



Editorial

Breaking the Silence: Unveiling the Challenges of Women's Reproductive Health

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Figure 1

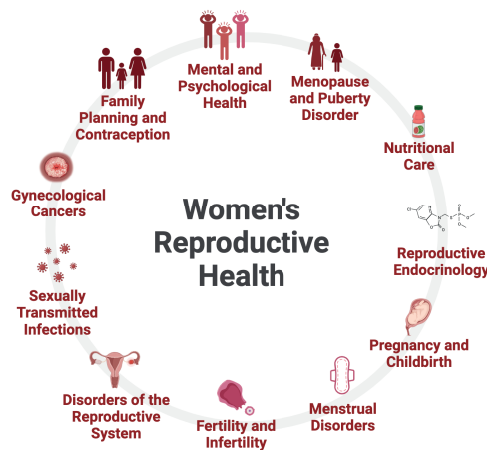
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Women's Reproductive Health Policies

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- Affordable Pregnancy Care Packages
- Insurance Coverage for Reproductive Health Services
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Comprehensive overview of women's reproductive health conditions and the corresponding policies and strategies designed to alleviate and advance reproductive well-being. This integrated approach underscores the interconnected nature of reproductive health issues and emphasizes the need for multifaceted interventions to improve women's reproductive health outcomes on a global scale.

1. Introduction

In the heart of the Gulf, a region rich in history and cultural diversity, there exists a profound silence surrounding a critical aspect of women's well-being – their reproductive health. While the Gulf has made significant strides in various fields, the discussion surrounding women's reproductive health remains veiled in stigma and societal taboos.

The current state of women's reproductive health in the Gulf is a complex tapestry of cultural, religious, and political influences. Despite advancements in healthcare, many women in the region still face various challenges that hinder women from accessing



quality healthcare services. Limited access to comprehensive sexual education, contraceptives, and family planning resources perpetuates a cycle of misinformation and unmet reproductive health needs.

Addressing the current state of women's reproductive health in the Gulf requires a multi-faceted approach. First and foremost, breaking the silence is paramount. Cultivating an environment that encourages open dialogue, education, and awareness is essential to dismantling the barriers that shroud women's reproductive health in secrecy.

One of the primary challenges lies in the stigma associated with discussing women's reproductive health openly. Cultural norms and societal expectations often dictate that such matters should be kept private, leading to a lack of awareness and understanding. This silence not only hampers women's ability to make informed choices about their reproductive health but also perpetuates harmful myths and misconceptions. The stigma associated with reproductive health has far-reaching psychological and emotional consequences for women, impacting their overall well-being. Efforts to improve women's reproductive health include advocacy and awareness campaigns, as well as strengthening healthcare infrastructure (Mousa et al., 2021).

The current state of women's reproductive health in the Gulf demands a collective effort to dismantle the walls of silence and stigma. By fostering open conversations, promoting education, and aligning cultural norms with modern healthcare practices, we can pave the way for a future where women in the Gulf can fully embrace their reproductive rights and achieve optimal well-being. It is time to break the chains of silence and work toward a more enlightened and empowered future for women in the region. In this editorial, we will delve into the complexities of women's reproductive health in the Gulf, exploring the cultural, social, and healthcare factors that shape women's experiences and access to reproductive healthcare services.

2. Challenges Faced By Women in the Gulf to Seek Care on Reproductive Health

2.1. Cultural and Social Stigma

In many Middle Eastern societies, the stigma surrounding reproductive health extends to issues such as infertility and menstrual health. In many societies across the region, women grappling with fertility challenges find themselves not only contending with the medical complexities of their situation but also facing a profound sense of isolation and judgment. This societal scrutiny not only exacerbates the emotional toll of fertility

struggles but also hampers the ability of women to seek and receive the support they need. The cultural expectation of women to bear children can intensify the stigma surrounding infertility, creating an environment where those experiencing difficulties may hesitate to seek medical assistance or share their experiences openly. Consequently, this culture of silence perpetuates a lack of understanding about the prevalence and complexity of infertility issues, hindering the establishment of supportive networks and advocacy efforts (Alomair et al., 2022).

