

Women's Health and Well-Being: A Foundation for Progress

¹Arun Joseph, ²Hema Rathore, ²Kumud Rajpoot, ¹Rishi Mehra, ¹Saksham Sharma,
¹Aadarsh Saxena, ¹Arshee Soni, ¹Mandakni Jaiswal

¹Assistant Professor, Faculty of Management, Aryavart University, Sehore, M.P. ²Associate
Professor, Faculty of Management, Aryavart University, Sehore, M.P.

ABSTRACT

Women's health has a significant impact on how they live their life, including how they can work, learn, and contribute to society. While health issues can create barriers that limit women's chances, good health enables them to seek education, develop jobs, and assume leadership responsibilities. Many Indian women face obstacles to mental health, reproductive rights, and healthcare, which impacts not only their private lives but also their families, communities, and places of employment. This study examines the beneficial effects that access to high-quality medical care, reproductive health services, and mental health support can have on women's involvement in all facets of life. Women can assist their families, achieve their goals, and improve society overall when they are in good health. Investing in women's health is about more than simply providing medical treatment; it's about enabling all women to realize their full potential and make significant contributions to society.

KEYWORD

Women, Society, Health, Mental Health.

INTRODUCTION

Everyone needs good health in order to seek opportunities, lead fulfilling lives, and give back to their communities and family. However, health issues frequently turn into obstacles that prevent women from realizing their full potential. Their capacity to learn, work, and assume leadership roles is directly impacted by these issues, whether it be access to healthcare, reproductive health services, or assistance for mental health (Srivastava, 2012).

Cultural norms that place a higher priority on family duties than on an individual's own well-being present extra difficulties for many Indian women (Karim and Talhouk, 2021). Their health issues are therefore frequently disregarded or not given enough attention. This essay examines the three main facets of women's health: access to healthcare, mental health, and reproductive health, and how they affect not only the lives of individuals but also those of families, workplaces, and society at large (Pathak *et al.* 2022). A future where women are stronger, healthier, and more capable of achieving their objectives can be achieved by having a greater understanding of these problems. Health-related challenges, such as limited access to healthcare, insufficient reproductive health services, and inadequate mental health support, often

hinder women's ability to learn, participate in the workforce, and assume leadership roles. These obstacles not only limit personal growth but also have broader implications for societal progress, as women's health is closely tied to family well-being, community development, and national productivity.

Cultural norms in many parts of India prioritize women's roles as caregivers and homemakers over their individual well-being, leading to neglect of their health needs and disregarded by family and community members. This results in delays in seeking medical treatment, as women often require approval or financial support from male family members. Mental health, often stigmatized, is essential for building confidence, fostering resilience, and supporting leadership aspirations. Reproductive health, including family planning and maternity care, is central to women's ability to balance professional and personal responsibilities without career disruption.

A comprehensive understanding of these dimensions underscores the urgent need for policies and institutional reforms that prioritize women's health. Empowering women with equitable healthcare resources, supportive workplace structures, and cultural recognition of their well-being creates ripple effects across families, organizations, and national economies. By addressing these issues holistically, societies can build a future where women are healthier, more resilient, and fully capable of achieving their aspirations while contributing to collective progress.

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND CAREER PROGRESSION

The ability of a woman to maintain work-life balance, career advancement, and long-term professional stability is strongly impacted by her reproductive health. Reproductive health issues continue to impact women's use of higher education and work in India, where maternal mortality is still 103 deaths per 100,000 live births (World Health Organization, 2020).

Career disruptions are caused in part by unmet contraceptive needs and subpar maternity care. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2021), 9.4% of Indian married women do not have access to adequate family planning resources, which results in unintended pregnancies that frequently require women to quit their jobs. Long-term professional engagement is further discouraged by workplace regulations in many firms that do not offer sufficient maternity benefits. The issue is further compounded by workplace policies that provide limited or no support for maternity needs. While the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017, extended paid maternity leave to 26 weeks for women in the formal sector, its coverage remains narrow, largely excluding those in the informal workforce where over 90% of Indian women are employed. Even within the formal sector, many private firms hesitate to hire or retain women of

childbearing age due to the perceived "costs" of compliance, reinforcing gender-based discrimination in recruitment and career advancement.

INSTITUTIONAL GAPS, REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH, AND CAREER STABILITY AMONG WOMEN

The absence of flexible working arrangements, affordable childcare facilities, and comprehensive maternity benefits discourages long-term professional engagement for women. As a result, many either leave the workforce after childbirth or re-enter at lower positions, creating a persistent gap in career progression. This cycle perpetuates economic inequality, reduces household income potential, and limits women's representation in leadership roles. Addressing these challenges requires a twofold strategy: expanding access to family planning services and ensuring robust workplace maternity support. Strengthening reproductive healthcare infrastructure, normalizing workplace flexibility, and mandating childcare provisions can help reduce career disruptions, enabling women to sustain their professional trajectories while balancing family responsibilities.

