

A BRIGHTER TOMORROW: PRIORITIZING CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

There is a crucial need for recognising children and adolescents as an integral part of society, especially in a nation with a significant youth demographic. Pakistan's 280 million population, includes 100 million youth, and require urgent investment in mental well-being, particularly addressing psychiatric disorders like depression and anxiety, especially for women, whose welfare is often neglected.

At present, Pakistan has an alarming shortage of psychiatrists, with one of the lowest numbers in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. Despite existing policies, there is a clear lack of tailored laws addressing the specific needs of children and adolescents. The efforts made by organisations like the College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan and Sindh Mental Health Authority are acknowledged, but nonetheless, there is a pressing need for a robust policy. The progress made by neighbouring countries in formulating and implementing mental health policies, particularly emphasising the importance of mental health within a holistic healthcare system, is noteworthy.

An emphasis has been laid on the urgency of the situation, advocating for prompt action, comprehensive policies, and unwavering commitment. The proposed future directions include a call to actively prioritise the mental well-being of youth to shape a brighter future for Pakistan.

KEYWORDS

Adolescent; Anxiety; Child; Depression; Health Policy; Pakistan

Children are often described as the future, but seldom are they acknowledged as the present. In a nation where over 29% of its populace falls between the ages of 15 to 29, and a staggering 64% is below 30, children are not just our future; they are our today.¹ As Pakistan's population burgeons, expected to touch 280 million by 2030, with the youth constituting about 100 million of that number, it is crucial that we invest in their mental well-being.^{1,2}

Psychiatric illnesses, including those as debilitating as depression or anxiety, frequently take root during the tender ages of childhood and adolescence.³ In particular, the susceptibility of females to these illnesses during this age is alarming, especially in a country where the well-being of women is often side-lined. When we consider that Pakistan has a mere 0.19 psychiatrists per 100,000 inhabitants – one of the lowest rates in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region – the gravity of the situation becomes all the more palpable.^{4,5}

Moreover, despite Pakistan's Mental Health Ordinance of 2001 and the subsequent National Health Vision Pakistan (NHVP) 2016-2025, which acknowledges mental health as a fundamental part of general well-being, there's an evident dearth of specialized policies specifically focusing on the needs of children and adolescents.⁶ After the health became a provincial matter in 2010, Sindh took a progressive step by introducing the Sindh Mental Health Act in 2013, a rapid response compared to other provinces. However, despite having a dedicated Youth Policy, Sindh largely overlooks the importance of adolescent mental health.⁶ This is not to ignore efforts from organizations such as College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan (CSPS) and Sindh Mental Health

Authority(SMHA), which in the last decade have tried to remedy this issue. Yet, the need for a holistic policy that encompasses the unique needs of children and adolescents cannot be overstressed.^{4,7}

Our neighbouring countries have made notable strides in formulating and implementing policies specific to mental health, emphasizing its importance in a holistic healthcare system. In Nepal, there has been a recent recognition of child and adolescent mental health problems, although prior to this it had remained almost invisible on the health agenda.⁸

The WHO's recommendation for the training of GPs in psychiatry is a testament to the fact that psychiatry is not just about managing illnesses but shaping minds. With our vast youthful populace, it's not just about healing; it's about nurturing leaders and innovators for tomorrow. It's about imbuing positivity, resilience, and fortitude in them.

In conclusion, while the journey is arduous, it is not insurmountable. The urgency of the matter beckons swift action, comprehensive policies, and unyielding commitment. Future directions should include a focus on increasing the number of trained mental health professionals, integrating mental health services into primary healthcare, and developing school-based mental health programmes. Priority should be given to creating awareness and reducing the stigma associated with mental health, enhancing early detection and intervention, and promoting research to understand the unique mental health needs of Pakistani children and adolescents. Let's not just envision a brighter future for Pakistan; let's actively mould it by prioritising the mental well-being of our children and adolescents today.



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