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Editorial

IJWE's First Decade in Review

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It is with great pride that I serve the IJWE as Editor in Chief, now for several years. Over the past decade, the IJWE has been able to depend on many dedicated scholars and practitioners who contributed to our yearly publication, as authors, blind reviewers, editorial team members, etc., not to mention the efforts of many more, in organizing the AEIRC's Annual Conference on Women Empowerment. The completion of 2024, marks 10 years of successful growth and social as well as scholarly relevance for the Journal. It marks 10 years of hard work, which must be recognized, and which I believe, are worthy of accolades. Dr Sadaf Ahmed, first and foremost, should be recognized for turning a dream into reality, with the establishment and spearheading of the AEIRC, back in 2010. Serving as AEIRC's President (elect), since inception, Dr. Ahmed is still one of the foundational pillars of the IJWE. Other key sources of support for the IJWE have included Dr. Moiz Khan, Dr. Shershah Syed, Dr. Sonya Arshad, and Dr. Riaz Shaikh. The Journal would not be what it is today, without their unwavering support, and for this, I wish to express my sincere thanks and appreciation in my capacity of Editor in Chief.

In the first few years, it became evident that the scientific scope of the AEIRC was perhaps becoming too large. Thus, the advisory board, along with the managing team, decided to create clusters, or divisions, each with their own areas of focus. Progressively, the AEIRC created four divisions to help support the work of emerging and established scholars, contribute to the dissemination of original research across various fields, and to ensure the organization's alignment with Sustainable Development Goals. The four divisions consisted in the psycho-physiology research division, the women research division, the youth research division and the pharmaceutical quality & regulatory sciences division.

The Women Research Division was specifically created to bring together researchers, public leaders, and practitioners to support women's empowerment. And it is through the Women Research Division that the IJWE and the AEIRC's Annual Conference on Women Empowerment came to be. In turn, both of these mechanisms have been instrumental in disseminating high-quality research to inform policy, practice, and action, taking into account gender disparities, and the need for both data driven publication, and advocacy for social change.

The collection of IJWE titles and published studies from 2015 to 2024 highlights the Journal's commitment to several key areas of focus surrounding women, their health and wellbeing, and aspects of their social, political and economic integration. Working towards women's rights means addressing persisting gender inequality, the factors influencing women's health, and the conditions that either promote or inhibit women's empowerment. The IJWE has been an enduring platform, showcasing interdisciplinary research, covering local and global issues, and addressing subversive and often provocative topics with courage and scholarly integrity. For example, right from the onset, the IJWE did not shy away from publishing works that offered strong cultural critiques, notably on the normalization of marriage matchmaking practices that involve transactional exchanges between parents, and very often, questionable agency for women, who may be forced or coerced into marriage, and denied the right to choose their partner¹.

Over the past decade, one of the key areas of focus for the IJWE has been women's health and well-being. Indeed, the IJWE published several studies that focused on women's specific health challenges, including family related stressors, as well as breast cancer and gynecological cancers, addressing their progression, prognosis, and the adequacy or limitations of healthcare interventions^{2,3}. It also covered topics like maternal health outcomes, perinatal attachment, family planning^{4,5}, and all too common, yet grossly misunderstood concerns related to reproductive health, including dysmenorrhea (painful menstruation)⁶ and menopause⁷.

A number of publications addressed a variety of issues surrounding menstruation. For example, Ahmed (2019) argued that women's periods should not be constructed and treated as taboo, but rather as a normal and natural phenomenon that ought to be normalized and destigmatized⁸. In line with similar concerns,

Batool and Shafiq, (2022) for their part, provided key insights on the perceptions and practices of women as these relate to menstrual hygiene⁹. Adjacently, and with a focus placed on physical stress during the menstrual cycle, Tabassum et al., (2015) examined how women experienced pain, discomfort and exhaustion, while Farooq et al. (2020) examined the contributing factors of dysmenorrhea in fertile-aged women⁶.

Another recurrent theme in the area of women's reproductive health, was menopause. Jassani (2015) for instance, provides a critical analysis of menopausal myths, arguing that erroneous beliefs are disconnected from the more complex realities of women as they enter this stage of life⁷. Alam et al. (2023) proposed an integrative women-centered health care approach to understand, and tackle the changes that come with menopause¹⁰. Within the broader field of women's health, Akbar et al., (2021) assessed quality of life outcomes in the treatment of anemia in women suffering from hypothyroidism¹¹; while Naseem and Ahmed (2016) discussed the experience of pain and discomfort from the perspective of feminine characteristics¹². For their part, Karatela et al., (2016) examined the social and cultural barriers inhibiting women's access to health care in rural communities around Karachi, Pakistan¹³. They contended that many factors influence women in their choice or ability to seek healthcare, from taboos, to lack of education, material scarcity, all the way to misogyny and dogma, especially in resource-limited settings. They also proposed strategies to overcome some of these challenges. Still within the field of health sciences, the IJWE has served as a platform for women to publish their research findings on rare diseases like Crigler-Najjar syndrome⁴, and on the key factors in healthy aging¹⁴.