Similarly, the stigma attached to menstruation contributes to a culture of silence, preventing open conversations about menstrual hygiene and women's overall well-being. Menstrual health, a fundamental aspect of a woman's reproductive journey, is frequently shrouded in secrecy due to cultural taboos and societal expectations (Ahmadi, 2020). The reluctance to openly discuss menstrual hygiene perpetuates myths and misinformation, contributing to the perpetuation of harmful practices and inadequate awareness about women's overall well-being.

Patriarchal norms and gender–power relations have been shown to impact women's reproductive health needs in West Africa, indicating the influence of societal attitudes on women's reproductive health (Ayanore et al., 2015). Furthermore, the stigma surrounding reproductive health services utilization by unmarried women has been identified as a barrier, with discrimination and fear of being labeled contributing to the stigma (Mohammadi et al., 2016). Additionally, the cultural taboo surrounding reproductive health, especially for divorced poor women, poses significant challenges in managing their reproductive health (Parvez et al., 2022). The impact of societal attitudes and cultural norms on women's reproductive health is further underscored by reproductive autonomy. It is evident that women's reproductive health is influenced by a complex interplay of individual, community-level, and societal factors, including cultural norms, gender–power relations, and stigma.

Religious beliefs can also play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward women's reproductive health. While some interpretations of religious doctrines may embrace the importance of family planning and women's health, others may inadvertently contribute to the stigma by reinforcing conservative perspectives. Bridging the gap between religious teachings and modern healthcare practices is crucial to ensuring that women can make informed choices aligned with their beliefs and values (Arousell & Carlbom, 2016).

Engaging religious leaders in open dialogues about the intersection of faith and reproductive health can facilitate a more nuanced understanding that promotes the

well-being of women. By fostering an environment where religious teachings are harmonized with contemporary healthcare principles, societies can work toward dismantling the stigma that often hinders women's access to comprehensive reproductive health services (Alomair et al., 2020).

The multifaceted challenges surrounding women's reproductive health in the Gulf necessitate a holistic approach that addresses not only the practical aspects of healthcare but also the deeply ingrained cultural and religious norms. Breaking the silence around infertility and menstrual health, while fostering understanding between religious doctrines and modern healthcare practices, is essential for empowering women to make informed choices about their bodies, thereby creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for women across the region.

2.2. Lack of access to quality healthcare services

The pervasive lack of access to quality healthcare services stands as a formidable barrier to women's reproductive health in the Gulf, amplifying the challenges faced by women seeking essential care. This issue is intricately woven into the fabric of the region's socioeconomic landscape, where various factors, including unequal distribution of resources, hinder women's ability to access the healthcare facilities necessary for comprehensive reproductive health services (Hardee et al., 1999).

The glaring inequality in the availability of healthcare resources perpetuates gender disparities across the Gulf. Many women, particularly those in marginalized communities find themselves at a disadvantage, lacking easy access to facilities equipped to provide the full spectrum of reproductive healthcare services. This not only exacerbates existing gender inequalities but also contributes to a cycle of limited opportunities for women to make informed choices about their reproductive well-being.

The repercussions of this limited access extend far beyond mere inconvenience, significantly hindering women's ability to receive crucial medical interventions at various stages of their reproductive lives. Prenatal care, family planning, and safe childbirth practices become elusive for numerous women, exposing them to heightened risks of complications, both physical and mental. The absence of comprehensive healthcare services not only endangers individual women but also has broader implications for the overall health and development of communities.

Addressing the issue of inadequate access to quality healthcare services for women in the Gulf necessitates comprehensive reforms at both policy and infrastructure levels.

Governments must prioritize the development and implementation of policies that aim to bridge the gaps in healthcare access, particularly targeting underserved populations. This entails not only increasing funding for healthcare but also ensuring the efficient allocation of resources to areas where the need is most acute.

Moreover, substantial improvements in healthcare infrastructure are imperative. Investing in the establishment and enhancement of healthcare facilities, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged areas, is crucial to democratizing access to reproductive health services. This includes the training and deployment of healthcare professionals, as well as the provision of necessary equipment and technology to ensure the delivery of high-quality care.

Addressing the profound issue of limited access to quality healthcare services for women in the Gulf requires a concerted effort encompassing policy reforms, increased funding, and improved infrastructure. By dismantling barriers and creating an environment where women have equal and reliable access to reproductive healthcare, societies can take a significant step toward fostering the well-being of women and, by extension, the overall development of the region. It is an investment in a healthier, more equitable future for generations to come (Mousa et al., 2021).

