Partnership to enhance women’s health research in Kurdistan Region, Iraq

The health and well being of women are considerably affected as a result of having both biological and gender-related differences from men. In many societies women are disadvantaged by discrimination rooted in socio-cultural factors, which make their health of particular concern. Experiencing violence is one of the socio-cultural factors that can prevent women from attaining the best possible level of physical and mental health. Violence against women is a worldwide problem and a serious human rights abuse that occurs among all social, cultural, economic, and religious groups. Violence against women has been shown to be highly prevalent globally, with partner violence affecting one in three women. It is, in fact, a major public health concern as a wide range of negative health outcomes and even death had been recognized as consequences of violence against women. In November and December 2015, the United Nations has led a campaign to end violence against women. The campaign was carried out during the civil society-driven 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, which run from November 25th, 2015, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, until December 10th, 2015, Human Rights Day. This “Orange the World” initiative has focused on the theme of preventing violence against women and girls. The campaign was carried out throughout the world with Iraqi Kurdistan Region also witnessing many activities initiated by the government and civil society organizations. Coinciding with the 16 days of activism and despite the enormous efforts of Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government by building up civil societies and women’s organizations, passing the domestic violence legislation and efforts to enforce this legislation, violence against women continues at a high rate in Iraqi Kurdistan Region. For example, a study from the region has shown that the prevalence of the overall lifetime and the overall past year spousal violence against women was 58.6% and 45.3%, respectively. The proportions of women experienced at least one form of lifetime spousal violence were 52.6% for emotional abuse, 38.9% for physical violence and 21.1% for sexual violence. The issue of violence against women in Iraqi Kurdistan context and its roots, risk factors and workable prevention strategies remained understudied and poorly understood. Hawler Medical University has been proactive in producing research and providing some research evidence in this particular field. However, most of these efforts have been of low scale and at individual researchers' or postgraduate students' level and could not study this problem in a systematic and comprehensive way and have not actively influenced policy making. Hawler Medical University is currently involved in a collaborative academic project with the University at Albany, the State University of New York through a small grant provided by the Iraq University Linkage Program that is managed by the International Research and Exchanges (IREX). The aim of this grant activity is to build the research capacity at Hawler Medical University in the field of women's health and violence against women. More specifically, it prepare and build the capacity of a multidisciplinary team of researchers and
academics from different fields of public health, gynecology and obstetrics, nursing and sociology. Thus, they will be enabled to plan and conduct research and advocacy activities in relation to exploring the problems facing the women's health, the roots and causes of violence against women in Iraqi Kurdistan society and trying to identify the needs and solutions to the current problems. This project will include different collaborative research and educational activities between Hawler Medical University and the University at Albany. In this context, Hawler Medical University has established a department for women's health that will provide a framework for the trained multidisciplinary team to actively contribute to the research and advocacy activities in the fields of women's health and violence against women. Through this collaborative activity with the University at Albany and within the vision of Hawler Medical University to become an innovative centre of excellence in research that addresses community needs, Hawler Medical University aims to become more actively involved in the area of research and advocacy on issues related to improving women's health and combating violence against women, particularly its most extreme form of female genital mutilation, which is unfortunately common in Iraqi Kurdistan region. Hawler Medical University also aims to become more actively involved in influencing decision and policy making in these regards through active dissemination of the research findings, knowledge transfer activities and advocating for the use of research findings in policy making process.

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