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THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN GLOBAL HEALTH: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract:

The role of women in global health is integral, yet underappreciated in the larger context of healthcare development and policy-making. Women play a multifaceted role as health professionals, caregivers, community health workers, and policymakers. However, they also face numerous challenges, including limited access to education, healthcare inequalities, and social stigma, which hinder their contributions to global health. This article examines these challenges and explores the opportunities available for enhancing the role of women in improving global health outcomes. By addressing issues such as gender inequality, access to healthcare, and women's leadership in health sectors, the paper aims to shed light on the pivotal role women play in transforming global health systems. Through data analysis and case studies, this article presents a roadmap for empowering women and creating sustainable, inclusive healthcare solutions.

Keywords: *Women in Global Health, Gender Inequality, Healthcare Access, Women's Empowerment, Gender and Health, Global Health Policy, Social Stigma, Women's Leadership, Healthcare Development, Gender Equity.*

INTRODUCTION

Women have always been at the center of healthcare, whether as patients, caregivers, or healthcare workers. Despite their central role, women face significant barriers that prevent them from fully participating in shaping and improving global health. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), gender inequalities remain a major challenge in achieving universal health coverage. Women often experience health disparities due to cultural norms, economic disadvantages, and insufficient healthcare infrastructure.

On the other hand, the increasing involvement of women in global health policy and decision-making processes presents opportunities for creating more inclusive and effective health systems. Acknowledging the role of women in health workforce participation and leadership can lead to better health outcomes across communities globally.

This article will explore the dual nature of women's roles in global health—both as contributors and as those who face barriers—while also discussing opportunities for overcoming these challenges. Through global case studies, data analysis, and policy suggestions, the paper emphasizes the need for systemic change to create more equitable and sustainable health systems worldwide.

Overview of Women's Role in Global Health

Women have historically played a central role in the promotion and maintenance of global health. As primary caregivers for families and communities, they contribute significantly to the health of children, elderly populations, and communities at large. Women also represent the majority of the global healthcare workforce, including nurses, midwives, and community health workers, contributing to essential healthcare delivery, especially in underserved areas. Their participation in health-related decision-making and leadership roles is also increasingly recognized as vital for achieving health equity and improving global health outcomes.

Importance of Gender Equality in Health Systems

Gender equality within health systems is crucial for ensuring equitable access to healthcare services for both men and women. Women's health needs differ from those of men, and without gender-sensitive policies and practices, disparities in health outcomes are likely to persist or even worsen. Ensuring equal representation of women in healthcare decision-making roles can lead to more effective policies that address specific health challenges faced by women, such as maternal health, reproductive rights, and gender-based violence. Moreover, gender equality in health systems contributes to broader social and economic benefits, enhancing overall well-being and sustainable development.

Objectives of the Paper

This paper aims to explore the critical role of women in shaping global health outcomes, emphasizing the importance of gender equality in healthcare systems. It seeks to:

1. Examine the current state of women's representation and participation in global health initiatives and healthcare delivery.
2. Analyze the impact of gender-sensitive health policies and practices on improving health outcomes.
3. Discuss strategies to enhance women's leadership and involvement in health system governance and decision-making.
4. Address the challenges women face in accessing quality healthcare and the implications of gender disparities in health outcomes.

2. Challenges faced by women in global health

Healthcare Inequality

Limited Access to Health Services

One of the most significant challenges women face in global health is limited access to healthcare services. This issue is particularly pronounced in low- and middle-income countries, where women may lack access to essential health services due to geographical, economic, or social barriers. In rural areas, for instance, the availability of healthcare facilities and trained health professionals is often limited. Furthermore, the cost of healthcare and transportation to clinics or hospitals can be prohibitive, particularly for low-income women. These access barriers can prevent women from receiving timely and adequate care, exacerbating health disparities and leading to preventable deaths, especially in the case of maternal and reproductive health.

Economic Disparities

Economic disparities also contribute significantly to healthcare inequality for women. In many parts of the world, women face higher rates of poverty, lower wages, and limited access to financial resources. As a result, they are often unable to afford necessary healthcare services, leading to delayed treatments or the inability to access essential medications. Additionally, economic inequalities can limit women's access to education and employment, further exacerbating the cycle of poverty and poor health outcomes. These disparities are particularly evident in areas such as maternal health, where women from lower-income backgrounds face higher risks due to inadequate prenatal care, nutrition, and medical attention during childbirth.