2.3. Legal and policy barriers

Policy reforms and legal protections are also necessary to ensure women's reproductive rights are upheld. Promoting gender equality and empowerment through education and awareness programs, as well as providing economic opportunities for women, are crucial steps toward addressing these issues. International and regional collaboration plays a vital role in sharing best practices and lessons learned, as well as addressing cross-border reproductive health challenges.

Restrictive laws and policies often limit women's access to reproductive healthcare services and hinder their ability to make informed choices about their own bodies. These barriers can range from strict regulations on contraception to discriminatory practices regarding marriage age, divorce, and inheritance rights. Such restrictions not only infringe upon women's reproductive autonomy but also perpetuate gender inequalities within society. Moreover, the lack of comprehensive sex education and awareness programs exacerbates the problem, leaving women unaware of their rights and options (Moghadam, 2003).

To address these challenges, there is a pressing need for policy reforms that prioritize women's reproductive health and promote reproductive rights as fundamental human rights. Such reforms should aim to eliminate discriminatory laws, expand access to essential healthcare services, and foster a supportive legal framework that empowers women in making decisions about their own bodies. Only through concerted efforts to dismantle legal and policy barriers can the Gulf region strive toward achieving comprehensive and equitable reproductive healthcare for all women.

3. Editorial Summary

3.1. Addressing cultural stigma: Endometriosis diagnosis in the Arab World

Al-Shukri and *Almarzooqi* emphasize the need for addressing cultural stigma surrounding endometriosis diagnosis in the Arab world, particularly among teenagers. The commentary outlines the challenges faced by young girls and their families in conservative societies, where the diagnosis of endometriosis can impose psychological burdens, affecting both health and future reproductive capabilities. It underscores the significance of recognizing and combating stigma, highlighting the impact of societal disapproval on health outcomes, access to resources, and individual well-being.

The multifaceted impacts of endometriosis on women's lives, including the symptoms and potential long-term ramifications emphasizes the impact of cultural misconceptions and taboos, hindering early diagnosis and exacerbating the emotional toll on affected individuals. This also leads to the intersection of cultural attitudes toward menstruation and the concealment of women's struggles, contributing to the silence around endometriosis.

Comprehensive policy recommendations were included to address these challenges. It suggests initiatives and awareness programs aimed at breaking down societal ignorance and fostering supportive environments within schools. The commentary advocates for integrating reproductive health education into school curricula, ensuring school healthcare providers are well-informed, and promoting routine gynecological check-ups for young girls. Additionally, it emphasizes the role of gynecologists, specialized centers, telehealth services, open dialogue, cultural sensitivity, and peer support in reducing stigma and facilitating early diagnosis.

In conclusion, the commentary calls for a holistic approach to combat the stigma surrounding endometriosis in the Arab world, incorporating education, awareness, cultural

sensitivity, and policy advocacy. By implementing these strategies, the goal is to create a future where endometriosis is openly discussed, comprehended, and effectively managed, thereby improving the overall well-being of affected individuals.

3.2. Book review: *Your fertile years: What you need to know to make informed choices*

Alsabi has presented a book review on "*Your Fertile Years: What You Need to Know to Make Informed Choices*," by Dr. Joyce Harper. Dr. Harper is a distinguished expert in global fertility education, drawing upon her personal struggles with fertility and her extensive expertise as a Professor of Reproductive Science at University College London to provide a comprehensive guide for women. The book delves into various aspects of women's reproductive health, adopting an individualized approach that encourages readers to make their own informed decisions. Dr. Harper emphasizes the importance of self-familiarization with one's anatomy and offers detailed explanations of human reproductive organ functions, ranging from puberty and contraceptive methods to more complex subjects such as genetic testing, egg freezing, and menopause.

The book addresses the decline in fertility rates, supported by statistics from the UK and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where late marriages contribute to a decrease in fertility rates. The chapter on reproductive optimization highlights the impact of nutrition and exercise on fertility, addressing prevalent issues, like obesity and diabetes in the UAE. Dr. Harper introduces FemTech, advocating for technology-based applications that track various fertility indicators for ovulation monitoring.

