Webinar Report

Community Engagement within Research Uptake:

Sexual and Gender Rights

September 2022

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Introduction

On 21st July 2022, the Applying Research to Policy and Practice for Health (ARCH) programme and the Community Engagement Hub, Mesh at The Global Health Network conducted the Sexual and Gender Rights virtual webinar, which was the fourth part of the "**Community Engagement within Research Uptake**" webinar series. Currently, there is a wide separation between teams that undertake health research, those making decisions on health priorities and policies, and those who are delivering healthcare and pushing social change, particularly in resource-limited settings. Nevertheless, if research is to deliver its maximum impact and positively change health outcomes, findings from health research should be translated into recommendations that are relevant to communities and can be implemented within policy and practice.

The session brought together experts in the field:

- Erica Nelson, a Research Fellow, Health and Nutrition Cluster, the Institute of Development Studies **(chair)**
- Ntokozo Yingwana, a Researcher and PhD candidate with the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS), at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa **(speaker)**
- Dr Suchi Gaur, the Director of Global Engagement and Impact at World YWCA in Switzerland **(speaker)**

Content Summary

Session one: Migration and Health Project Southern Africa (maHP)

Ntokozo Yingwana is a Researcher and PhD candidate with the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS), at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa

Introduction

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) region is associated with high population and mobility rates. Nevertheless, migration is a major health determinant. Additionally, developing knowledge about migration and its consequences is a political process. The maPH website, www.mahpsa.org is a tool that has been used to generate and communicate knowledge to improve responses to issues of migration, health, and well-being in the SADC region.

Public engagement methods include symposiums, webinars, policy dialogues, art-based exhibitions, seminars, and film screenings where films that have components of migration and mobility are shown to participants. Producers and directors of the films are then invited to discuss issues in the films with the audience. Multimedia platforms such as op-eds, YouTube, blogs, podcasts (with interviews of researchers), and journals are also used by researchers to communicate their findings as a form of engaging the public. A project called MoVE (Methods, Visual, Explore) engaged participants, who are migrant sex workers. Art exhibitions are advocacy pieces that are used to engage different stakeholders, such as the public and policymakers.

Project books (usually E-books) are also a form of engagement that are used, where research findings are communicated through and is used as a form of reflection of the work. Participants were also allowed to produce a newsletter, which served as both data and an advocacy artifact. All these efforts are to make research accessible to the public.

Session two: Decolonizing research

Dr Suchi Gaur is the Director of Global Engagement and Impact at World YWCA in Switzerland

Introduction

Most of today's research uses archaic methods of data collection and analysis. Research designs are a reflection of how men viewed participants as passive subjects. While the world has evolved in the way audiences are engaged in research, we have not yet reached a pinnacle of decolonising the way we conduct research to reflect the changes.

Reflection on a Story

In reflecting on past research in India on the use of contraceptives, it was noted that women were unwilling to become participants in the research. It was later discovered that previous research participants were mostly viewed as passive subjects without being informed on why the data was being collected, what impact the findings would have on the subjects, and the harm it may have caused to participants when they got back to their homes. The power structures within communities and the power play between the researcher and the participant are not examined in the research.

Story collection is critical to closing research loops. Today, photographs and stories serve as a tool for collecting data and sharing research findings, especially when researching sensitive topics such as gender and sexual rights. Decolonising research requires respect, responsibility, and humility. There are several interconnected questions that need to be answered when decolonising research:

- who is benefitting
- who is setting the agenda and what it is
- who are we working for
- who is the other
- who defines how the research is to be conducted

The Process

Much of the research is gender biased. However, there are processes that need to be considered.

- Language: how research is written or given back to the community and the terminologies used.
- Inclusion: create heterogeneous groups of people when conducting research.
- Participation: all voices must be involved.

Feminist consultation has been used as a tool to reverse the way data is collected and how findings are taken up by the community for policy advocacy agenda setting. Stories are part of the data. As an example, the COVID-19 pandemic presented many challenges to women and girls. The research followed the impact that young people and young women have in combating COVID. Currently, they work with six youth organisations working with the WHO and the UN. The youth are directly involved with the decision-making processes, including how funds must be distributed to tackle the impacts of the pandemic. Engaging directly with youth has proven that engaging directly with the public is beneficial in gathering information and finding solutions.

Summary of Q&A

How do you promote community engagement through the lifecycle of a research project? What are the challenges and enabling factors?

Ntokozo Yingwana: I worked with sex workers as co-researchers for my project. I engaged them as intellectual partners from the start. I also shared with them the literature regarding the research and discussed it with them. They also assisted in analyzing the data collected. We need to start seeing people as experts in their own lives.

Dr Suchi Gaur: We can see people as gap fillers, but we have to bring them in at every step. It is empowering for them when they are involved in research. People define their agendas. "

How can researchers equip themselves to understand power dynamics within the areas they are working in?

Ntokozo Yingwana: It is very difficult to gauge the level of power dynamics and how research affects those dynamics. However, it is important to take the lead, and it was very helpful for me to understand the dynamics because my co-researchers were also participants and would give me insights. It allowed me to step back and re-evaluate my role in the research.

How do you deal with tensions that may arise when the research method expectations are challenged by the norms of the participants?

Dr Suchi Gaur: You need to identify people in the community who are your first contact and who can drive the agenda. The timing is also important.

Demographics

Geographical coverage

A total of **234** people from **56 countries** registered for this webinar, and **94 participants** from **29 countries** attended the webinar which corresponds to an **attendance rate of 40%.**

Figure 1. Heat map showing the geographical distribution of webinar registrants. The scale bar shows how the colour corresponds to the number of registrants from each country.

Participants' work

In the registry, participants were asked to fill in their occupations. Most of the participants were researchers, physicians, students, lecturers, pharmacists, and lab technicians.

Feedback

Out of the 94 individuals that attended the workshop series, three completed the feedback form.

All three participants strongly agreed that the session was a good fit for their needs, the concepts and skills presented at the webinar were explained well, and that that there was at least one thing that they would do differently or act on as a result of attending the webinar. For instance, one participant stated that they would strongly support various community engagement for all kinds of programs and services for sexual and gender rights.

One participant gave us a suggestion on what we could change for future webinars. They suggested that we increase the webinar duration so that there is sufficient time to tackle all necessary topics and concerns regarding the webinar.

When asked about which development opportunities would interest the participants if available, two participants stated that seminars and online learning courses would be interesting to them, whilst once participant highlighted that twinning or site exchange programmes, seminars, online learning courses, grant opportunities for pilot studies, and pairing with a mentor would be interesting to them.