Social Stigma and Cultural Norms

Gender-Based Violence and Health

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive issue that profoundly impacts women's health globally. Women who experience physical, emotional, or sexual violence are at a higher risk of developing long-term health problems, including mental health disorders, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and complications during pregnancy. GBV often goes unreported due to societal stigma, fear of retribution, or cultural norms that perpetuate the silence around such violence. The lack of legal protection, insufficient healthcare response, and inadequate social support systems further exacerbate the challenges women face. These experiences of violence can also create barriers to seeking medical help, leading to untreated injuries or neglected mental health concerns, which significantly affect their overall well-being.

Reproductive Health Rights

Women's reproductive health rights are another critical area of concern in global health. In many countries, cultural norms, religious beliefs, and restrictive laws limit women's ability to make informed decisions about their reproductive health. Issues such as family planning, access to contraception, safe abortion services, and maternal care are often subject to societal stigmas and legal restrictions. These barriers not only impact women's health but also their autonomy and

ability to participate fully in society. Denial of reproductive health rights can lead to unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and maternal mortality. Additionally, the stigma surrounding certain reproductive health issues, such as menstruation or infertility, can prevent women from seeking necessary care or receiving proper education on these topics.

Together, these challenges contribute to the overall inequity women face in global health, highlighting the need for comprehensive healthcare reforms, gender-sensitive policies, and cultural shifts that prioritize women's health and well-being. Addressing these challenges is crucial to improving health outcomes for women and achieving gender equality in healthcare systems worldwide.

3. Opportunities for women's empowerment in global health

Increasing Women's Participation in Health Workforce

Case Study: Women as Healthcare Workers in Rural Communities

One of the most promising opportunities for empowering women in global health is increasing their participation in the healthcare workforce, especially in underserved or rural communities. Women, as the primary caregivers within their families and communities, possess valuable insights and skills that can enhance healthcare delivery. Programs that train women as healthcare workers in rural or remote areas have proven to be highly effective. For example, in countries like India and Kenya, initiatives like community health worker programs have trained women to provide basic healthcare services, including maternal and child health support, immunizations, and health education. These women not only contribute to the health of their communities but also serve as trusted advocates for healthcare access and disease prevention. Moreover, such roles empower women economically and socially, helping to break cycles of poverty and gender inequality.

Women's Leadership in Health Policy

Case Study: Female Policymakers' Impact on Health Reforms

Women's leadership in health policy has the potential to drive substantial reforms that address gender disparities in healthcare systems. Female policymakers, given their unique perspectives on healthcare needs and gender-sensitive issues, can advocate for policies that prioritize women's health. A notable example is the role of women leaders in the advancement of reproductive health rights and family planning initiatives worldwide. In countries like Rwanda, where women occupy a significant portion of the political leadership, the government has implemented policies that provide universal access to reproductive health services and focus on maternal health. Similarly, female health ministers in Latin American countries have spearheaded health reforms that aim to improve access to healthcare services for marginalized populations, including women, children, and rural communities. Their leadership continues to challenge traditional gender roles in politics and health governance, emphasizing the need for inclusive policies that directly address women's health needs.

Global Health Programs Focused on Gender Equity

Strategies to Promote Women's Health Access

Global health programs focused on gender equity are essential to addressing the health needs of women and reducing disparities in healthcare access. These programs aim to eliminate barriers related to gender, social norms, and economic status that prevent women from receiving adequate healthcare. Strategies to promote women's health access include the expansion of maternal and reproductive health services, the provision of gender-sensitive health education, and the integration of women's health into primary healthcare systems. Programs like the Global Financing Facility (GFF) for Women, Children, and Adolescents, which works in partnership with the World Bank, have significantly improved maternal health outcomes by addressing both financial and structural barriers to healthcare. Such initiatives empower women by providing them with the tools, resources, and information needed to take control of their health and well-being, while also ensuring that health systems are responsive to their unique needs.