The book covers a spectrum of topics, including pregnancy recommendations, causes of infertility, and assisted reproductive technologies, such as IVF. Dr. Harper stresses the importance of early awareness about fertility, suggesting that women ideally complete their childbearing by age 35. She also discusses preventive measures, such as the intake of folic acid and vitamin D, and provides evidence-based recommendations for optimizing fertility through dietary and exercise habits.

The book explores emerging technologies like egg freezing and contemplates future reproductive prospects, including in-vitro reproductive cells, womb transplants, pre-implantation genetic testing (PGT), and genetic editing. Dr. Harper discusses the ethical implications of these advancements, particularly the potential for limitless genetic possibilities. In conclusion, the book encourages women to acquire comprehensive knowledge about their reproductive health, emphasizing the existence of a fertility window and the available treatments for pregnancy difficulties. It serves as a valuable

resource for women in their late 20s to early 30s, offering insights into fertility and reproductive choices.

3.3. Beyond contraception: The medical necessity of hormonal contraceptives for optimal health and well-being of women in the UAE

Awar and Zareba provide a comprehensive review that outlines the multifaceted benefits of hormonal contraceptives beyond their primary role in contraception. The first section focuses on general health and wellness benefits, highlighting the positive impact on mood stabilization, reduction of premenstrual symptoms, acne relief, and potential positive effects on bone mineral density. The discussion emphasizes the importance of individual variations in response to hormonal contraceptives, acknowledging that while they generally stabilize mood, some women may experience mood-related side effects.

The review explores the role of hormonal contraceptives in optimizing interpregnancy intervals for healthier pregnancy outcomes. The significance of waiting at least 24 months after a live birth, as recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO), is discussed. Short interpregnancy intervals are associated with adverse maternal and neonatal outcomes, making hormonal contraceptives a valuable tool for family planning and ensuring adequate recovery time between pregnancies.

The subsequent section delves into medical indications for contraception, elucidating how hormonal contraceptives can be crucial for women with severe cardiac diseases, chronic disorders, and other health complications where pregnancy poses significant risks. It emphasizes the importance of preventing pregnancy in high-risk populations to safeguard maternal and fetal health, providing effective contraception as a vital tool in managing these risks.

The subsequent sections delve into specific gynecological conditions such as dysmenorrhea, abnormal uterine bleeding, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), and endometriosis. The discussion highlights how hormonal contraceptives effectively manage symptoms, offering relief from pain, regulating menstrual cycles, and reducing the progression of these conditions. Additionally, the use of hormonal contraceptives is explored in the context of preventing ovarian and endometrial cancers.

The review then addresses hormonal contraceptives' role in managing premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD), emphasizing their effectiveness in alleviating both physical and emotional symptoms. The last sections

explore the preventive role of hormonal contraceptives in anemia, particularly iron-deficiency anemia, and their efficacy in managing acne and hirsutism. The discussion highlights how hormonal contraceptives contribute to reducing menstrual blood loss, preventing iron deficiency, and regulating hormonal imbalances associated with acne and hirsutism.

Overall, this comprehensive review provides a nuanced understanding of the diverse health benefits offered by hormonal contraceptives, extending beyond their primary contraceptive function to address a spectrum of women's health concerns.

3.4. Cervical cancer awareness and screening practices amongst women in Ras Al-Khaimah, UAE and migrant women in Sydney, Australia

Ozturk et al focuses on cervical cancer awareness and screening practices among women in Ras Al-Khaimah, UAE, and migrant women in Sydney, Australia. Despite cervical cancer being the fourth most common cancer in the UAE and the fourteenth in Australia, significant disparities persist in screening participation. The study aimed to identify barriers and facilitators influencing access to cervical screening in these populations. The research, conducted in Ras Al Khaimah and Sydney, revealed multiple hindrances, including lack of knowledge; cultural, religious, and psychological barriers; as well as organizational factors. The findings underscore the importance of addressing these obstacles through targeted policies and health awareness initiatives to encourage women's participation in cervical screening.

Cervical cancer, a leading cause of cancer-related deaths globally, is addressed through screening programs in the UAE and Australia. Despite reductions in incidence rates due to these programs, inequalities persist, especially among migrant women. Factors contributing to screening disparities include individual-level barriers such as lack of knowledge, cultural beliefs, and psychological factors, as well as system-level factors like logistical and organizational aspects of healthcare provision. The study emphasizes the need for government initiatives, awareness campaigns, and culturally tailored health promotion programs to overcome these barriers and improve screening rates, particularly among migrant populations.

