

CORRESPONDENCE
**HEALTH CULTURE IN ISLAMABAD: NAVIGATING SOCIO-
ECONOMIC CHALLENGES, HEALTHCARE ACCESSIBILITY, AND
PUBLIC HEALTH INITIATIVES**

Naserr Ahmed Umrani

Doctor Abasyn University Islamabad Campus

naserrahmedumrani@catgroup.uk

* *Corresponding Author:* naserrahmedumrani@catgroup.uk

Abstract

The health culture in Islamabad, Pakistan, reflects a dynamic interplay of socio-economic factors, healthcare accessibility, traditional and modern medical practices, and public health initiatives. This paper explores key dimensions of Islamabad's health landscape, focusing on maternal and child health, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges, inappropriate prescribing practices, and environmental health hazards. Despite improvements in healthcare, maternal and postnatal care remains underutilized, while mobile health interventions show promise in improving child health practices in rural areas. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of effective public health strategies, highlighting the need for mental health support, particularly among students. Additionally, concerns about inappropriate medication prescribing and the impact of air pollution and heavy metals on public health have surfaced. Addressing these issues requires a multi-sectoral approach, involving policymakers, healthcare providers, and the community, to build a resilient healthcare system in Islamabad.

Keywords: Health culture; Islamabad; Maternal and child health; COVID-19

Introduction

Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan, has a unique health culture shaped by the diverse socio-economic conditions of its population, healthcare infrastructure, and public health policies. As a city that houses both affluent populations and economically disadvantaged communities, Islamabad faces diverse health challenges. Health culture refers to the beliefs, practices, and behaviors related to health and illness, encompassing both traditional and modern medical systems. In Islamabad, these aspects of health are influenced by a combination of socio-political factors, traditional practices, and healthcare accessibility.

This paper explores the health culture of Islamabad through several critical lenses: maternal and child health, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health issues, inappropriate prescribing practices, and environmental health hazards. Each

of these areas highlights the complexity of health culture in Islamabad, revealing both strengths and areas for improvement in the healthcare system.

Maternal and Child Health in Islamabad

Maternal and child health remains a pivotal concern in Islamabad, where traditional practices intersect with modern medical interventions. While healthcare facilities in the capital have improved, the utilization of postnatal care (PNC) services remains low. Postnatal care is essential for reducing maternal and newborn mortality, yet many women in Islamabad, particularly in surrounding rural areas, do not receive adequate PNC services (Sultana & Shaikh, 2015). Social barriers, including cultural norms and inadequate healthcare system responsiveness, contribute to this gap in care.

Despite these challenges, innovative solutions are emerging. For instance, mobile health interventions have been effective in improving infant and young child feeding practices in rural Islamabad. Akber et al. (2019) demonstrated that mobile health (mHealth) technologies, including SMS-based reminders and educational messages, can significantly enhance maternal knowledge and practices related to child nutrition. This indicates that technology, when combined with culturally appropriate education, can bridge gaps in maternal and child health services.

However, the success of such interventions depends on sustained efforts to improve healthcare accessibility and address the socio-cultural factors that limit PNC utilization. Health education campaigns targeting rural communities and the integration of traditional birth attendants with formal healthcare providers can further enhance maternal and child health outcomes in the region.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on Islamabad's health culture, revealing both strengths and weaknesses in the city's public health infrastructure. One of the most significant challenges during the pandemic was the need for effective contact tracing and public health communication. Islamabad's response included innovative strategies, such as systems-based approaches to contact tracing, which helped manage the spread of the virus (Zafar et al., 2022). These efforts were critical in controlling the transmission of COVID-19 and reducing mortality rates in the city.

However, the pandemic also exposed vulnerabilities, particularly in mental health. Studies conducted during the pandemic revealed a rise in anxiety, depression, and psychological distress among university students in Islamabad. The sudden shift to online learning, isolation due to quarantine measures, and uncertainty about the future contributed to these mental health challenges (Hussain et al., 2023; Naqvi et al., 2022). Mental health, which is often overlooked in Pakistan, became a focal point of concern during the pandemic, underscoring the need for mental health support systems within educational institutions and the broader community.

Addressing the mental health crisis requires a comprehensive approach that includes mental health education, accessible counseling services, and the destigmatization of mental health care. Establishing partnerships between universities and mental health professionals can help provide students with the necessary support to navigate these challenges.

Prescribing Practices in Islamabad's Healthcare Facilities

Inappropriate prescribing practices have been a long-standing issue in Islamabad's healthcare system. The overuse and misuse of medications, particularly antibiotics, pose significant health risks, including increased morbidity, rising healthcare costs, and the acceleration of antibiotic resistance. A study by Siddique et al. (2020) revealed that inappropriate prescribing patterns, including the overprescription of antibiotics for conditions that do not require them, are prevalent in basic healthcare facilities in Islamabad.

These practices contribute to a broader public health challenge, as antibiotic resistance threatens to undermine the effectiveness of treatments for common infections. The reasons for inappropriate prescribing include insufficient training for healthcare providers, patient demands for specific medications, and a lack of oversight in prescription practices. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive training programs for healthcare providers to improve their prescribing behavior and encourage rational use of medications.

In addition to training, public awareness campaigns aimed at educating patients about the dangers of antibiotic misuse can play a vital role in curbing inappropriate prescribing practices. Healthcare policymakers must also implement stricter regulations and monitoring systems to ensure compliance with prescribing guidelines.

Environmental Health Concerns in Islamabad

Environmental factors play a significant role in shaping the health culture of Islamabad. Air pollution, particularly the presence of harmful pollutants like particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) and heavy metals, poses a serious threat to public health. Islamabad, despite its status as a relatively green city, faces growing air quality issues due to industrial emissions, vehicular pollution, and seasonal crop burning in surrounding areas. Exposure to high levels of air pollution has been linked to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, particularly among vulnerable populations such as children and the elderly (Jadoon et al., 2022).

Moreover, the presence of heavy metals, such as arsenic and lead, in drinking water further exacerbates health risks. A recent study conducted in Islamabad and Rawalpindi highlighted the contamination of drinking water with these toxic elements, which can lead to long-term health complications, including cancer and developmental disorders (Azam, 2024). This environmental health hazard requires urgent attention from both local and national authorities to implement effective water purification systems and monitor industrial emissions more closely.

Public awareness campaigns are also essential in educating the population about the risks associated with air and water pollution. By fostering a culture of environmental responsibility and implementing stringent environmental regulations, Islamabad can mitigate the health risks associated with pollution and create a healthier living environment for its residents.

Public Health Initiatives and the Path Forward

To address the complex health challenges in Islamabad, a multi-sectoral approach involving healthcare providers, policymakers, and the community is necessary. Public health initiatives must focus on improving healthcare accessibility, particularly for marginalized populations, and addressing both physical and mental health needs. Maternal and child health programs, such as mHealth interventions, should be expanded and integrated into existing healthcare services to ensure comprehensive care for women and children.

Additionally, mental health support systems must be strengthened, particularly in educational institutions, to address the psychological impact of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health campaigns should also focus on promoting rational prescribing practices and increasing awareness of the dangers of antibiotic resistance.

Environmental health concerns, such as air pollution and water contamination, require robust policy measures and increased public awareness. By implementing stricter environmental regulations and encouraging community involvement in environmental protection, Islamabad can reduce the health risks associated with pollution.

In conclusion, the health culture in Islamabad is shaped by a variety of factors, including socio-economic conditions, healthcare accessibility, public health policies, and environmental influences. Addressing the challenges faced by Islamabad's healthcare system requires collaboration across sectors to promote sustainable health practices and improve the overall well-being of the population.

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