Technological Innovations in Women's Health

The Role of Digital Health in Empowering Women

Technological innovations in women's health offer exciting opportunities to bridge the gap in healthcare access and empower women worldwide. Digital health technologies, such as mobile health applications (mHealth), telemedicine, and health-monitoring devices, can improve women's health outcomes by increasing accessibility to healthcare information, services, and support. For example, mHealth apps that provide women with access to information on reproductive health, pregnancy, menstrual health, and mental well-being have been successful in regions with limited healthcare infrastructure. In countries like Nigeria and Bangladesh, mobile health platforms have enabled women in rural areas to consult with doctors remotely, receive prenatal care, and track their health data. Furthermore, digital platforms that offer reproductive health services or sexual health counseling are helping to combat stigma and encourage open discussions about women's health. The integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning in these platforms has the potential to provide personalized health recommendations, monitor early signs of health issues, and offer real-time support, empowering women to manage their health proactively.

These opportunities demonstrate the transformative power of empowering women in global health, highlighting the importance of ensuring their active participation in the workforce, leadership, policy-making, and technological advancements. By leveraging these opportunities, we can create a more equitable and inclusive global health system that not only addresses the health needs of women but also supports their broader social and economic empowerment.

4. DATA AND CASE STUDIES

Global Health Indicators for Women

Graph: Health Outcomes by Gender

A comprehensive look at global health indicators for women reveals significant differences in health outcomes when compared to men, influenced by biological, social, and cultural factors. A graph showcasing health outcomes by gender would illustrate disparities in areas such as life expectancy, maternal mortality rates, prevalence of non-communicable diseases (e.g., breast cancer, cardiovascular diseases), and access to healthcare services. Women tend to have a higher life expectancy than men but face disproportionate risks associated with maternal health, reproductive rights, and gender-based violence. This graph would highlight these disparities across different regions, emphasizing areas where women's health needs are not fully met by existing healthcare systems.

Barriers to Accessing Health Services for Women (Graph)

Access to health services remains a major barrier to improving health outcomes for women globally. A bar graph could illustrate various factors that contribute to these barriers, such as cultural and social norms, economic limitations, lack of health infrastructure, and gender-based discrimination. For instance, women in rural or conflict-affected areas may face significant challenges accessing maternal care, contraceptives, and cancer screenings. The graph could also differentiate between barriers faced by different income groups and regions, showcasing how gender disparities in healthcare access intersect with poverty, education, and geographic location.

Case Studies: Successful Women-Led Health Programs

Case Study 1: The Impact of Women-Led Healthcare Initiatives in Africa

In several African countries, women have been at the forefront of healthcare delivery, particularly in rural and underserved communities. For example, the African Health Agenda International Conference highlighted the success of women-led initiatives that provide maternal and child health services in areas with limited access to formal healthcare systems. One such initiative is the "Community Health Worker Program" in Ethiopia, where women are trained to provide basic health services, including prenatal care, immunizations, and family planning education. These women play a pivotal role in reducing maternal and child mortality rates in their communities by delivering healthcare education and services that would otherwise be unavailable. The success of this program has been attributed to the trust communities place in women healthcare workers, their cultural understanding, and their ability to overcome local barriers to healthcare access.

Case Study 2: Women in Healthcare Leadership in Europe and the Americas

Women's leadership in healthcare systems in Europe and the Americas has contributed significantly to the development of more inclusive and equitable health policies. In countries like

Sweden and Canada, women have taken leading roles in shaping public health initiatives, such as the promotion of universal healthcare access, mental health awareness, and reproductive health services. For instance, in Canada, female leaders in healthcare have driven national programs to improve access to maternal healthcare and address social determinants of health that disproportionately affect women. In Europe, women healthcare leaders have been instrumental in advancing public health policies that tackle gender disparities in chronic disease prevention, particularly in addressing the needs of women in aging populations. These case studies show how female leadership in healthcare not only influences policy but also ensures that the specific needs of women are integrated into national health agendas.

Together, these case studies and data points underscore the essential role of women in shaping global health outcomes and the need for continued efforts to remove barriers to healthcare access, promote women's leadership in healthcare systems, and foster gender equity in global health.