The research also aligns with global efforts to eliminate cervical cancer by 2030, as proposed by the WHO. The WHO's three-pillar strategy involves vaccinations, screening, and treatment. The study highlights the importance of the HPV vaccine in preventing cervical cancer and recommends HPV DNA as the primary screening test. In the UAE,

the Ministry of Health and Prevention collaborates with Dubai Municipality to implement the WHO Global Strategy, developing national guidelines for early screening. The study concludes that understanding barriers and facilitators is crucial for policymakers and healthcare professionals to deliver culturally sensitive services and achieve the goal of eliminating cervical cancer.

4. Key Priorities in Advancing Women's Reproductive Health Policies

4.1. Strengthening the policy environment

A strategic and research-driven approach is essential for creating a robust foundation for sexual and reproductive healthcare in the MENA region. By addressing the following critical topics, policymakers can steer the allocation of resources toward impactful interventions, ultimately elevating the standard of care and fostering the well-being of individuals and communities:

1. Country-specific Analyses of Policies and Health Service Standards

- (a) Undertake comprehensive analyses of existing policies and health service standards related to sexual and reproductive healthcare at the country level.
- (b) Identify gaps in the current framework to ensure that primary healthcare systems offer comprehensive information and care, addressing specific needs within each nation.

2. Research on Health Sector Reforms

- (a) Investigate the impact of health sector reforms, such as decentralization, privatization, and the implementation of fees for services.
- (b) Ensure that these reforms protect the availability and accessibility of essential sexual and reproductive health services, preventing any unintended consequences that may hinder public access.

3. Examination of Reproductive Health Education Curricula

- (a) Evaluate the content and outcomes of reproductive health education curricula in schools.

- (b) Provide evidence-based insights to adapt the curriculum content to local conditions, ensuring that it is relevant, effective, and addresses the unique needs of diverse communities.

4.2. Improving quality of care in women's reproductive health

To enhance the quality of women's reproductive health care, comprehensive training programs for healthcare providers, standardized clinical protocols, and a patient-centered care approach are recommended. Additionally, integrating technology, implementing continuous quality improvement systems, and leveraging online platforms for community engagement can improve efficiency and accessibility. Emphasizing multi-disciplinary care teams, targeted initiatives to address health disparities, and culturally sensitive education further contribute to equitable access and holistic well-being in reproductive health services.

1. Comprehensive Training Programs and Standardized Protocols

- (a) Implement ongoing, comprehensive training programs for healthcare providers focused on women's reproductive health.
- (b) Include modules on evidence-based practices, sensitivity training, and cultural competency to ensure providers are equipped to offer high-quality, patient-centered care.
- (c) Develop and implement standardized clinical protocols for reproductive health services.
- (d) Ensure guidelines cover a range of services, including prenatal care, family planning, and postpartum care, to maintain consistency in care delivery across healthcare facilities.

2. Patient-centered Care Approach

- (a) Adopt a patient-centered care approach that prioritizes women's preferences, needs, and values.
- (b) Encourage shared decision-making between healthcare providers and women, fostering a collaborative and empowering healthcare environment.

3. Community Engagement Programs

- (a) Develop community engagement programs to educate and involve women in their reproductive health.

- (b) Conduct workshops, seminars, and outreach activities to raise awareness, promote preventive care, and encourage timely access to reproductive health services.

4. Multidisciplinary Care Teams

- (a) Foster collaboration among multidisciplinary care teams, including obstetricians, gynecologists, nurses, and mental health professionals.
- (b) Ensure a holistic approach to women's reproductive health, addressing physical, emotional, and mental well-being.

4.3. Health awareness and education policies

The proposed health awareness and education policies aim to establish a multifaceted approach to promote public health and well-being. By implementing a comprehensive health education curriculum in educational institutions, including topics like nutrition and mental health, we seek to empower individuals with foundational knowledge. Community health awareness campaigns, accessible information resources, and workplace wellness programs further extend this initiative beyond formal education, fostering a culture of preventive care and healthy living. Collaborations with healthcare professionals, integration into primary healthcare services, and targeted outreach for vulnerable populations ensure inclusivity and tailored support. By emphasizing continuous evaluation, government support, and incentives for healthcare professionals, these policies aspire to create a robust framework that prioritizes health education, encourages proactive healthcare practices, and ultimately enhances the overall health of communities.

