

A Gender Approach to Equitable Health: Perspectives during a Pandemic

Notes from the webinar



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Introduction

International Women's Day (IWD) is celebrated globally to recognize the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. The day also marks a call to action for the acceleration of gender parity. The campaign theme for International Women's Day 2021 is "Women in Leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world".

The difficulties women face in terms of health, socio-economic conditions and security have been further exacerbated due to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Not only is the health of women in peril owing to the pandemic, but also severe constraints within the health systems due to broken supply chains, poor allocation of resources and lack of prioritised approaches to bridge gaps in terms of reproductive and other women centred health services further negatively impacts women's health. KHPT organised a virtual round table discussion titled 'A gender approach to equitable health:

Perspectives during a pandemic' on March 5, with an aim to provide a platform for women to share their experiences, successes and the obstacles that dwarf women's ability to access health services in the context of the pandemic, especially with respect to tuberculosis (TB). The round table also aimed to urge discussion on the necessity of employing a gender lens, especially when assessing and responding to a crisis such as that presented by COVID-19. The discussion also intended to unpack pressing issues such as women's apathy towards seeking medical assistance for TB and COVID-19 in comparison to their male counterparts. The speakers' expertise was sought on what can be done to address these obstacles, the need to address the causes of women's mortality and morbidity by strengthening health systems, and allowing for greater access to cost-effective services and treatments to women, while ensuring accountability and improving the overall quality of care.

The round table was comprised of expert resource persons with varied work experience in public health, women's issues and rights, TB and allied fields.

zoom

A Gender Approach to Equitable Health: Perspec... - Shared screen with gallery view



Top, left to right: Mr. Mohan HL, CEO, KHPT; Dr. Dalbir Singh, President, Global Coalition Against TB

Bottom, left to right: Dr. Maithreyi R, Strategic Lead, Adolescent Health, KHPT; Ms. Pallavi Prasad, Senior Journalist

The speakers included

- Dr Sangita Patel, Director, Health Office, United States Agency for International Development
- Dr Nishant Kumar, Deputy Director, Central TB Division, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India
- Mr. Mohan HL, CEO, KHPT
- Ms. Pallavi Prasad, Senior Journalist
- Ms. Blessina Kumar, CEO, Global Coalition of TB Activists
- Dr. Dalbir Singh, President, Global Coalition Against TB
- Dr. Avni Amin, Technical Officer, Department of Reproductive Health and Research on Violence Against Women, WHO, Geneva

Dr Maithreyi R, Strategic Lead, Adolescent Health, KHPT moderated the discussion. Mr. Mohan HL and Ms. Sangita Patel delivered the key note address.

The speakers underscored the importance of gender-sensitivity in responding to and determining the health needs of the marginalised women in particular.

The following are key highlights from the webinar, the recording of which can be accessed [here](#).



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Challenges to women accessing healthcare

Challenges at the community level:

- Studies have indicated that women comprise a large proportion of vulnerable populations in terms of access to health. Gender is a significant influencer of the epidemiology, risk factors, probability of diagnosis, access to healthcare, treatment adherence and overall impact of TB on communities.
- The nationwide lockdown due to COVID-19, which has left many facing job losses and uncertainty over salaries. Forced isolation and stressed households has resulted in a steep rise in violence against women. Women with no financial security and the ones who are dependent on their partners for support are subject to more abuse.
- Mr. Mohan HL said the responsibility of care for family members rests largely on women and this causes them to neglect their health. COVID-19 has further compounded the situation, resulting in greater distress, violence, and lack of access to redressal services which have in turn affected the overall wellbeing of women.
- Gender differences and inequalities play a significant role in determining how people of all genders access and receive healthcare in the public and private sectors. Dr. Sangita Patel said that although more men are affected by TB, women and transgender persons experience the disease differently through their own unique, gendered challenges such as stigma and social repercussions. Women are especially constrained by social norms which prevent the prioritizing of their nutrition, health and wellbeing.
- Stigma is not only a barrier to access, but also to function. It stunts women both physically and emotionally, said Ms. Blessina Kumar.