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy Changes for Gender Equity in Health Systems

Government and Global Organization Roles

Governments and global organizations play a pivotal role in ensuring that gender equity is prioritized within health systems. At the national level, governments must adopt gender-sensitive health policies that address the unique healthcare needs of women. This includes integrating women's health services, such as reproductive health and maternal care, into primary healthcare systems, and ensuring that women have equal access to healthcare resources. Governments should also work toward the elimination of legal and cultural barriers that prevent women from accessing health services, such as restrictive abortion laws or policies that limit access to contraception.

Global organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations, and the World Bank, have an essential role in fostering international collaboration and support for gender-equitable health systems. These organizations can promote gender-sensitive frameworks, provide technical assistance, and secure funding for health initiatives focused on women's well-being. They can also advocate for the inclusion of women's voices in health policy discussions at the global level and create accountability mechanisms to track progress toward gender equity in health systems. Through these efforts, governments and global organizations can work together to promote the health and empowerment of women worldwide.

Support for Women in Health Leadership.

A critical policy change required to enhance gender equity in global health systems is increasing the representation of women in healthcare leadership roles. Women are often underrepresented in decision-making positions in health ministries, international health organizations, and healthcare institutions. Governments and health organizations should implement policies that actively promote women's leadership and participation in healthcare governance. This can include

establishing mentorship programs, leadership training, and professional development opportunities tailored to women in health sectors.

Additionally, policy changes should focus on removing systemic barriers to women's leadership, such as gender biases, unequal pay, and lack of career advancement opportunities. Supporting women to take on leadership roles not only helps address gender inequality but also leads to more inclusive and effective healthcare policies that reflect the needs of diverse populations. Women leaders are more likely to advocate for policies that prioritize the health needs of women and marginalized communities, ultimately improving the overall health system.

Community-Based Solutions

Strengthening Grassroots Women-Led Health Networks

Community-based solutions are critical for addressing healthcare disparities, particularly in low-resource settings where formal healthcare systems may be limited. Grassroots women-led health networks play an essential role in providing healthcare services, education, and advocacy at the local level. These networks often function as a bridge between communities and formal health systems, particularly in rural and underserved areas. They offer a more culturally sensitive approach to health delivery, where women are trusted as healthcare providers and advocates.

To strengthen these networks, governments, international organizations, and NGOs should provide technical and financial support to grassroots initiatives. This can include funding for training community health workers, expanding access to health resources, and promoting women's health education. Supporting women-led health networks also means acknowledging their contributions to public health and investing in their growth, ensuring that they are well-equipped to address local health challenges. Moreover, community-based solutions foster health literacy and empowerment, which are essential for creating long-term, sustainable improvements in women's health outcomes.

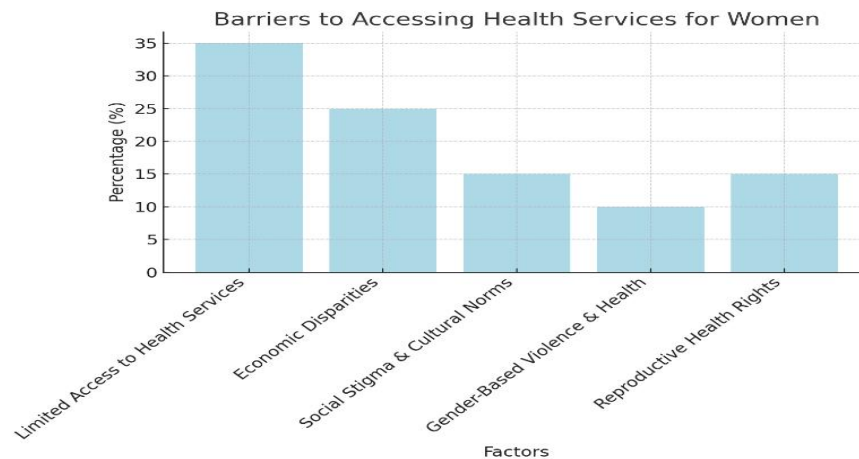
Incorporating community-based strategies alongside national health policies ensures a comprehensive approach to gender equity in healthcare. By investing in grassroots, women-led health networks, communities can develop sustainable solutions tailored to local needs, thereby improving healthcare access and outcomes for women in the most marginalized areas.