Furthermore, in professional settings, menstrual health disorders and reproductive health issues such as polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) are frequently disregarded. Nearly 20% of Indian women of reproductive age have PCOS, a disorder associated with hormonal imbalances, exhaustion, and trouble sustaining work efficiency, according to a study published in the Indian Journal of Endocrinology and Metabolism in 2021 (Haque *et al.* 2022). Even though it is common, there are still few concessions made in the workplace for women who have reproductive health issues.

CAREER DISRUPTIONS, REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH, AND THE NEED FOR SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE POLICIES

The lack of institutional support in professional and educational environments often hinders women's career stability. Structural barriers like insufficient maternity leave, inadequate childcare facilities, and rigid work schedules create challenges that disproportionately affect women. These barriers lead to higher dropout rates from higher education programs and limit the pipeline of qualified women transitioning into senior roles. Reproductive health issues, such as unmet contraceptive needs and inadequate maternity care, also contribute to career interruptions and slower progression. To strengthen long-term professional development for women, integrated strategies addressing reproductive health issues alongside workplace reforms are needed. Legislative measures, such as stronger enforcement of maternity benefits and mandatory childcare facilities, can reduce career disruptions. Promoting workplace flexibility through remote work options and return-to-work programs can help women balance professional commitments with family responsibilities. Women's capacity to sustain career stability is hampered by a lack of institutional support in professional settings, which also raises the dropout

rate from higher education programs and reduces their presence in senior leadership positions. Women's long-term professional development can be improved by addressing reproductive health issues through workplace flexibility and legislative reforms.

MENTAL HEALTH AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Mental health is a crucial but often neglected aspect of women's well-being, influencing their confidence, decision-making ability, and leadership aspirations. The National Mental Health Survey of India (2015-16) revealed that 5.3% of the population experiences depressive disorders, with a higher prevalence among women, particularly in the 40–59 age group. Psychological stressors such as gender-based discrimination, workplace harassment, and domestic responsibilities further contribute to mental health burdens (Hayes *et al.* 2020). Mental health is a critical aspect of women's well-being, impacting their confidence, decision-making capacity, and leadership aspirations. In India, 5.3% of the population suffers from depressive disorders, with women showing a higher prevalence in the 40-59 age group. Psychological stressors, such as gender-based discrimination, harassment, and domestic responsibilities, exacerbate these challenges. Burnout, diminished career ambitions, and withdrawal from the workforce are common consequences. Poor mental health limits organizational productivity, reduces diversity in leadership, and perpetuates cycles of gender inequality. Women who could advance into managerial or executive roles may find their career progression stalled due to untreated mental health concerns. The stigma associated with acknowledging psychological distress discourages women from seeking professional help, reinforcing silence and invisibility around the issue. To address this neglected area, a multi-level approach is needed. At the societal level, reducing stigma through awareness campaigns and community engagement is essential. Within organizations, embedding mental health into workplace policies, such as confidential counseling services, stress management workshops, flexible work arrangements, and zero-tolerance policies against harassment, can create supportive environments for women to seek help. At the individual level, encouraging open dialogue and peer-support systems can further normalize conversations around mental health. Prioritizing women's mental health promotes equity and inclusion, strengthens leadership pipelines, and enables women to thrive both personally and professionally. This holistic approach ensures mental health is recognized as a fundamental pillar of gender equality and sustainable workforce development.

STIGMA, STRESS, AND LEADERSHIP: RETHINKING WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

Despite these challenges, mental health remains an underrepresented concern in organizational structures. Workplace cultures that emphasize high performance often fail to accommodate the unique stressors women face (Fauk *et al.* 2022). The stigma associated with seeking psychological support discourages many women from accessing mental health resources, leading to burnout, career stagnation, and withdrawal from leadership roles. The stigma surrounding

mental health in professional settings often discourages women from seeking support, leading to burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and disengagement. Unaddressed mental health issues can result in career stagnation and premature withdrawal from leadership pipelines, affecting individual professional growth and organizational diversity. To address this, organizations should mainstream mental health as an integral part of gender equity initiatives, including confidential counseling services, employee assistance programs, stress management workshops, and flexible work arrangements. Cultivating an inclusive workplace culture where discussing mental health is normalized and seeking support is seen as a strength can also help create sustainable career pathways for women, enhance leadership retention, and foster healthier workplaces (Knisely *et al.* 2021).

