Promises of the GRAPHIC HEALTH WARNING (GHW) in Tobacco Control Regime and Perils of Tobacco Pandemic: The Way Forward

Tobacco is the largest preventable cause of death in the world, and almost 6 million deaths annually are directly attributed to tobacco use and exposure. If this global trend continues, this number is likely to increase to 10 million by 2030. In Pakistan, an estimated 160,100 people die every year because of tobacco-related diseases such as cancer and heart attack, besides other Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs).

Arguably, tobacco is the only product that is designed and manufactured to kill half of its users. The tobacco industry has found a replacement of tobacco casualties in the shape of youth, and more alarmingly, kids. In the absence of awareness and credible WARNING, almost 1200 children in Pakistan initiate smoking every day, which translates into 50 new smokers every hour or a child starts smoking almost every minute.

Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs) are worst affected by the ever increasing influence of tobacco multinationals. Lobbying at the highest government level and fierce resistance to tobacco control legislation such as GRAPHIC HEALTH WARNING (GHW), the tobacco industry thrives with impunity. Resultantly, tobacco multinationals in Pakistan have violated Article 5.3 of WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), and manoeuvred policy reversals in case of ‘Size of Warning’ on cigarette packs in Pakistan.

Smoking control laws, awareness campaigns for masses, capacity building among the legislative framework and high tobacco taxation and prices, digitalisation of health issues to measure tobacco health burden, etc., have been instrumental in reducing the number of smokers in the developed world. However, slackness in execution of these measures and circumventing the implementation show questionable outcomes in the LMICs. Consequently, 24 million active tobacco users in Pakistan continue to smoke an ever increasing number of 85 billion tobacco sticks annually. Additionally, almost 10 million Pakistanis continue to use smokeless tobacco which is a direct cause of mouth cancer, and is an area of tobacco use which is under-researched, unregulated, contains no GHW for the users and fosters on an illicit economy.

On the one side, such insatiable tobacco consumption has detrimental impact on public health, while on the production side, it has adverse effects on human ecology and environment from cradle to the grave, by degradation of arable land, excessive pesticide usage, depletion of forests, water sources and the quality of usable water etc. Very few of these allied issues are ever mentioned or discussed as tobacco fallout. Additionally, almost 90% of tobacco crop is grown in the developing world, including Pakistan which is a ‘Low Income Food Deficit Country’, depleting already scarce water and fertile land resources. Regrettably, bulk of the profit from tobacco consumption ends up in the developed world. The tobacco transnationals are literally and metaphorically burning the future of the most vulnerable people on earth.

Tobacco’s environmental and human footprint also makes it incompatible with the SDGs, specifically SGD 12 – responsible consumption and production, 13 – climate action, 14 – life under water and 15- life on land, necessitating tobacco control to be an indispensable part of sustainability planning and policy.

Addressing future of the GHW in tobacco control regime, this panel of experts will focus the discussion on the following aspects:

- Implementation of existing tobacco control regulations, especially in Pakistan, and suggesting measures for future of pictorial and textual GHW on cigarette packs and smokeless tobacco.
- Effects of tobacco on environmental health, human health and sustainable development and future of tobacco pandemic preparedness and response in LMICs, including Pakistan.
- The inclusion of ‘digital health’, including eHealth (electronic Health) and mHealth (Mobile Health) in tobacco control regime as a research and policy outcome.

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