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## **Breast cancer: bill to be introduced in National Assembly, says Dr Fahmida**

Pakistan is facing great challenge of breast cancer, as one out of nine women are likely catch the disease, making it the country with a very high rate of breast cancer compared to rest of Asia. A comprehensive legislative bill would be introduced in the National Assembly on breast cancer, said Dr Fahmida Mirza, former Speaker of the National Assembly.

Breast cancer respects no boundary and geography and it is a matter of great concern for the country that 40 thousands deaths report every year due to this disease, Dr Fahmida while addressing a seminar on marking the "Breast Cancer Awareness Month" 'Early Detection Save Lives' organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in collaboration with the UNWOMEN and UN Resident Co-ordinator's Office here on Wednesday.

Pakistan's leading experts on health, education, population and human rights made an appeal for prevention and treatment of breast cancer that claims hundreds of women's lives each year in Pakistan. "Breast cancer is not a women's' issue, but a human rights issue. It is an issue for every segment of every society. It hits the rich, the poor, the old and most importantly our young women alike", said Dr Mirza, adding that it is a matter of grave concern for all of us that Pakistan is amongst countries with a very high rate of breast cancer as compared to the rest of Asia. Although in the absence of any authentic data, it is difficult to scale the magnitude but the available reports suggest that it could be up to one in nine women in Pakistan threatened with breast cancer and due to lack of early diagnoses and specialized care, this leads to over 40,000 reported deaths every year, she maintained.

Former Speaker further said that the complexities of cultural taboos, religious misinterpretations and traditional biases have created a vicious circle which prevents our women to speak out and express their agony. The severity of this prevails even further in the marginalized communities, she said, adding that the majority of Pakistani women are reluctant to consult and expose themselves to doctors for regular medical check-ups and so are forced to lurk in pain and anguish in silence and die. Though, there is evidence now that if detected early, can save lives, she added.

Dr Mirza further said that the state of denial and ignorance has led to a lack of information and understanding. There is little research if any; hardly any reliable data; no customised medical infra-structure and hence evidence. What is worse is not being recognised at the state level as an issue to be taken up on urgent basis, she maintained.

"This is not just a medical emergency; it is a human rights emergency for women in Pakistan. We demand urgent measures to be taken on war footing," Dr Mirza added.

Dr Mirza further said that it is high time we had a high level national working group on breast cancer that sets out a roadmap, holds stakeholders accountable, and develops a national policy on breast cancer in the near future. A national policy that facilitates, advocates for, and implements early detection, expeditious treatment, follow-ups and ongoing awareness campaign, she added.

Health experts agreed on this occasion that awareness regarding the disease had a direct link with literacy, education and right to access information. While breast cancer itself could be treated if detected early, what equally was life-threatening is ignorance and negligence about the disease.

Yasmeen Rehman, Former Special Envoy to the Prime Minister on social issues; Shahnaz Wazir Ali, social activist and former special assistant to Prime Minister for Education and former Member UNESCO Executive Board; Dr Attiya Inayatullah, former Minister for Science and Technology; Dr Sania Nishtar, Founder and President-Heartfile/former Minister for Science and Technology and Dr Nehal Masood, MD-Section Chief Haematology and Oncology at Agha Khan Hospital addressed on this occasion.

Sangeeta Rana Thapa, Deputy Representative of UNWOMEN in Pakistan in her remarks said that breast cancer prevalence and prevention must also be analyzed in the context of women's lack of empowerment, marginalization and gender inequalities. Dr Kozue Kay Nagata, UNESCO Director/Representative in Pakistan said that this consultation has laid the foundation of a significant beginning but the real work lies ahead. This consultation owes debt to the academia, students and civil society organizations' partners who are a catalyst of change and critical link with the communities.

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