks, in terms of their dresses, lifestyles, behavioral nature and other personal choices. These practices of the society had constructed a separate spheres or world for the women and made them realize that they were always had to depend on their male counterparts. In today's society too, the idea of the patriarchal thoughts are prevailed upon which are evidenced from the ongoing practice of dowry system, girl child and women trafficking, early girl marriages, etc. to name a few. It is more often seen that women are still suffering from various unwanted biases in their own families as well as in the society at large. They are frequently discriminated and become the subject of violence out of the frustrations and complexities of the men. Daughters are not considered to be one of the owners of the properties in the families; rather the sons are counted as the sole beneficiaries. In the workplaces also, women are still less protective than men ^[7].

Now tuning to the women health from the patriarchal perspectives, there is no significant change in the rural areas of Indian culture where women can make health choices or decisions related to their own health without the influence of their male counterparts. For instance, decisions related to time gap between two child, whether to make normal delivery or cesarean, whether to make home delivery or institutional delivery, whether use to contraceptive by the women, etc. –these all decisions are still taken by the male counterparts mostly in the villages. So, to prepare or design any kind of health messages specially meant for the women should always keep in mind that these messages should first be capable of influencing the decision making bodies of the families (*i.e.* male counterparts). Subsequently, the main target group, *i.e.* the women, will have to be influenced for changing their health behaviors so as to achieve better health outcomes. Accessibility of the health messages are always to be ensured while placing such messages. The information containing convincing examples of past misfortunes due to non-receipt of health benefits, may impact the minds of the women encouraging them to avail the health facilities well before the deadline. To this end, women are to be more empowered by devising new and more potent policies specially meant for the women. A society without any gender biases should be created to make the women feel that they are fully independent similar to men, having equal rights of taking decisions on every issue including health in particular.

Conclusion: With the growing significance of literacy rate amongst the women nearly to that of men in the society, the consciousness level towards all dimensions including health issues have been prominent amongst the women today. The health literacy is simultaneously important along with the educational literacy. However, the definition of literacy and health literacy varies from situation to situation depending upon the goal, although a proper definition of health literacy is very much essential for executing and implementing any health programmes ^[8]. Another psychological pressure towards women for maintaining their health is that they will be able to support other members of the family, if and only if they themselves are healthy. So, this has to be utilized as an advantage while trying to influence the health behaviors of the women. Women consider themselves more of a care givers rather than care takes. Mere individual efforts of women, however, will not bring any huge change in their health issues unless there is an external support or assistance from the policymakers. The mindsets of the men in the society have to be changed initially by implementing women friendly laws and regulations. Most importantly, women are to be empowered in a more empirical manner rather than talking only about the theoretical aspects. Women commissions have to be strengthened more and make them to function independently and harder ways. Moreover, there is a need of some academic research on this particular area as to find out what kind of communication strategies will work impact fully and more effectively. Afterwards, the health communication strategies should be implemented in a phased manner by understanding the outcomes of the exercise. The blended efforts of all the stakeholders and more emphasis on issues like health awareness as well as effective health communication strategies will help women in achieving better

health outcomes and in turn, they will be able to provide best supports towards their male counterparts as has been expected as the social norms.

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