

Strategies to ensure gender equality in the health sector

Sir,

From the global perspective, gender bias has attracted significant attention because of its rising incidence, universal distribution, and deteriorating influence on the multiple dimensions of health of millions of girls and women.^[1] Realizing the significance of the issue, the policy makers have incorporated the issue of gender equality as one among the eight Millennium Development Goals (Goal-3).^[2] Critical review of available evidence has revealed that attributes such as minimal political commitment by the policy makers, inadequate welfare policies, education status of the parents, sociocultural norms, poor socioeconomic status of the family, etc., have played a significant role in the causation and the augmentation of the problem.^[1,3]

In the health sector definitive evidence pertaining to gender bias such as minimal gender awareness among policy makers/employers; deficiencies in the existing health policies which generally lack the importance of gender in the hierarchy of the workforce/working habits; and type of work allocated to male/female and the manner in which it should be executed, has been documented.^[2,4] In fact, the gender-related issues are poorly dealt even in undergraduate medical curriculum; and the same stands true with regard to seat allocation in academic courses.^[5,6] Finally, to assess the influence of gender bias in medicine a theoretical model has been developed.^[7]

Gender bias has resulted in detrimental consequences for different stakeholders, namely

- Patients: Influence on doctor-patient association and quality of care; victim of varying kinds of abuse; poor treatment seeking behavior; etc.^[7,8]
- Community: Declining child sex ratio at birth; minimal utilization of health care services; negative influence on mental and social attributes of health; rising trends of gender-related violence; etc.^[1,2,8-11]
- Health care professionals: Harassment at the workplace; limited employment security/promotion avenues; etc.^[1,4]

Acknowledging the influence of gender bias on multiple domains of health sector, it is crucial to improve gender equity in health and even ensure achievement of the fundamental right to health across different levels.^[1] The primary step is to develop a gender-aware policy in order to build a gender-friendly environment across all health care establishments.^[4] In addition, there is a need to implement different measures such as facilitating women's accessibility to health centers;^[1] providing gender-friendly care;^[1] ensuring accountability of the health system to women;^[1] bringing about a change in the mentality of people;^[5] sensitizing health providers regarding different gender concerns;^[4,7] creating a committee to monitor harassment of women at workplace;^[4] building strategy to enable nomination of women in key positions;^[2,4] developing gender-aware medical curriculum;^[1,6] and extending support to agencies working for the welfare of women;^[1] to negate the problem of gender bias at grass root level.

To conclude, in order to achieve gender equality in the health sector, there is a crucial need to develop and implement a comprehensive gender-friendly health policy so that the interests of women can be safeguarded.

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