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Understanding gendered influences on women's reproductive health in Pakistan: Moving beyond the autonomy paradigm

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Abstract

Recent research and policy discourse commonly view the limited autonomy of women in developing countries as a key barrier to improvements in their reproductive health. Rarely, however, is the notion of women's autonomy interrogated for its conceptual adequacy or usefulness for understanding the determinants of women's reproductive health, effective policy formulation or program design. Using ethnographic data from 2001, including social mapping exercises, observation of daily life, interviews, case studies and focus group discussions, this paper draws attention to the incongruities between the concept of women's autonomy and the gendered social, cultural, economic and political realities of women's lives in rural Punjab, Pakistan. These inadequacies include: the concept's undue emphasis on women's independent, autonomous action; a lack of attention to men and masculinities; a disregard for the multi-sited constitution of

gender relations and gender inequality; an erroneous assumption that uptake of reproductive health services is an indicator of autonomy; and a failure to explore the interplay of other axes of disadvantage such as caste, class or socio-economic position. This paper calls for alternative, more nuanced, theoretical approaches for conceptualizing gender inequalities in order to enhance our understanding of women's reproductive wellbeing in Pakistan. The extent to which our arguments may be relevant to the wider South Asian context, and women's lives in other parts of the world, is also discussed.



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Keywords

Pakistan; Women's autonomy; Gender; Reproductive health; Contraceptive use; Antenatal care use

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