A number of titles published in the IJWE have covered a variety of issues surrounding family planning, perinatal health and postnatal realities, and the conditions and outcomes

surrounding fertility, pregnancy, and reproductive health care. While Johnson et al. (2016) discussed diet and the conceiving mother¹⁵, Asif et al., (2020) studied the frequency of lower back pain in pregnant women and its impact on their daily life¹⁶; and Jamalvi et al., (2020), for their part, investigated the attitudes of medical students around breastfeeding¹⁷. Others followed suit, focusing on maternal and perinatal outcomes in adolescent and adult primigravida¹⁸, on the perinatal outcomes of high-risk pregnancies¹⁹, and on maternal-fetal attachment trends⁵. Halani (2015) identified key issues in discussing family planning²⁰, a theme revisited by Ali and Alaman (2016) who later confirmed that family planning still elicits cultural resistance⁴, which is readily expressed against it; which serves to rob women of bodily agency and might incur risks to women's health, and/or to the foetus/unborn child. The irony perhaps lies in the fact that interventionist practices surrounding family planning tend to be readily accepted when it serves to determine the sex of the foetus.

Neelam Barkat Ali (2017), in her article "Non-Medical Preimplantation Gender Selection: A Clear Gendercide and Sexism in Pakistan" for example provides a poignant critique of gender-based biases in preimplantation selection, explaining that male embryos are systematically favored over female ones, when couples use embryo implantation as part of a non-medical fertility treatment²¹. As a result, perfectly healthy female embryos are destroyed due to a preference for boys. Neelam Barkat Ali (1990-2020) is fondly remembered as an exceptional embryologist, and a role model for Pakistani women in the sciences. She passed away in the 2020 PK-8303 tragedy (a PIA plane crash that occurred on May 22, 2020). This mention, of her passing, in this editorial, is a way for the IJWE team to remember her contributions, and former affiliation with the AEIRC. We were, and remain bereaved, along with all her friends and family, though she remains for us, a symbol of the

embodiment of women empowerment. She lives on in our hearts and memory!

IJWE also opened the door to discussions on violence and abuse against women, and their psychological impacts on women and girls. Publications clearly linked women's health and mental health concerns to other social ills, such as domestic violence and intimate partner violence^{4,22}, teen dating violence²³, workplace violence against women in nursing⁷ and the prevalence of physical, sexual and emotional violence among married women in Pakistan by Imran and Yasmeen²⁴. IJWE has disseminated important works on marital rape²⁵⁻²⁷. With the publication of "Violence Against Women in Pakistan: A Cultural or a Criminal Problem?" by Qadar et al., (2018)²⁸, the IJWE once again, served as a platform to address the symptoms of endemic misogyny in Pakistan, and the cultural and legal underpinnings of gender-based violence in the country. Authors such as Halani (2015) reminded us of the scope of concerns revolving around persistent rights violations against women, as it pertains to femininity²⁰; while Batool et al. (2022)⁹, argued that women empowerment is still contingent on women's basic individual rights. The IJWE takes pride in showcasing the work of scholars whose voices resonate as advocacy, such as Faiza Ahmed (2019) in "Why I March?"⁸ and Maira Asif (2021), in denouncing the reproduction of gender stereotypes in the single national curriculum of Pakistan²⁹.

Since women empowerment is the core of the Journal's focus, we have remained committed to defining, measuring, discussing and debating all matters pertaining to it. A good starting point perhaps was linking women's empowerment to human and civil rights, which was a central focus for Halani and Karim (2015)²⁰ and Batool et al. (2022)⁹, in their respective articles. Another good starting point in discussing women empowerment, is through the perspective of education. Within this line of inquiry, Jahan (2015)³⁰ set out to measure the impact of training in the

development of women empowerment in Pakistan; and Shah et al., (2023)³¹ examined the empowerment that is derived from women's vocational training in the Hunza region of Gilgit Baltistan. In light of the central role of education in empowering women, Askari et al. (2022)³² provided a compelling discussion on the challenges and opportunities facing women's education in Pakistan. Although Maira Asif (2021) reminded us that, as a matter of socialization, sexism and gender-based stereotyping is still rife within the content included in Pakistan's national curriculum²⁹.

