

EMPOWERED PATHWAYS: UNVEILING THE CRUCIAL LINK BETWEEN REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**Dr. Smitha K**

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ABSTRACT

Women empowerment, defined as the process by which women gain control over their lives and achieve equal opportunities in various spheres, has been widely recognized as essential for sustainable development and gender equality. At the same time, reproductive health and rights encompass a range of issues related to sexual and reproductive well-being, including access to comprehensive healthcare services, contraception, safe abortion, and freedom from discrimination and violence. Through guaranteeing access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare services, promoting gender equality, and eliminating discriminatory practices and policies, societies can foster an environment conducive to women's empowerment. This paper seeks to demonstrate the intricate interplay between reproductive health and rights and women empowerment. By conducting a comprehensive literature review and analyzing existing empirical studies, it examines how the realization of reproductive rights contributes to women's agency, decision-making power, educational attainment, economic participation, and overall social and political empowerment. Furthermore, it investigates the ways in which women empowerment positively influences reproductive health outcomes, such as improved maternal health, reduced fertility rates, and lower maternal and child mortality. The paper also identifies potential challenges and barriers that hinder the realization of reproductive health and rights, including social norms, cultural beliefs, and institutional constraints.

Keywords: reproductive health, reproductive rights, women's empowerment, autonomy, health, education, economic opportunities

Empowered Pathways: Unveiling the Crucial Link between Reproductive Health and Rights and Women Empowerment

The pursuit of gender equality and women empowerment has gained significant momentum in recent decades, highlighting the need to address various dimensions of women's lives comprehensively. Among these, reproductive health and rights have emerged as essential components in the broader discourse on women's empowerment. The ability of women to exercise control over their reproductive choices, access quality healthcare services, and make informed decisions about their bodies plays a pivotal role in shaping their autonomy, health, education, and economic opportunities.

Reproductive health encompasses a wide range of issues, including access to family planning, safe and legal abortion, maternal healthcare, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, and reproductive cancer screenings. Simultaneously, reproductive rights focus on the fundamental human rights of individuals to make choices regarding their reproductive lives, free from discrimination, coercion, and violence. The synergy between reproductive health and rights intertwines with women's empowerment, creating empowered pathways that pave the way for positive individual and societal transformations.

This research paper is an attempt to explore the multifaceted and indispensable relationship between reproductive health and rights and women's empowerment. It examines how access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare and the ability to make informed choices about reproductive matters directly impact women's autonomy, health, education, and economic opportunities. By unveiling the crucial link between reproductive health and rights and women empowerment, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing efforts towards creating a world where women can thrive, exercise agency, and participate fully in all aspects of life.

Concept of Reproductive Health and Rights

Reproductive health and rights are fundamental concepts that play a central role in advancing women's well-being, autonomy, and empowerment. Understanding the definitions and frameworks that underpin these concepts is essential for comprehending their significance in promoting women's rights and overall development.

Reproductive Health

Reproductive health, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being in all matters relating to the reproductive system. It encompasses not only the absence of disease or infirmity but also the capability to enjoy a satisfying and safe sexual life, free from coercion, discrimination, and violence. Reproductive health goes beyond the mere absence of reproductive disorders and encompasses positive aspects of sexuality and reproductive well-being. It means that women and men should be aware of and have effective, safe affordable process of birth control, access to proper health care facilities of reproductive medicine. Programs on health education are initiated to make women aware about the importance of reproductive health, safety at pregnancy and childbirth so that they can have healthy infant and healthy life (Seidu, Ahinkorah, Agbemavi, Amu & Bonsu, 2019).

The components of reproductive health encompass various aspects of an individual's well-being, both physical and emotional, related to their reproductive system and reproductive choices. These components are essential for maintaining overall reproductive well-being and ensuring the ability to make informed decisions about one's reproductive health. The following are key components of reproductive health:

Sexual and Reproductive Health Education: Comprehensive and accurate information about sexual and reproductive health, including anatomy, puberty, contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and healthy relationships. Education empowers individuals to make informed decisions and promotes responsible sexual behavior.

Family Planning: Access to a range of safe, effective, and affordable contraceptive methods, enabling individuals and couples to plan and space pregnancies according to their desires and needs. Family planning empowers individuals to exercise control over their reproductive choices, promoting reproductive autonomy and reducing the risks associated with unintended pregnancies.