1. Comprehensive Health Education Curriculum and Resources

- (a) Provide easily accessible and culturally sensitive information and education on women's reproductive health.
- (b) Implement a standardized and comprehensive health education curriculum in schools and educational institutions, covering a broad spectrum of topics, including nutrition, mental health, sexual and reproductive health, and preventive care.
- (c) Ensure the availability of easily accessible and culturally sensitive health information resources. Establish online platforms, community health centers, and informational materials in multiple languages to cater to diverse populations.

- (d) Establish specialized reproductive health services for youth, providing age-appropriate information, counseling, and access to a range of family planning methods. Ensure confidentiality and create youth-friendly spaces to encourage open discussions

2. Workplace Wellness Programs

- (a) Encourage and support workplace wellness programs that promote physical and mental health among employees. Provide resources, workshops, and incentives to foster a health-conscious work environment.
- (b) Ensure elderly women have easy access to healthcare services tailored to address menopausal symptoms and related health concerns. This includes regular check-ups, counseling, and appropriate medical interventions.

3. Collaboration with Healthcare Professionals

- (a) Foster collaboration between educational institutions, community organizations, and healthcare professionals. Establish partnerships to facilitate expert-led workshops, seminars, and health screenings for the community.
- (b) Integrate health awareness and education into primary healthcare services. Ensure that healthcare providers routinely offer information and engage in conversations about preventive care during patient visits.
- (c) Develop targeted outreach programs for vulnerable populations, addressing specific health needs and barriers to access. Consider socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic factors to tailor awareness initiatives for maximum impact.

4. Accessible Contraceptive Information and Services

- (a) Establish programs to improve access to accurate contraceptive information and a variety of contraceptive methods. Ensure that individuals have the knowledge to make informed choices about family planning and reproductive health.

5. Prevention and Treatment of STDs

- (a) Implement robust prevention strategies for STDs through educational campaigns, accessible testing facilities, and community outreach programs. Ensure timely and affordable treatment options, reducing the prevalence and impact of STDs on reproductive health.

6. Women's Cancers Screening and Treatment

- (a) Develop and implement comprehensive screening programs for women's cancers, including cervical and breast cancers. Ensure that diagnostic and treatment services are readily available, promoting early detection and improving outcomes.

7. Adequate Nutrition Programs

- (a) Establish nutrition programs that focus on women's reproductive health, particularly during pregnancy and lactation. Provide education on balanced diets, nutritional supplements, and access to affordable and nutritious food options.

4.4. Financial support policy

This policy aims to ensure equitable access to comprehensive reproductive health services for women by providing financial support, reducing economic barriers, and promoting their overall well-being.

1. Subsidized Family Planning Services

- (a) Implement subsidies for family planning services, including contraceptives and counseling, to make these essential services financially accessible to all women, regardless of their economic status.

2. Maternal and Neonatal Care Assistance

- (a) Establish financial assistance programs for maternal and neonatal care, covering prenatal and postnatal services, childbirth, and postpartum care. This includes subsidizing medical examinations, medications, and hospital stays.

3. Preventive Screenings and Vaccinations

- (a) Introduce financial support programs for the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination, promoting the prevention of HPV-related cancers and ensuring broad access to this preventive measure.
- (b) Provide financial support for preventive screenings, such as cervical and breast cancer screenings, ensuring that women can access these critical services without financial constraints.

4. Affordable Pregnancy Care Packages

- (a) Develop affordable pregnancy care packages that encompass counseling, birth preparedness, and the management of pregnancy complications. Financial support will be provided to make these packages accessible to women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

5. Insurance Coverage for Reproductive Health Services

- (a) Advocate for comprehensive insurance coverage that includes a wide range of reproductive health services, from family planning to maternity care and preventive screenings, reducing out-of-pocket expenses for women.

6. Support for Mental Health Services

- (a) Extend financial support for mental health services related to reproductive health, recognizing the psychological aspects associated with various reproductive health stages.

In conclusion, the current state of women's reproductive health in the Gulf is influenced by various societal attitudes, cultural norms, and gender–power relations, which impact women's access to reproductive health services and their overall reproductive well-being. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account the cultural, social, and individual factors that contribute to the stigma and barriers surrounding women's reproductive health in the region.

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