EMBEDDING MENTAL HEALTH INTO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE

A study published in Harvard Business Review (2021) highlighted those women leaders are more likely than men to experience self-doubt and imposter syndrome, often exacerbated by societal expectations and workplace biases. Mental well-being is essential for leadership confidence, strategic thinking, and resilience—all critical factors for advancing in managerial and executive positions. Leaders who maintain strong mental health are better equipped to handle high-pressure environments, foster innovation, and inspire teams. Neglecting mental health can lead to heightened stress, burnout, and disengagement, weakening individual careers and organizational performance (Akinsolu *et al.* 2023). Addressing mental health concerns in leadership contexts requires a multi-pronged strategy that emphasizes institutional awareness and proactive interventions. Organizations must cultivate supportive work environments that normalize conversations around psychological well-being and dismantle the stigma associated with seeking help. Integrating mental health considerations into leadership development programs can help leaders manage stress more effectively, balance competing responsibilities, and lead with empathy. From a human resource management perspective, embedding mental health into leadership pipelines is a strategic investment, reducing attrition at senior levels, promoting gender diversity in decision-making roles, and enhancing overall organizational resilience. Addressing mental health concerns requires greater institutional awareness, supportive work environments, and leadership training programs that integrate emotional intelligence, psychological resilience, and well-being strategies (Becker *et al.* 2021).

HEALTHCARE ACCESSIBILITY AND HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Access to quality healthcare is a fundamental factor influencing women's ability to contribute effectively in academic and professional settings. However, in India, healthcare access remains highly uneven. While urban areas have well-equipped hospitals and specialized medical services, rural regions, where 65% of the population resides (Census of India, 2021), face shortages of trained professionals and essential medical infrastructure (Maas *et al.* 2020). According to the

Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (2021), India has 1 doctor per 1,511 people, failing to meet the World Health Organization's recommendation of 1:1,000. This shortage is particularly severe in rural areas, where only 25% of India's doctors practice. The disparity in healthcare accessibility leads to higher absenteeism rates among women in educational and professional institutions, lower productivity, and increased dependence on informal care networks.

Additionally, financial constraints pose a significant barrier. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2021) found that nearly 60% of women in India lack financial autonomy in making healthcare decisions, relying on male family members for approval. This economic dependency results in delayed treatment, increased severity of health conditions, and reduced engagement in professional opportunities. Financial independence often hinders women's access to reproductive healthcare, preventive checkups, and mental health services, which are crucial for long-term career engagement. Lower-income women often face a trade-off between healthcare spending and immediate family needs, leading to poor health and limited economic participation. Organizations that prioritize employee healthcare experience benefits such as higher retention rates, job satisfaction, and enhanced performance levels (Bai *et al.* 2023). For women, investing in healthcare support can act as a counterbalance to socio-economic disadvantages at home. Integrating robust healthcare benefits into workplace policies is not just compliance but a strategic necessity. Provisions like comprehensive health insurance coverage, preventive wellness programs, maternity and reproductive healthcare support, and accessible medical leave policies foster a more inclusive environment. Initiatives like financial literacy workshops and employer-sponsored health checkups empower women to make independent healthcare choices. Reducing financial barriers to healthcare access allows women to remain active and productive in the workforce, strengthening diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

From a human resource management (HRM) perspective, organizations that invest in employee healthcare programs witness higher retention rates, increased job satisfaction, and improved performance levels (Becker *et al.* 2021). The integration of health insurance benefits, preventive wellness programs, and accessible medical leave policies can contribute to a more inclusive and productive workforce.

CONCLUSION

Women's health is not just a personal issue; it directly influences their ability to pursue education, build careers, and take on leadership roles, impacting families, workplaces, and society as a whole. To ensure women can thrive, it is crucial to improve access to reproductive health services by making maternal care, family planning, and menstrual health support more affordable and accessible, especially in rural areas. Workplaces should introduce flexible maternity benefits and policies that support women's long-term career growth. Addressing mental health is equally important organizations should integrate mental health support

programs, offer counseling services, and foster inclusive environments where women feel safe discussing their challenges without fear of discrimination. Schools and colleges must also introduce mental health education to equip young women with tools to manage stress and develop leadership skills. Additionally, strengthening healthcare infrastructure, especially in rural regions, is necessary to bridge the accessibility gap. Financial support through subsidized healthcare programs and insurance benefits can help women seek timely medical care without economic dependency. By implementing these measures, we can create a society where women's health is prioritised, enabling them to contribute fully and shape a more equitable and progressive future.

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