Maternal Health: Ensuring adequate healthcare services and support throughout pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period. This includes access to prenatal care, skilled attendance during childbirth, emergency obstetric care, postpartum care, and support for breastfeeding. Maternal health promotes the well-being of pregnant individuals, reduces maternal mortality and morbidity rates, and supports healthy outcomes for both the mother and the child.

Prevention and Management of Sexually Transmitted Infections: Measures to prevent, diagnose, and treat STIs, including regular testing, condom use, and access to appropriate healthcare services. This component aims to reduce the transmission and impact of STIs, protect sexual and reproductive health, and prevent long-term complications.

Safe Abortion Services: Ensuring access to safe and legal abortion services when desired or necessary. Safe abortion services, performed by trained healthcare professionals in appropriate medical settings, reduce maternal mortality and morbidity associated with unsafe abortions and protect the reproductive rights of individuals.

Prevention and Response to Gender-Based Violence: Strategies to address and prevent gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and female genital mutilation/cutting. This component recognizes that violence against women and girls has significant reproductive health implications and emphasizes the importance of creating safe and supportive environments.

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Infertility Care: Access to medical interventions, support, and counseling for individuals and couples experiencing difficulties in conceiving. Infertility care aims to provide appropriate diagnosis, treatment options, and emotional support for those seeking to start or expand their families.

Adolescent Reproductive Health: Addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by adolescents regarding their sexual and reproductive health. This component focuses on age-appropriate education, access to youth-friendly services, contraception, prevention of STIs, and early detection of reproductive health issues.

Reproductive Rights

Reproductive rights are the lawful freedom and rights related to reproductive health. It means the basic right of the couple or individual to freely decide count, spacing and timing between the children and rights to have information on methods to do so and to get the highest level of reproductive health. They also have right to make all decisions related to reproduction without violence, discrimination and coercion. Reproductive rights are also influenced by social and cultural norms, socio economic factors and current laws and regulations (Mittal, 2018). Climate of socio structural may influence the access and quality of reproductive health care and interference.

Reproductive rights are grounded in the principles of bodily autonomy, privacy, equality, and non-discrimination. They emphasize the importance of individuals having control over their reproductive choices and being able to exercise those choices without facing stigma, coercion, or barriers.

International Frameworks and Conventions

Several international frameworks and conventions provide a foundation for recognizing and protecting reproductive rights. These include:

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, recognizes the right to marry and found a family, as well as the right to be free from arbitrary interference in private and family life. These principles lay the groundwork for reproductive rights.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The ICCPR, adopted in 1966, affirms the right to privacy, which encompasses decisions related to reproduction and reproductive health.

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The ICESCR, adopted in 1966, recognizes the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, including reproductive health. It also highlights the importance of access to family planning and the prevention and treatment of diseases affecting reproductive health.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW, adopted in 1979, specifically addresses gender-based discrimination and affirms women's right to control their reproductive lives. It emphasizes access to healthcare services, including family planning, safe childbirth, and postnatal care.

Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). The ICPD, held in 1994, highlighted the significance of reproductive rights as an essential component of sustainable development. It emphasized the need for comprehensive reproductive healthcare, including family planning, safe abortion, and prevention and treatment of STIs.

Importance of Reproductive Rights for Women's Autonomy:

Reproductive rights are essential for women's autonomy as they enable women to have control over their reproductive choices and make decisions about their own bodies and lives. Here are some key reasons why reproductive rights are crucial for women's autonomy:

Decision-making Power. Reproductive rights empower women to make informed decisions about their reproductive health and family planning. They have the right to choose whether to have children, when to have

them, and how many to have. By having the ability to make these choices, women can shape their lives according to their own aspirations, goals, and circumstances, leading to increased autonomy.

Bodily autonomy and integrity. Reproductive rights recognize and protect women's bodily autonomy and integrity. Women have the right to decide what happens to their bodies, including choices related to contraception, pregnancy, childbirth, and abortion. This autonomy ensures that women are not subjected to unwanted pregnancies or coerced into making reproductive decisions against their will, thus preserving their physical and mental well-being.

Education and career opportunities. Reproductive rights contribute to women's educational and career opportunities. When women have access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare, including contraception and safe abortion services, they can plan and space their pregnancies, allowing them to pursue education and career goals. The ability to control their reproductive choices empowers women to achieve their full potential and participate more actively in social and economic spheres.