Another key aspect of women's empowerment, often linked to training or education, revolves around work, or the ability to participate in socioeconomic activities. At the cusp of education, health, and economic integration, the work of Meherali et al. (2023)³³ stands out, as they evaluated a financial and health education initiative for poor women, demonstrating the use of calendars in managing their health and financial resources. Socioeconomic integration and women empowerment are inherently interwoven. As such, the Journal has showcased studies on women's self-employment and potential entrepreneurship, through door-to-door sales (Makhdoom, 2015)³⁴, through women's involvement in waste recycling in Douala, Cameroon, Africa³⁵, and through the domestic work performed by economically deprived women, working as maidservants³⁶. The role of socioeconomic integration as a key factor influencing the empowerment of women, and the link between women's empowerment and socioeconomic development were demonstrated to be salient, with the work of Saima Khan (2018) who examined the contribution of women to Pakistan's socioeconomic development³⁷; the work of Nargis and Mujahid (2019) on inclusive labor statistics that account for both the real female labor supply and job-finding rates³⁸; and Huzaifa Sarfaraz (2018) who investigated women labor force participation in Pakistan through survey research³⁹. Once again, we are

reminded of endemic hurdles to women's economic integration, wherein Syed et al. (2015) accounted for many of the challenges that women entrepreneurs faced in Tangwani Kandhkot, in the district of Kashmore, in Sindh⁴⁰, Pakistan; while Khan and Masroor (2019) also recounted the experience of workplace harassment and gender-based discrimination by working women in Dera Ghazi Khan, a district in Punjab, Pakistan⁴¹. Indeed, local case studies are supported by higher level statistics, wherein Begam and Mujahid (2019)⁴² along with Atiq and Qadri (2021)⁴³, in their respective articles, examined the relationship between gender inequality and economic growth, providing concrete indicators and a basis for comparison, in demonstrating the persistence of gender inequality and its deleterious impact on economic growth, in Pakistan specifically, and Asia more broadly.

Our authors have also tackled women's empowerment from other angles. Ahmed and Noushad (2017) helped frame women empowerment according to the objectives set out in the commitment to Sustainable Development Goals, and in turn, assess whether we are on the "Right Track"⁴⁴. Shahzadi et al. (2018) explored empowerment through shared narratives, drawing on Muniba Mazari's speech, providing a lens into the inspirational elements that sustain empowerment through both stories, and shared experience⁴⁵. Khan (2019) revisited the historical empowerment of women, while Jamil and Bukhari (2020), reviewed the determinant of women's (inter) generational empowerment, highlighting both, similarities and differences relevant to each historical context. Historical precedents are important, notably in remembering the lineages and legacies of powerful women who have inspired their nations, their communities and the next generations, as Khan (2019) poignantly reminds us⁴⁶. Although women's struggles are not forgotten, thanks to the work of Warwani et al., (2021) who dared to account for

documented examples of domestic violence from the dark ages up to the COVID pandemic, using various ethical, Islamic and Pakistani legal perspectives⁴⁷.

Honing on the psychology of empowerment, Soharwardi (2023) proposed, rather, that the 5s' approach, encompassing self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-management, and self-decision, is key to understanding women's empowerment, as a set of (pre)dispositions that shape women's capacity to contribute to sustainable development⁴⁸. Over a decade of publication through the IJWE, has shown that women empowerment, refers to both, social and psychological sets of conditions that intersect. In this vein, through the social psychology of empowerment, Sarfraz (2023) powerfully argues that sexist humor, in the form of objectifying, sexualizing and dehumanizing jokes, has a negative impact on women empowerment, as it legitimizes a misogynist patriarchal hegemony, that clearly normalizes and (re)produces inequity, uneven conditions that disadvantage women and girls⁴⁹. Another key study, coming out of IJWE, earlier, in 2019, conceded that the influence of globalized media and ideal representations of beauty negatively affected women's self-esteem, and that reliance on makeup and cosmetic trends was symptomatic of strategic marketing that mainstreamed unrealistic and unhealthy expectations for women and girls. The psycho-social construction of the self-conscious feminine, therefore is derived from the conflation of attractiveness and confidence, and for many, there is a link between the use of makeup and the impression of projection a more confident self-image⁵⁰. From this vantage point, two additional sectors of research intersect in this uneven playing field, that of cultural schemas as the background, and that of mental health, as the foreground of consequences related to such gender-based realities.

