

GUEST EDITORIAL

Beyond The White Coat: Journey of Female Physicians in Pakistan

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In our country, Pakistan, young females face many challenges due to gender inequity and a lack of involvement in decision-making for themselves, which leads not only to fewer opportunities for education but also to difficulties in pursuing a professional career [1]. Unfortunately, despite acquiring one of the noblest degrees- medicine- the journey of many females never goes beyond wearing the white coat [2]. Recent evidence shows that in Pakistan, female students constitute nearly two-thirds of medical college admissions; however, only about half of them join the workforce, and many are unfairly blamed for “wasting” medical seats [3]. Is she the one to blame? Is reality really that simple, that a girl who studied day and night easily gives up on her dreams? While placing the blame solely on her and calling for restrictions on female seats in medical colleges, many overlook the underlying issues of a patriarchal society: cultural expectations that place the major burden of childcare and household responsibilities on women, and the lack of female-supportive workplace policies [2]. Together, these factors deprive her of the family and professional support she needs to pursue a career, ultimately forcing many to carry the burden of guilt and unlive dreams.

This editorial by the Medical Women's Association of Pakistan (MWAP) explores the deeply rooted barriers to women's participation in medicine, the challenges of retention, the obstacles to thriving in leadership roles, and the way forward for policymakers.

The problem of non-practicing female graduates has been a hot topic of debate in Pakistan and the term “Doctor Bride” was coined. It creates the impression that families view a medical degree as a “hot ticket” for women to secure more desirable marriage proposals, effectively treating them as symbols of status rather than professionals [4, 5]. This narrative is misleading because it overlooks the complex, multi-systemic factors at play. A study found that physician shortages in Pakistan are not solely due to women leaving medicine, many male graduates also migrate abroad or choose other careers because of inadequate post-graduate training opportunities, low salaries despite overwhelming patients load (as low as Rs. 40,000–45,000 in major cities), and violence against doctors, highlighting that this is a complex issue affecting both genders. [4-6].

Moreover, many graduates remain unemployed, underemployed, or are sent to underserved, poorly supported areas. Hence, despite producing about 15,000 new doctors every year Pakistan still lacks ability to retain them leading to brain drain [6]. However, it is a well-established fact that the challenges faced by women health professionals are far more complex and deeply rooted in our cultural norms. This is why they remain underrepresented in all professional fields, including medicine, and rarely reach leadership positions, despite demonstrating academic excellence in medical colleges [2, 5].

There is a dire need to focus on the barriers and enablers that affect the retention of women in medicine and support their growth as medical leaders. A major challenge, however, is the lack of evidence in this area. Recognizing the urgency of breaking the myth of ‘doctor brides’ to shift focus on complex underlying issues that compel women to quit or hinder their progress, the Medical Women's Association of Pakistan (MWAP) took a crucial step to look into this issue by conducting a comparative study analyzing perspective of both genders related to barrier and enablers for women to excel in medical carrier. The survey gathered the opinions of leading medical professionals from various specialties through a structured questionnaire circulated via MWAP's WhatsApp social media groups.

The survey revealed several overlapping concerns between male and female respondents, with external structural and social factors identified as the predominant reasons women either leave or do not join the medical workforce. Women physicians considered lack of support from family and in-laws as the main reason. Men attributed this to domestic responsibilities primarily.

Almost two-third of women participants considered long working hours and night duties as barriers. Less than 50% male participants had same opinion. The burden of childcare was also a significant issue. Very few participants attributed women's attrition from the workforce to a lack of personal interest, (women 12.8%, men 10.8%). When exploring enablers to promote women's advancement in career and especially leadership roles, both genders strongly endorsed the role of supportive families, mentorship and access to leadership training programs. Both genders recognized the value of supportive colleagues and flexible working hours. Compared to men, women considered the need for more female networking opportunities to help them thrive in medical profession.

This survey conducted by MWAP, may help policy makers focus on the structural and cultural barriers, along with the factors that enable women to excel in medicine. The findings provide a roadmap for improving female representation in the medical field by emphasizing the need for:

- i. Institutional female support systems such as day care facilities for their children, adaptable working hours and work- life balance policies.
- ii. Encouraging a cultural shift by engaging families and husbands to support women's professional aspirations
- iii. Providing mentorship and leadership training to empower women in overcoming career-specific challenges
- iv. Strengthening female professional networks to provide women with support and access to opportunities in a culturally sensitive and safe environment

Based on its survey findings, Medical Women's Association of Pakistan calls for policy changes at institutional and national levels. It is crucial to recognize that women earn their 'white coat' through years of hard work and dedication. With women making up nearly two-thirds of medical graduates, it is the shared responsibility of the government, institutions, families, and society to provide the support they need to thrive. Without proper support, Pakistan risks repeatedly losing skilled female doctors while wrongly attributing the issue to the so-called "doctor bride" phenomenon.

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