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The Intersection of Gender Inequality and Public Health Challenges

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Abstract: Gender inequality remains a pervasive issue with profound implications for public health outcomes worldwide. Systemic disparities in access to healthcare, economic opportunities, and social determinants of health disproportionately affect women and marginalized gender groups, exacerbating health vulnerabilities. This paper explores the intersection of gender inequality and public health challenges, highlighting how discriminatory policies, cultural norms, and economic disparities contribute to unequal health outcomes. It examines key issues such as maternal health disparities, gender-based violence, limited access to reproductive healthcare, and the impact of gender norms on mental health. Additionally, the study discusses the role of intersectionality in amplifying health inequities among marginalized populations, particularly in low-income and crisis-affected regions. Addressing these disparities requires a multi-faceted approach, including policy reforms, gender-sensitive healthcare systems, and community-driven interventions. By prioritizing gender equity in public health strategies, societies can foster more inclusive and effective healthcare systems that improve overall population health outcomes.

Keywords: gender mainstreaming; health policy reform; intersectionality; empowerment; sexual health; health education; economic inequality

I. Introduction

Gender inequality is a deeply rooted social issue that influences various aspects of life, including economic opportunities, education, and political representation. One of its most significant yet often overlooked consequences is its impact on public health. Systemic disparities in healthcare access, social determinants of health, and cultural norms create a cycle of disadvantage that disproportionately affects women and marginalized gender groups.

Public health challenges, such as infectious disease outbreaks, maternal mortality, mental health crises, and access to healthcare, are closely tied to social and economic factors. Gender-based discrimination exacerbates these challenges by limiting access to resources, healthcare services, and decision-making power in health-related matters. Additionally, gender norms and expectations often shape health behaviors, influencing everything from disease prevention to treatment adherence.

Exploring the intersection of gender inequality and public health is crucial for developing inclusive health policies and interventions. By understanding how systemic biases contribute to health disparities, policymakers, healthcare providers, and researchers can work toward equitable solutions that improve health outcomes for all individuals, regardless of gender. Addressing these issues is not only a matter of social justice but also a necessary step toward achieving global public health goals and sustainable development.

II. Understanding Gender Inequality in Public Health

Defining Gender Inequality in Healthcare Access and Outcomes

Gender inequality in public health refers to the systemic disparities in healthcare access, quality of care, and health outcomes based on gender. These inequalities stem from cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that disproportionately affect women and marginalized gender groups. Factors such as discrimination in medical treatment, lack of gender-sensitive healthcare policies, and social stigmas contribute to these disparities, resulting in unequal health experiences and outcomes.

Key Areas Where Gender Inequality Affects Health

1. **Maternal Health:** Women, particularly in low-income regions, face high maternal mortality rates due to inadequate access to prenatal and postnatal care, skilled birth attendants, and emergency obstetric services.
2. **Reproductive Rights:** Limited access to contraception, family planning services, and safe abortion care restricts reproductive autonomy, leading to unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and related health complications.
3. **Access to Healthcare Services:** Women and gender-diverse individuals often experience barriers to healthcare, including financial constraints, discriminatory practices, and lack of gender-specific medical research, leading to misdiagnoses and inadequate treatment.
4. **Gender-Based Violence (GBV):** Survivors of GBV face physical and psychological health consequences, yet healthcare systems often lack sufficient resources and support services to address their needs.
5. **Mental Health:** Gender norms and societal pressures contribute to distinct mental health challenges, with women experiencing higher rates of depression and anxiety, while men may face stigma in seeking psychological help.

Disparities in Healthcare Policies and Resources Based on Gender

Healthcare policies often fail to account for gender-specific health needs, resulting in gaps in medical research, funding, and service provision. Many healthcare systems prioritize male-centric medical models, leading to underdiagnosis and mismanagement of conditions that primarily affect women and gender minorities. Additionally, a lack of gender-sensitive training among healthcare professionals can contribute to biased treatment and reinforce health inequities.

Addressing these disparities requires systemic reforms, including gender-responsive health policies, increased investment in women's and marginalized groups' healthcare, and improved access to quality medical services. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, public health systems can work toward more equitable and effective healthcare for all.

III. Major Public Health Challenges Affected by Gender Inequality

Gender inequality has far-reaching implications for public health, influencing health risks, access to care, and overall well-being. The following key areas illustrate how gender disparities contribute to major public health challenges:

A. Reproductive and Maternal Health

Gender inequality significantly affects reproductive and maternal health outcomes, particularly in low-income regions where women have limited access to quality healthcare. Barriers such as restrictive reproductive policies, lack of prenatal and postnatal care, and unsafe abortion practices contribute to high maternal mortality and morbidity rates. Furthermore, cultural stigmas and societal norms often limit women's autonomy over reproductive decisions, exacerbating health risks.