Recommendations:

- There is a need for a gender responsive health programme with different norms for men, women and transgenders, and a need for gender based budgeting and planning.

Systemic challenges to health:

- Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impact of COVID-19 is exacerbated for women and girls. COVID-19 has amplified gender inequality, threatening to relegate women to their gendered roles as caregivers.
- Limited access, lower index of suspicion of TB for women and the provision of inadequate information to care-seekers also significantly affects the access to services. In many areas the primary health facilities were converted into COVID centres. The private practitioners had also stopped their consultations with the fear of COVID, preventing potential TB diagnoses.
- In India, nurses and midwives constitute a majority of the female health workforce which provides palliative care to the sick and infirm and emergency and first aid services. Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) are also at the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic, tasked with educating people at the grassroots level about the disease. However, this workforce has not been provided for adequately, resulting in poor fund allocation, inadequate training, and a denial of fair pay, according to Dr. Dalbir Singh.



- Stigma attached to TB must not be condoned. Support groups must be set up for those who are affected by stigma due to TB.



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- There should be provisions for a safe non-judgemental space for women in both public and private health care systems. Private and public facilities must work together to address issues of gender disparities to address health services. Recruitment of personnel within the health system must be done in a gender sensitive manner ensuring adequate representation of women.
- There is a need to work towards changing gender attitudes of service providers to prevent disrespect and misbehaviour towards the vulnerable sections. The medical, nursing and midwifery curriculum must be designed in a manner which in turn brings about a change in the attitude of practitioners.
- Clinical packages must be offered to address mental health apart from physical injuries. Psychological first aid must be offered to victims who disclose incidents of violence.
- Cadres of frontline workers must be paid adequate in order to provide effective health care services.
- Strong legislation, and strong frameworks must be formulated with a view towards better administration of health systems and to foster accountability and sensitivity towards infectious diseases.
- Campaigns for increasing gender sensitivity and diversification in representation of transgenders and people living with HIV must be organised. Boys and girls must be trained both separately and together on violence and be empowered to work with parents and communities to develop a nonviolent attitude towards women and sexual minority communities.
- The media must be trained to sensitively and accurately report on TB and infectious diseases, and to raise concerns around inadequate legislations.
- Human rights and equity challenges must be addressed by equipping caregivers and health care providers with adequate resources so they could help their community.

Quotes from the speakers

Stigma unites women globally, as the experiences of stigma and discrimination and solutions for the same are not very different across the globe. **Ms. Blessina Kumar, CEO, Global Coalition of TB Activists**

COVID-19 is not only a challenge for global health systems, but also a test of our human spirit. Recovery must lead to a more equal world that is more resilient to future crises.

Dr. Dalbir Singh, President, Global Coalition Against TB

Women's health is never prioritised and is always neglected. COVID-19 has only augmented their vulnerability.

Mr. Mohan HL, CEO, KHPT

Providing mental health support and especially psychological first aid to all survivors of gender based violence is the minimum standard of care. **Dr. Avni Amin, Technical Officer, Department of Reproductive Health and Research on Violence Against Women, WHO, Geneva.**

Girls also internalise the unequal social norms, so working together with girls and boys is very important. **Dr. Avni Amin, Technical Officer, Department of Reproductive Health and Research on Violence Against Women, WHO, Geneva**

We need to realize that the system was not favourable for women or women TB patients even prior to the pandemic. Any gender sensitive plan needs to include some form of monetary aid to be given to those who are doubly affected by a crisis like COVID-19.

Ms. Pallavi Prasad, Senior Journalist

The role of women evolving across domains with changing roles and norms of all gender, hence a gender responsive health care system is the need of the hour be it private or public. **Dr. Nishant Kumar Deputy Director, Central TB Division, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India**

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