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Health to empower women

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POVERTY, illiteracy and gender stereotype are not the only major factors that are hindering the advancement of rural and island women in the Asia Pacific. Health is another major concern.

"Health is a fundamental issue which must in many ways precede attention towards other measures for advancement," said the first lady of Pakistan Begum Sehba Musharraf.

Health issues, she said, have a two-way linkage with any strategy of poverty reduction aimed at empowering women.

"Lower social and economic status of women particularly in the rural areas limits their access to general health services, whereas their special needs regarding reproductive healthcare is affected by insufficient decision-making power, lack of awareness and inadequate provision of maternity health cover."

In Papua New Guinea, health development, especially for women and children is lagging due to among others, uneven distribution of health services with rural areas being most disadvantaged, low literacy rate and 70 per cent of rural communities not having access to safe drinking water.

"The sad fact is that since 1981, government expenditure on health has been falling," said Papua New Guinea's first lady, Lady Roslyn Morauta.

"Of all countries in the Pacific Islands region, Papua New Guinea is spending the least on health, on a per-capita basis and as a percentage of Gross National Product."

In Pakistan, provision of satisfactory standards of nutrition and health is a central focus of its social policy for women.

"We are concerned about prevalent malnutrition amongst rural women, high maternal morbidity and mortality estimated at 350 per 100,000 live births, relatively high fertility rates, vulnerability in reproductive health, gender gaps in access to primary health care and potential risks of HIV/AIDS.

"However, initiatives by the government and private sector have steadily increased in recent years on the preventive as well as the curative side," Begum explained.

Although HIV/AIDS is not yet a serious concern in Pakistan as elsewhere in the region, she said Pakistan is not oblivious to the grave risks and the need for effective action.

"Official figures until August this year report over 2,000 cases of which about three per cent are women. But chances of inadequate information and gaps in reporting cannot be overlooked particularly in view of the increasing trend of vulnerable risky behaviour patterns."

There is a need for greater access to and education on health amongst girls and women, she stressed.

"But, it is not only girls and women that need to be educated on this matter, especially on HIV/AIDS. Men too have to be made aware of HIV/AIDS," said Malaysian AIDS Council president, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir.

The epidemic is also due to the migration of men from rural areas to urban centres and from poor countries to richer countries.

"Many men migrate from their villages to urban cities to look for work. They often leave their wives and families behind for long periods of time and are therefore highly likely to engage in sex with sex workers.

"If there is HIV among the sex workers, these men's risk of becoming

infected is high. Subsequently they return to their home villages where they infect their wives, often unknowingly and with no recourse to any treatment for either themselves or their wives," Marina explained.

The cycle of poverty that drives the men to migrate for work in the first place remains and even hardens with the advent of HIV into the rural areas.

Another contributing factor to the growing epidemic, said Morauta, is the fact that women's physiological vulnerability to the AIDS virus is compounded by their gender-based vulnerability.

"Imbalanced power relations render women powerless to control circumstances that put them at risk. Women's risk of acquiring HIV is increased significantly by the social and economic conditions of their lives," she said.

Yet, it's a sad fact that women bear the responsibility for care and support of family members who become sick with HIV, and of children orphaned by HIV.

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