

Critical need of responsible men for a Healthy Society

It is well documented that men and boys bear greater burden of mortality in the world.^[1] One can go a bit further and state that men are not only nemeses of their own health but they also contribute hugely in the lifestyle and survival of their dependents. Whether it is the macho attitude, hormones or simply masculinity that compulsively force men to take greater risks exposing themselves and their dear ones to a poor quality of life, even some time their demise. Within the field of health, much attention has been paid to the role that masculinities play in accounting for men's lower life expectancy compared to women.^[2] The seven key behaviours in Promundo Global's 2019 report^[3] lists, poor diet, tobacco and alcohol use, occupational hazards, unsafe sex, drug use and limited health-seeking behaviour. These factors account for more than half of all premature male deaths and about 70% of men's illnesses. Headlines from Daily Mail UK (health) 27 July 2019 reads, "Men twice as likely as women to die before the age of 65 of smoking and alcohol abuse". Abundant responsibility rests on men's shoulder to improve their own health and eventually that of their families'.

Decision Making

Decision making, good or bad, are all considered male responsibility. Male dominance in family, work and politics, plays a significant role in the state of their own health and that of their families. Generally, especially in LMICs, men decide on issues for women in having a child and often insistence on male child. Men decide to marry underage girls. Women can't use contraception without permission, and have no control over when and how many children to have. Men decide on family planning and immunisation of their children, often objecting to accept services because of their faith, poor understanding of the benefits and relying on rumours for decision making. Men decide how far the girl child is educated and who she marries. In the family, she marries into, again men and the older women who have been conditioned to obey and follow the male thinking, all control the fate and life of a young bride. Generations of preference for boys for retaining the family wealth, and fear of arranging dowry for the girl's marriage leading to selective abortion, has led to huge gender imbalance in countries like India, with dire consequences for future generations.

Nutritional Practices

Feeding practices and nutrition depends on cultural practices and the cash wife gets from the husband. Often men eat first and the best part of the meal, whilst children and women only get what is left after the men folk in the family have had their fill. It is not surprising that one third of all children in LMICs are undernourished and stunted and women are micronutrient deficient, including anaemia. The stunted girls soon become mothers and produce low birth weight babies, repeating the cycle all over. With increase in consumption of cheaper commercial foods, loaded with fat and sugars are adding to the overweight and obesity problem. All these problems add up to high maternal mortality, neonatal and infant mortality. The difference between high income and low income countries in maternal mortality ratio is as high as 100 fold, childhood mortality rate is more than ten times higher in many poor countries.

Patterns of spending money

How man spends money plays an important role in his and his family's state of health. Culturally communities follow certain practices and norms, which might have financial implications. Saving money for dowry, e.g. buying gold, rather than feeding nutritious food to children. Men away from home on work may prefer to spend money on themselves with clothes and jewellery, tobacco, alcohol, drugs and prostitution rather than sending money home for nutrition and education of the children. This is particularly noticeable as impacts of large projects where workers and job seekers from outside congregate in and around the project construction sites, such as mining and dams.

Commercialism

Commercial enterprises, specifically to exploit the male preferences, reach remotest site with goods to deliver to the receptive populations. Brothels flourish near large projects along with sale of alcohol, tobacco and drugs. Vulnerable women, especially adolescent girls, are drawn into these businesses for easy money. Unsafe sex leads to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. In the absence of effective and efficient Primary Health Care, traditional and private practitioners exploit the situation and treat illnesses, more often relying on unethical practices and dispensing unnecessary drugs with little attention to prevention. Criminals pushing drugs and looking for trafficking young, also exploit the situation.

Obviously most of the people are trying to live a just life and are caring towards their families and dear ones. However, by and large, men are behind all ills and misery. It is important to increase awareness on these issues so that men make decisions with full knowledge and understanding. Universal quality education in schools is the starting point. Socially, opportunities should be available for people to have discussions on these issues. Primary health care services need to concentrate on men so that they understand their own health needs and that of the women and children. Governments need to strengthen social services, including health and maintain law and order to reduce crime and illegal practices. Unethical practices among commercial enterprises is of paramount concern. The manufacturers of food industry, particularly high content of fat, sugar and salt; environmental pollution by industries; tobacco and alcohol industry; pharmaceuticals; responsible advertising and journalism; the list is endless. There is preponderance of *men* there and unless the attitudes change, there is little hope.

When health is considered, there are clear reasons for poorer health and premature mortality among men. All seven risk factors described in Promundo Global's 2019 report earlier in the article are preventable and reduction in these risks can reduce morbidity and mortality significantly.

None of this is possible unless MEN and WOMEN consider their responsibility for health and a just society.

Linked published articles: Growth Monitoring and Universal Health Coverage January 27, 2019; Global Syndemic: Obesity, Under-nutrition and Climate Change March 3, 2019; Sex Ratio in India March 17, 2019; Immunisation Sustainability April 13, 2019; Family Planning May 15, 2019; Preventing Teenage Pregnancy June 1, 2019.

References:

- [1] Cody Ragonese and Gary Barker. Understanding masculinities to improve man's health. *Lancet* Vol. 394, p198-199. July 20, 2019.
- [2] Robertson et al. The case for retaining a focus on "masculinities" in men's health research. *Int J Men's Health*. 2016; 15: 52-67.
- [3] Ragonese, Shand, and Barker. *Masculine norms and men's health: making the connections*. Washington, DC: Promundo-US, 2019.