Over the years, the Journal disseminated several studies that extensively addressed the

prevalence and consequences of physical, sexual, and emotional violence against women. Batool et al. (2016) for example, demonstrated the empirical link between women's experiences of traumatic abuse and their mental health⁵¹. Moreover, Saleem et al. (2017) showed that sexual abuse among married females constitutes a threat to their mental and emotional health⁵². Adjacently, Siddiqui et al. (2021) also demonstrated a direct association between domestic violence and abuse, and women's symptoms of generalized anxiety disorders⁵². Imran and Yasmeen (2020) for their part, examined violence against married women in Pakistan using demographic health data²⁴; while Qadar et al. (2018) analyzed violence against women in Pakistan more generally²⁸. What clearly emanates from the studies published in the IJWE, is that women's empowerment is contingent on women's safety and wellbeing, on the protection of women against gender-based violence and discrimination, and that enduring cultural tropes must be challenged in order to redefine women's position. Abro (2015)⁵³, delved into the "Symbolic Representation of Daughter in Sindhi Culture" arguing that a culture of control and protection of a daughter's virginity is founded on the internalization and collective representation of symbolic frames of reference that construct family honor as contingent on, or bound to, girls'/women's sexual chastity and purity, unlike boys/men who are not serious subjects of sexual scrutiny or control. Yet, in a study on married women's perceptions on spousal infidelity, Naz & Usman (2019) showed that the majority of women sampled (N=100) would experience "complete distress" in the face of spousal infidelity by their husband, with emotional (having feelings for someone else) and sexual affairs, 70% and 94% of married women, respectively anticipated/experienced the highest levels of distress⁵⁴.

Despite the daunting prospect of marriage, Saleem et al. (2018), also concerned with the marriage imperative for girls/women in

Pakistan, investigated the mental health effects of matrimonial rejection in matchmaking exchanges⁵⁵. Wherein the woman is displayed, sometimes forcibly showcased, to potential in-laws and grooms. For a sample of 100 women, representing two age groups, four levels of education and three occupational statuses, 80% of respondent confirmed being forced into "being shown" to secure prospective matrimonial arrangements. They demonstrated that women experienced distress and objectification, with negative effects on their wellbeing, on their behavior, and on their relations with family members. Batool et al., (2023) for their part, studied the perceptions of university students regarding the depiction of gender dynamics in Pakistani television dramas⁵⁶. They reported that the representation of dominant and aggressive male heroes perpetuates the normalization of toxic patterns of behavior that can in turn influence young adults in adopting the same attitudes. "The portrayal of aggressive and dominating male characters, often labeled as the 'hero,' raises questions about the inadvertent promotion of harmful relationship dynamics. The acceptance of such behaviors within the dramatized context may, as participants noted, contribute to a normalization of toxicity in actual relationships".

In numerous studies published in the *IJWE* over the past decade, as demonstrated above, we find empirical and theoretical contributions that serve as disruptive and transformative critiques of the cultural conditions that inhibit women empowerment, and gender justice. Along with these, we should recall the work of Karatela et al., (2016) which examined the social and cultural obstacles facing women seeking healthcare in rural communities¹³. The work of Karatela et al., (2017)⁵⁷ which addressed fundamental concerns surrounding the culturally prevalent acceptance of early marriages in rural Pakistan. And the work of Ahmed et al. (2023), as they explored women's experiences in academia, accounting for

harassment, intersectional discrimination, and the leaky pipeline⁵⁸. In their work, they discuss the prevalence of various harassment types and identify institutional support gaps, which incur emotional burdens, unhealthy coping mechanisms, and the normalization of alienating aspects of institutional culture. They argue however, that there is a positive correlation between individualized support for women aspiring for leadership positions, and their career progression. In addressing gender-based double-standards, inequalities, violence and discrimination, derived from cultural beliefs and practices, adjacent health and mental health concerns, and women's agency, the *IJWE* has triangulated many complementary factors, beyond political rights, and representation, access to education, and socioeconomic integration, which influence women's empowerment. In this way *IJWE* has proven to be interested in understanding the real-life world, from the local, to the global.

The Journal has also expanded its scope to global concerns, for instance with the editorial by Aziz (2018), which provided a brief review of nine key global issues affecting women either disproportionately or exclusively³. Linking important changes in Pakistan, to the forces of globalization, Begum (2022) examines women's labor force participation, arguing that in Pakistan women are not benefitting significantly from opportunities on the global labor market⁵⁹. Rather, domestic employment has kept a majority of Pakistani women under-educated, in unskilled labor sectors, and in underpaid, insecure and informal work, without substantively diminishing the burden of household work.

The body of research published in *IJWE* over the past decade covers a large breadth of issues revolving around gender inequality, touching on health, violence, economic participation, education, and cultural representation. With a commitment to inter- and multi-disciplinary ethos, the Journal has

also emphasized the intersectionality of issues affecting women and underlined the importance of social justice in striving for sustainable gender equity. There is no doubt, that the IJWE is one of the key outlets for research and scholars working on women's issues in Pakistan. With 10 years of solid scholarly contributions, I want to turn our sights towards the future. With volume 11 on the role of women's leadership in neuroscience, and new considerations on the role of women in fostering global citizenship or on the importance of storytelling to remember women of influence, we maintain our commitment to publishing relevant content on women, their struggles, their successes, their stories, etc. For the next 10 years, the IJWE aims to continue addressing local and global issues affecting women and girls.

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