B. Infectious Diseases and Gender-Based Vulnerabilities

Infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and COVID-19, disproportionately impact women due to socioeconomic disadvantages, caregiving responsibilities, and biological factors. Women in many societies have reduced access to preventive care, diagnostic services, and treatment

due to financial and cultural barriers. Additionally, gender norms often dictate that women assume caregiving roles, increasing their exposure to infectious diseases while limiting their own healthcare-seeking behaviors.

C. Mental Health Disparities

Mental health challenges manifest differently across genders, influenced by societal expectations and structural inequalities. Women are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), often linked to gender-based violence, economic hardship, and caregiving burdens. Conversely, men may face stigma when seeking psychological help, leading to untreated mental health conditions and higher suicide rates. Gender-diverse individuals also face increased mental health risks due to discrimination and social exclusion.

D. Gender-Based Violence and Its Public Health Implications

Gender-based violence (GBV), including domestic abuse, sexual violence, and human trafficking, is a critical public health crisis. Survivors of GBV experience severe physical and psychological health consequences, including chronic pain, reproductive health issues, substance abuse, and PTSD. Healthcare systems often lack the necessary infrastructure to provide adequate support, legal protection, and rehabilitation services for survivors, perpetuating cycles of violence and trauma.

E. Economic and Social Determinants of Health

Gender inequality in education, employment, and income generation directly influences health outcomes. Women and gender minorities are more likely to experience poverty, unstable employment, and lower wages, limiting their ability to afford healthcare and nutritious food. Additionally, unpaid caregiving responsibilities disproportionately fall on women, affecting their physical and mental well-being while restricting their access to economic opportunities. Addressing these social determinants is essential to reducing health disparities and promoting overall well-being.

By recognizing and addressing these interconnected challenges, public health policies can become more inclusive, ensuring equitable healthcare access and improving health outcomes across all genders.

IV. Policies and Strategies for Addressing Gender Inequality in Public Health

Efforts to reduce gender inequality in public health require coordinated actions at global, national, and community levels. Implementing gender-responsive policies and strategies can help eliminate barriers to healthcare access and improve health outcomes for all individuals.

A. Global Initiatives and Frameworks

Several international organizations and frameworks play a crucial role in addressing gender inequality in public health:

- **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and Goal 5 (Gender Equality) emphasize the importance of eliminating health disparities and ensuring universal access to healthcare, particularly for women and marginalized gender groups.
- **World Health Organization (WHO) Policies:** WHO promotes gender-sensitive healthcare through initiatives such as the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's, and Adolescents' Health, which aims to improve maternal health, reproductive rights, and access to essential services.
- **The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW):** This international treaty calls for equal healthcare access and protection against gender-based discrimination in health policies.

- **Global Financing Initiatives:** Programs like the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria allocate resources to gender-responsive health interventions, particularly in low-income countries.

B. National Policies Promoting Gender-Inclusive Healthcare

Governments play a critical role in shaping healthcare systems to be more inclusive and equitable. Some key national policy strategies include:

- **Legislation Ensuring Equal Access to Healthcare:** Enforcing laws that guarantee non-discriminatory healthcare access for all genders, including reproductive and maternal health services.
- **Funding for Women's and Gender-Specific Health Services:** Allocating government resources for research, treatment, and preventive programs that address gender-based health disparities.
- **Training Healthcare Professionals in Gender-Sensitive Care:** Integrating gender perspectives into medical education to ensure that healthcare providers understand and address the unique health needs of different gender groups.
- **Expanding Reproductive Rights and Family Planning Services:** Ensuring access to contraception, safe abortion care, and comprehensive sexual health education to empower individuals in making informed health decisions.

C. The Role of Community-Based Interventions and Advocacy

Community-driven initiatives are essential in bridging healthcare gaps and addressing gender-related health challenges. Key approaches include:

- **Grassroots Advocacy and Awareness Campaigns:** Community organizations and activists work to educate individuals about gender inequality in health and advocate for policy reforms.
- **Support Networks for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence:** Establishing safe spaces, crisis helplines, and counseling services to assist those affected by violence and discrimination.
- **Culturally Sensitive Health Programs:** Implementing programs that respect local traditions while promoting gender-inclusive healthcare access, particularly in underserved areas.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Collaborations between governments, non-profits, and private organizations help expand healthcare services and reach marginalized communities.

