

Prioritising Women's Health & Wellbeing

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According to a new report from the World Economic Forum and the McKinsey Health Institute launched at Davos in January 2024, women may live longer than men, on average, but they spend 25 per cent more of their lives in debilitating health. The report said improving diagnostics, data on women-specific conditions like ovarian cancer, and directing more investments towards women's health and research is needed.

In particular, McKinsey research finds that less than 2 per cent of healthcare research and innovation is invested in female-specific conditions beyond cancer.

This 'women's health gap' equates to 75 million years of life lost due to poor health or early death each year. Closing the gap would benefit 3.9 billion women, giving them an extra seven healthy days a year, or an average of 500 days over a lifetime. Further, it could boost the global economy by \$1 trillion by 2040 from fewer early deaths and health conditions, and a greater capacity for women to contribute to the economy and society.

As a result of these findings, the final hours of the World Economic Forum in Davos saw the launch of a new Global Alliance for Women's Health, which has the broad ambition of 're-shaping the future of women's health and the global economy.' The health alliance will pledge new commitments from governments, philanthropies, and pharmaceutical companies, among others, across three pillars i.e. financing, science and innovation, and agenda-setting. So far, partners have pledged \$55 million to improve women's health outcomes.

With International Women's Day 2024 being themed around 'Inspiring inclusion', we see governments across the globe putting the much-needed emphasis on women's healthcare. For instance, the UAE has set out wide-ranging plans to bolster healthcare services for women, by approving the 'National Policy for Improving Women's Health' for providing the highest healthcare services quality for women, whether curative, preventive or rehabilitative services. Similarly, the Irish government is paving the way for a longer-term comprehensive Women's Health Strategy.

Women in England are being urged to help shape reproductive health policy, as the government seeks views on periods, contraception, fertility, pregnancy and menopause for health strategy. Likewise, the Biden administration recently announced a White House initiative to improve how the federal government approaches and funds research into the health of women, who make up more than half of the US population but remain understudied and underrepresented in health research.

India, of course, is not far behind in this initiative. The Interim Budget 2024-25 announcement that took place on February 1, 2024, laid focus on encouraging vaccination for girls in the age group of 9 to 14 years for the prevention of cervical cancer.

Besides these government initiatives, multiple efforts are also being made by the industry players to improve women's health. For example, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved Zurzuvae as the first and only oral treatment approved for women with postpartum depression, developed by American pharmaceutical company Biogen. The US FDA has also recently approved a birth control pill to be sold without a prescription for the first time in the US, a milestone that could significantly expand access to contraception. The pill's manufacturer, Perrigo Company is based in Dublin.

Further, biotech companies in the UK and Korea are embarking on the world's first prospective study of artificial intelligence (AI)-powered breast cancer detection, to streamline diagnosis, and tackle radiologist shortages. On the other hand, startups in India have developed groundbreaking multi-cancer detection tests specifically designed for high-risk and asymptomatic women.

Quality, affordability, and accessibility, particularly in the context of women's health, are very critical aspects of ensuring well-being. This calls for greater mobilisation across sectors to invest in women's health, keeping in mind the imperatives of equity and integral care.

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