Economic empowerment. Reproductive rights play a significant role in women's economic empowerment. When women can exercise their reproductive rights, they can make informed decisions about family planning and childbirth, which can positively impact their economic well-being. By being able to plan and space their pregnancies, women have increased opportunities for education, employment, and economic participation, leading to greater financial independence and autonomy.

Health and well-being. Reproductive rights are crucial for women's health and well-being. Access to reproductive healthcare services, such as prenatal care, safe childbirth, and prevention and treatment of reproductive health issues, ensures that women can maintain good health and address potential risks and complications. When women have control over their reproductive health, they can prioritize their well-being and seek appropriate care, leading to improved overall health and autonomy.

Gender equality and social empowerment. Reproductive rights are intertwined with gender equality and social empowerment. When women have the right to make decisions about their reproductive health, it challenges traditional gender norms and power dynamics. It promotes gender equality by recognizing women as autonomous individuals capable of making choices about their own bodies and lives. Reproductive rights empower women to challenge discriminatory practices, advocate for their rights, and participate more actively in society, thereby enhancing their social empowerment.

In summary, reproductive rights are crucial for women's autonomy as they enable women to have control over their reproductive choices, make informed decisions about their bodies and lives, pursue education and career opportunities, achieve economic independence, and maintain good health and well-being. Ensuring reproductive rights is fundamental for promoting gender equality and empowering women to lead fulfilling and self-determined lives.

Women Empowerment

Women empowerment refers to the process of enabling women to have increased control, influence, and participation in decision-making across various spheres of life. It is a multidimensional process and helps women in gaining control over their lives. It involves creating an enabling environment where women can exercise their rights, access resources, and overcome societal barriers that limit their opportunities and agency. Women empowerment aims to promote gender equality, challenge gender norms, and enhance women's social, economic, and political status. In every part of life, women get unequal status and position and become important to empower them by providing equal status and opportunities (Mavelil, & Srivastava, 2019).

Dimensions of Women Empowerment

Women empowerment encompasses multiple dimensions that collectively contribute to women's ability to assert their rights and achieve their full potential. These dimensions include:

Economic Empowerment. Economic empowerment focuses on improving women's access to resources, income-generating opportunities, financial independence, and entrepreneurship. It involves equal access to education, vocational training, employment, land, credit, and financial services, allowing women to enhance their economic well-being and contribute to sustainable development.

Social Empowerment. Social empowerment emphasizes women's participation, voice, and leadership in social and community affairs. It involves challenging gender norms, promoting gender equality, and fostering inclusive and equitable societies. Social empowerment encourages women's active engagement in decision-making processes, community development, and social movements.

Political Empowerment. Political empowerment centers on increasing women's participation and representation in political and governance structures. It involves removing barriers to political leadership, promoting women's political rights, and creating an inclusive political environment. Political empowerment enables women to influence policy decisions, advocate for their rights, and shape the socio-political landscape.

Educational Empowerment. Educational empowerment focuses on ensuring equal access to quality education for girls and women. It encompasses eliminating gender disparities in educational attainment, promoting girls' education, and supporting lifelong learning opportunities for women. Educational empowerment equips women with knowledge, skills, and critical thinking abilities necessary for personal development, decision-making, and active participation in society.

Health Empowerment. Health empowerment involves ensuring women's access to comprehensive healthcare services, including reproductive health services. It emphasizes the right to make informed decisions about reproductive choices, access to sexual and reproductive health information, and quality healthcare. Health empowerment enables women to take control of their health, well-being, and reproductive lives.

Interlinkages between Reproductive Health, Rights, and Empowerment

Reproductive health, rights, and empowerment are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Attainment of personal skills, authority to take decisions, knowledge of their rights & privileges, self-confidence and awareness are the important elements of women empowerment (Kansal, Singh, & Kumar, 2017). When women are aware of her rights then she can develop capacity and capability of self-reliance, self-control and self-strength and build freedom of action and choice (Kankana, 2017). The following interlinkages highlight their significance:

Autonomy and Agency. Reproductive rights and access to reproductive health services empower women by providing them with the autonomy to make decisions about their bodies and reproductive choices. This autonomy enhances women's agency, enabling them to assert their rights, pursue education and employment opportunities, and participate in decision-making processes.

Health and Well-being. Reproductive health is a fundamental aspect of women's overall health and well-being. Access to reproductive healthcare services, including family planning, prenatal care, safe childbirth, and prevention and treatment of STIs, positively impacts women's physical and mental health. Improved health outcomes contribute to women's empowerment by enabling them to lead healthy and productive lives.