By strengthening policies at all levels and fostering community engagement, societies can move toward achieving gender equity in public health, ultimately improving health outcomes for all individuals.

V. Case Studies and Real-World Examples

Examining real-world examples provides valuable insights into successful gender-sensitive public health programs and highlights both achievements and challenges in addressing gender inequality in healthcare.

A. Success Stories of Gender-Sensitive Public Health Programs

1. The Maternal Health Initiative in Rwanda

- Rwanda has significantly reduced maternal mortality rates through policies that ensure universal access to maternal healthcare.
- The government implemented a **community-based health insurance program** that covers prenatal and postnatal care, making services accessible to women in rural areas.
- Trained community health workers help educate women on maternal health and provide essential services, reducing maternal and infant mortality.

2. India's Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) Program

- This **conditional cash transfer** program incentivizes institutional births by providing financial assistance to pregnant women, particularly in rural and low-income areas.
 - Since its implementation, India has seen a rise in skilled birth attendance and reductions in maternal and neonatal mortality rates.
3. **The SheDecides Movement**
- A global initiative advocating for **sexual and reproductive rights**, launched in response to policies that restricted funding for reproductive healthcare.
 - The movement has mobilized governments, organizations, and activists to ensure continued access to contraception, abortion services, and reproductive education worldwide.

B. Countries with Effective Gender-Equitable Healthcare Policies

1. **Sweden's Gender-Responsive Healthcare System**

- Sweden has implemented **universal healthcare with a gender lens**, ensuring equal access to reproductive services, mental health support, and preventive care.
- The country actively promotes **men's involvement in reproductive health**, challenging traditional gender roles and fostering shared responsibility.

2. **Canada's National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence**

- Canada has developed a comprehensive approach to addressing **gender-based violence (GBV)**, integrating healthcare, law enforcement, and social support systems.
- The plan includes **specialized trauma-informed care** for survivors of violence, recognizing the long-term health consequences of GBV.

3. **Norway's Equal Pay and Parental Leave Policies**

- By implementing **equal pay laws** and generous parental leave policies, Norway reduces economic barriers that affect healthcare access for women.
- These policies support **work-life balance**, improving mental and physical health outcomes for both parents.

C. Challenges and Lessons Learned from Past Efforts

1. **Limited Cultural Acceptance in Some Regions**

- Programs promoting gender equity in healthcare often face resistance due to deeply rooted cultural and religious beliefs.
- **Lesson:** Tailoring interventions to be culturally sensitive while upholding gender rights can improve acceptance and effectiveness.

2. **Lack of Funding and Political Will**

- Some gender-sensitive health initiatives struggle with **sustained funding**, particularly in low-income and crisis-affected areas.
- **Lesson:** Strengthening public-private partnerships and securing long-term government commitments can ensure program sustainability.

3. **Healthcare Bias and Discrimination**

- Many healthcare providers lack training in **gender-sensitive care**, leading to misdiagnosis and inadequate treatment.
- **Lesson:** Integrating gender training into medical education can improve healthcare delivery for marginalized gender groups.

By learning from these case studies, policymakers and public health leaders can develop more effective strategies to combat gender inequality in healthcare and ensure equitable access to health services for all.

VI. Conclusion

Gender inequality remains a critical barrier to achieving equitable public health outcomes worldwide. This paper has explored how systemic gender disparities influence healthcare access, reproductive and maternal health, infectious diseases, mental health, and gender-based violence. Additionally, it has highlighted the impact of economic and social determinants on health inequities. Case studies from various countries demonstrate that gender-sensitive policies and programs can lead to significant improvements in public health, but challenges such as cultural resistance, funding constraints, and healthcare bias persist.

Addressing gender disparities in public health requires a **multi-sectoral approach** that integrates government policies, healthcare reforms, community-driven initiatives, and global collaborations. Governments must enact and enforce gender-equitable healthcare laws, while healthcare providers should receive training in gender-sensitive care. Furthermore, non-governmental organizations, advocacy groups, and private sector stakeholders play a vital role in bridging healthcare gaps and promoting awareness.

A collective effort is needed to ensure that health systems are **inclusive, accessible, and responsive to the diverse needs of all individuals**, regardless of gender. Policymakers must prioritize gender-equitable healthcare policies, healthcare providers must implement inclusive practices, and society as a whole must challenge discriminatory norms that hinder progress. By taking decisive action, we can move toward a more just and healthier world for everyone.

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