

INTERNATIONAL THE NEWS

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Framework for promotion of early detection, treatment of breast cancer urged

Leading experts on health, education, population and human rights made a resounding appeal for the development of a national framework to comprehensively scope the prevalence and impediments to early detection and quality treatment of breast cancer in Pakistan.

The appeal was articulated at a multi-stakeholders consultation on 'Early Detection Save Lives' here on Wednesday morning. Marking the Breast Cancer Awareness Month, it was organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in collaboration with the UNWOMEN and UN Resident Coordinator's Office.

The initiative was inspired by a meeting on the issue between the UN Secretary General Ban ki-Moon and former Speaker of the National Assembly Dr. Fahmida Mirza, in August this year. Dr. Fahmida, herself a survivor of breast cancer, was commended for her heroic leading of the cause in Pakistan.

Experts agreed 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 was equally life threatening was ignorance and negligence about the disease.

Making her keynote address, Dr. Fahmida reiterated that in Pakistan, breast cancer was intrinsically linked with women's lack of access to essential information and awareness. She pointed out that it was an issue that concerned availability of and access to equitable and comprehensive quality healthcare but largely remained off the public discourse due to cultural barriers, shame and stigma attached to disclosure.

Women in Pakistan are at a formidably high risk of getting breast cancer at some point in their lives, leading to over 40,000 deaths every year. Fehmida, therefore, described breast cancer as not just a medical emergency, but also a human rights emergency.

Fehmida said, cancer diagnosis is a life-altering experience for most individuals; however, women facing breast cancer often feel especially alone and overwhelmed. "From parenting young children and concerns about future of the grown up ones, to managing careers and sustaining relationships, women struggle to balance their illness with their personal and professional lives."

She hoped that the deliberations would pave the way for a National Working Group on Breast Cancer in Pakistan.

Former caretaker minister and president of Heartfile Dr. Sania Nishtar outlined a series of interventions that can enable early detection of breast cancer without huge investments being made. "A number of cost-effective, policy opportunities can be leveraged for an effective public health response to breast cancer. Creating awareness at a population level to step up breast self-examination does not cost anything and is a powerful tool, which can enable early detection of cancer, thus improving survival and prognosis. Awareness about what high risk constitutes, and the indications for mammography, is another imperative," said Dr. Sania Nishtar.

Opportunistic screening for breast cancer by health care providers, Dr. Sania said, is yet another cost-effective entry point in public health. "Pakistan's field force of Lady Health Workers can be tapped by including this in their scope of work," she proposed. Dr. Sania also recommended the need for the government to incentivize the private sector to invest in setting up infrastructure for mammography. "Paralleled with instruments to overcome financial access barriers for poor women, this can significantly help step up efforts towards breast cancer control," she concluded.

Sangeeta Rana Thapa, Deputy Representative of UNWOMEN in Pakistan said, breast cancer prevalence and prevention must also be analysed in the context of women's lack of empowerment, marginalisation and gender inequalities. Dr. Kozue Kay Nagata, Unesco Director or Representative in Pakistan, paid rich tribute to the campaign. "With this consultation, a new historic beginning has been made within the national drive to place this crucial issue on the national agenda but the real work lies ahead of us, she said before moving on to salute the courage of survivors whose heroic presence induced hope. Other panellists at the consultation included Yasmeen Rehman, Shahnaz Wazir Ali, Dr. Attiya Inayatullah, Dr. Nehal Masood, and Farid Ullah Khan, Secretary Education, Capital Administration and Development Division.

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