Gender Equality. Reproductive health and rights are integral to achieving gender equality. When women have access to reproductive healthcare, contraceptive options, safe abortion services, and information about sexual and reproductive health, they can exercise control over their reproductive lives. This control challenges traditional gender roles and norms, promotes gender equality, and empowers women to participate fully in society.

Economic and Social Empowerment. Reproductive health and rights play a significant role in economic and social empowerment. When women can plan and space their pregnancies, they have greater opportunities for education, employment, and economic participation. Access to reproductive healthcare also reduces the burden of reproductive responsibilities, allowing women to engage in social and community activities, pursue personal goals.

Importance of Reproductive Health and Rights in Women Empowerment

In developing countries like India, Africa and many more, almost 2/3rd of diseases among women at reproductive age is due to reproductive and sexual health issues. These issues causes' great burden on poor men and women and need urgently health care for the same. More than 250 million of women lost their life each year due to poor reproductive and sexual health. However economic and social implications are overlooked and more attention was given to medical perspective. At level of society, reproductive services support wide range of development goals like improvement in women status, contribution in economic growth and reduction of inequality and poverty. It was observed that if women are able to delay first birth and can plan proper timing and spacing between their children then they will be able to stay more in school and will have better prospects for employment and will participate fully in political and social activity of their community.

According to Sebastian, Kulkarni, & Begum, 2017, prevention of maternal death and disability protect women and families from terrible health expenses and loss of income. By preventing unintentional pregnancy, poverty reduces and increases girls and women ability to access both employment and education opportunities and they are able to participate in political, social and economic life and they feel empowered.

Human rights connected with reproductive and sexual health includes women's educational, political and economic empowerment. With reproductive rights, women can make decisions like when, whether and with whom she want children and have opportunity to access good quality of health services wherever and whenever she wants. Women reproductive rights helps woman in realization of opportunities available and way to fulfill them. This rights increase motivates women and enhances confidence among them that lead to women empowerment. These realities reveal the reason of promotion and protection of rights related to reproductive and sexual health are important to achieve all human rights including education right, decent work right, right to food and participation right. Rights of Adolescent Girls are protected by delaying marriage age and childbearing and empower them by enhancing their social status in society (Nanda & Dhar, 2017). Reproductive health and rights has great influence on women empowerment. Women with better reproductive and sexual health feel more confident and have good standard of living that empowers them (Chanu, & Kumar, 2015).

Fertility for example if done by choice rather than by chance shows the women influence on family decision making and their confidence and empowerment. Fertility is a basic need of women's health. Woman who can't control or regulate her fertility cannot be called in 'state of complete Mental, Physical and Social well- being' i.e. the definition of health by WHO constitutions. Family planning improves life of women and they start thinking beyond their families and work for themselves, society and nation (Verma, Dhakar, & Mordia, 2017).

Reproductive and sexual health mostly deals regarding women, who are mostly undervalued and subordinated. Providers of reproductive and sexual health must consider along with women respect and treating them equal should also consider their perceptions and concerns. Respect for women provide them with privacy, confidentiality and information access that is needed for well informed decisions related to health. Women illiterate or literate, poor or rich, if given the information and right to select and choose will make correct decisions for themselves and their families. Women were expelled historically on moral authority and are still not represented properly in professions like law, medicine and in regulatory assemblies. Women voice and their perspectives were not taken into consideration in policies, laws and regulations related to reproductive and sexual care for women.

Here are some importance of reproductive health and rights on empowerment of women:

Improved health outcomes and reduced maternal mortality. Access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare services, including prenatal care, skilled attendance during childbirth, and postpartum care, leads to improved health outcomes for women. Adequate reproductive health services help prevent and manage complications during pregnancy and childbirth, reducing maternal mortality rates. When women have access to safe and quality reproductive healthcare, it positively impacts their overall health, well-being, and life expectancy, thereby contributing to women's empowerment.

Educational and economic opportunities. Reproductive health and rights play a significant role in expanding educational and economic opportunities for women. When women have access to family planning and contraception, they can plan and space their pregnancies according to their educational and career aspirations. This enables them to complete their education, pursue higher studies, and participate in the workforce. By exercising control over their reproductive choices, women can enhance their economic independence, secure employment opportunities, and contribute to the economic development of their families and communities.