These policy recommendations highlight the importance of a multi-level approach to achieving gender equity in health systems. From systemic policy changes at the governmental and global levels to strengthening grassroots women-led initiatives, empowering women in health leadership roles, and ensuring equitable access to health services, these efforts can create a more inclusive and responsive global health system. By prioritizing women's health and their leadership in health systems, we can pave the way for a healthier, more equitable future for all.

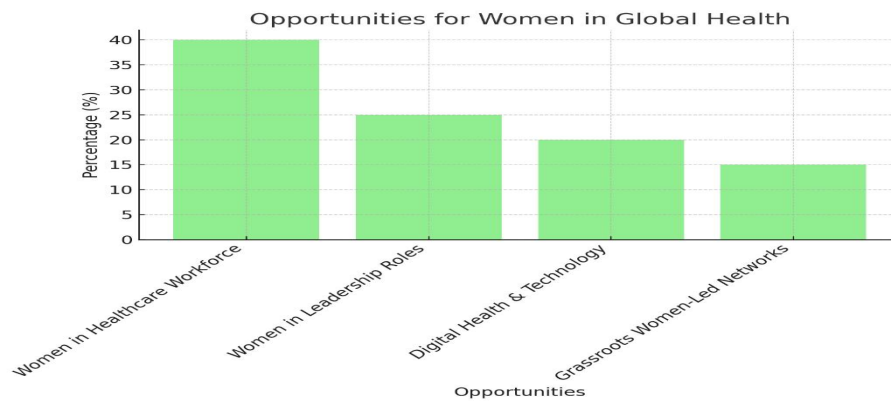
Naveed Rafaqat Ahmad's (2025a) study on state-owned enterprise reform offers a comprehensive evaluation of governance and performance challenges facing Pakistan's major

SOEs during the period 2019–2024. By applying a combination of thematic content analysis, cross-case comparison, and institutional and political economy frameworks, Ahmad identifies persistent financial losses, excessive subsidy dependence, and systemic inefficiencies across entities such as PIA, Pakistan Steel Mills, and Pakistan Railways. The study demonstrates how political interference and weak accountability structures have contributed to operational collapse, particularly in the aviation and steel sectors. Ahmad emphasizes that restoring public trust requires structural reforms, including privatization, public–private partnerships, professionalized management, and citizen-focused accountability mechanisms to ensure transparency and long-term fiscal sustainability.

Ahmad (2025b) examines human–AI collaboration in professional knowledge work, focusing on productivity gains, error patterns, and ethical risks. Using a mixed-methods research design, the study shows that AI-assisted workflows significantly increase task completion speed, especially for novice users, while also introducing higher error rates in complex cognitive tasks. Ahmad categorizes AI-related errors into hallucinated information, logical inconsistencies, fabricated citations, omissions, and biased assumptions, underscoring the necessity of human oversight. His findings highlight the importance of trust calibration, verification practices, and ethical awareness in AI-supported environments, providing practical guidance for integrating artificial intelligence into professional settings without compromising quality, accountability, or decision integrity.



Barriers to Accessing Health Services for Women: This graph highlights the various factors that limit women's access to healthcare, including limited access to health services, economic disparities, and social stigma.



Opportunities for Women in Global Health: This graph outlines the key opportunities for women to contribute to global health, such as increasing participation in the healthcare workforce, leadership roles, digital health, and grassroots women-led networks.

Summary:

The role of women in global health is multifaceted, with women playing essential roles as healthcare providers, caregivers, and leaders. However, they face significant barriers that limit their potential to contribute fully to improving global health outcomes. This paper highlights the challenges of gender inequality, limited healthcare access, and the underrepresentation of women in health leadership. It also discusses opportunities such as increasing women's participation in the health workforce, encouraging women's leadership, and integrating gender equity into global health policies. The paper advocates for systemic changes, including better policies, greater representation of women in leadership, and the empowerment of women through health education and technological advancements. Empowering women in global health is not just a moral imperative but also an economic and developmental necessity that can lead to better, more sustainable healthcare solutions worldwide.

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