Enhanced decision-making power. Reproductive health and rights empower women by enhancing their decision-making power regarding their reproductive lives. When women have access to accurate and comprehensive information about sexual and reproductive health, they can make informed decisions about contraception, family planning, and reproductive healthcare services. This increased autonomy over reproductive choices leads to a sense of control and empowerment. Women are better able to prioritize their own well-being, make choices aligned with their goals and values, and actively participate in decision-making processes within their families and communities.

Reduction of gender-based violence and discrimination. Reproductive health and rights contribute to the reduction of gender-based violence and discrimination against women. When women have access to reproductive healthcare services, including safe abortion and contraception, they can exercise control over their bodies and reproductive choices, reducing the risk of coercion, forced pregnancies, and harmful practices. Comprehensive sexuality education and awareness about reproductive rights also promote gender equality, challenge harmful gender norms, and help prevent violence and discrimination based on gender and sexuality. By addressing the root causes of gender-based violence and discrimination, reproductive health and rights contribute to creating a more equitable and empowering environment for women.

In summary, ensuring access to comprehensive reproductive health services and upholding reproductive rights positively impacts women's empowerment. It leads to improved health outcomes, reduced maternal mortality, expanded educational and economic opportunities, enhanced decision-making power, and a decrease in gender-based violence and discrimination. By addressing the specific needs and rights of women in relation to their reproductive health, societies can create a more equal and empowering environment for women to thrive and contribute to their communities and societies.

Challenges and Barriers

The various challenges in achieving reproductive health and rights are;

Lack of access to quality reproductive healthcare services. One of the significant challenges in achieving reproductive health and rights is the lack of access to quality reproductive healthcare services, particularly in low-income and marginalized communities. This lack of access can be attributed to various factors such as geographical barriers, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, insufficient healthcare funding, and limited availability of trained healthcare professionals. Limited access to services like contraception, prenatal care, safe childbirth, and postnatal care can significantly impact women's reproductive health and rights, hindering their empowerment and overall well-being.

Socio-cultural barriers and gender norms. Sociocultural barriers and deeply ingrained gender norms often pose challenges to reproductive health and rights. Discriminatory social norms, stereotypes, and cultural beliefs around gender roles, sexuality, and reproductive decision-making can restrict women's autonomy and limit their access to reproductive healthcare services. Stigma, shame, and fear of judgment may prevent women from seeking information, contraception, or safe abortion services. Challenging and changing these sociocultural barriers is essential for promoting reproductive health and rights and empowering women to make autonomous decisions about their bodies and lives.

Legal and policy challenges. Legal and policy challenges can hinder the realization of reproductive health and rights. In some countries, restrictive laws and policies limit access to contraception, safe abortion services, and

comprehensive sexuality education. Legal barriers, such as mandatory waiting periods, parental consent requirements, and criminalization of abortion, can disproportionately affect marginalized communities and restrict women's ability to exercise their reproductive rights. Inconsistent implementation and enforcement of laws related to reproductive health can also create barriers to accessing quality healthcare services. Advocacy efforts and legal reforms are necessary to address these challenges and ensure that laws and policies protect and promote reproductive health and rights.

Summary of Key Findings:

Through this research paper, we have explored the importance of reproductive health and rights in women empowerment. Key findings include:

- i. Reproductive health encompasses various components, including sex education, family planning, maternal health, STI prevention, safe abortion services, and infertility care.
- ii. Reproductive rights are human rights that recognize individuals' autonomy in making decisions about their reproductive lives.
- iii. Women empowerment involves economic, social, political, and educational dimensions, all of which are influenced by reproductive health and rights.
- iv. Access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare services and the ability to exercise reproductive rights have a positive impact on women's health outcomes, educational and economic opportunities, decision-making power, and the reduction of gender-based violence and discrimination.

Suggestions

Addressing the various challenges in achieving reproductive health and rights requires comprehensive and multi-faceted approaches. These include;

- i. There should be serious efforts to strengthen healthcare systems and services to ensure access to quality reproductive healthcare for all.
- ii. Comprehensive sexual education should be integrated into educational systems, providing young people with knowledge and skills for healthy relationships and responsible sexual behavior.
- iii. Advocacy efforts should focus on promoting reproductive rights and legal reforms to protect and advance women's autonomy and access to reproductive healthcare.
- iv. Gender-transformative approaches should be embraced to challenge harmful gender norms and promote gender equality in relation to reproductive health and rights.

By addressing these challenges, societies can create an enabling environment for women to exercise their reproductive rights, achieve empowerment, and enjoy optimal reproductive health and well-being.

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