

Strengthening
gender equality and
social inclusion

in anti-microbial resistance
intervention and
implementation research

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CONSULTING THE EXPERTS

Discovering what antimicrobial resistance researchers need to help them fully consider gender and equity in their work

Introduction

Antimicrobial resistance is a significant threat to human and animal health worldwide because it makes common infections difficult or impossible to control. The consequences are prolonged illness, increased mortality and higher healthcare costs. Gender-related inequalities contribute to AMR but researchers in low- and middle-income countries – where the problem is most severe – lack resources to approach their work with a gender lens in place. After conducting a scoping review of studies on the links between gender and AMR, a team from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in South Africa and Mahidol Oxford Tropical Medicine Research Unit (MORU) in Thailand held consultations with AMR experts in Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia. Their inputs are now being integrated into easy-to-use and practical resources that will help researchers to **consider gender-related factors across each stage of their projects.**

How the expert consultations worked

Six online workshops – three in Sub-Saharan Africa and three in South East Asia – were convened by facilitator Vernon Solomon, who has an honorary research fellowship with the Antimicrobial Research Unit in the School of Health Sciences at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. A seventh workshop was facilitated by the principal investigator for this project, Dr Ingrid Lynch of the HSRC.

Several experts also had individual interviews with Lynch and co-principal investigators Dr Konosoang Sobane (HSRC) and Dr Bhensri Naemiratch (MORU). All workshop participants were conducting AMR-focused research projects, and many of them were recipients of grants from the International Centre for Antimicrobial Resistance Solutions (ICARS) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which jointly support this project.

Describing the participants, Solomon says: 'These are highly committed, very engaged researchers and implementers. They were keen to participate in the conversation and very keen to see the outcome, which is to have a tool that can enhance the work they're doing.'

Why gender matters

The scoping review showed how gender norms and roles influence AMR exposure risks and access to information about how to mitigate them. Yet many workshop participants admitted 'they hadn't really thought about the impact gender might have on AMR', says Lynch. 'It was exciting to see them having those "Aha!" moments as the discussions went on.'

Sobane adds: 'As a result of the workshop, many of them realised that if you don't apply a gender lens across the different sections of your work, it is difficult for you to unpack the social issues you are dealing with in AMR.'

Naemiratch says even though the idea of applying a gender lens to research is an old one, researchers felt it had faded into the background of a broader human rights approach. 'That means issues such as economic discrimination against women, equal pay and power balances don't get taken into account, and ultimately these all have an effect on AMR because women either do not have the knowledge they need or aren't empowered to act on it.'

What are the challenges?

Lack of capacity and lack of institutional support were among the main factors researchers raised when they were asked what prevented them from incorporating a gender lens in their work.

'They haven't been trained how to do it,' says Sobane. 'And by saying that, they are reinforcing the need for this project. In their opinion, it is going to give them the tools they need.'

She gives the example of an education project linked to an AMR national action plan. 'After about three years, they still hadn't managed to link up with the community,' she says. 'The minute they started using community health workers, who are women, they realised that women were more receptive to the information. The toolkit we are working on will help to avoid problems like this.'

Lynch says it is not enough for institutions to ask staff to attend to gender in their research. 'There is also a need to build staff capacity using the relevant frameworks and tools. If these aren't available, then researchers do not feel capable and confident.'

What key issues emerged in the workshops?

Experts in the workshops repeatedly spoke about the importance of conducting a gender analysis at the start of any research project. 'It's a way of making sure the impact and consequence of gender is taken into account throughout the study,' says Naemiratch. 'And to remind researchers of the importance of always having gender on the table for a whole range of very important social justice reasons.'

Sobane says training in gender skills emerged as a priority, and 'most of the experts talk about capacity-building across all phases of a research project as the one thing they are really looking forward to as a result of this initiative. They have realised that a blanket approach usually creates problems.'

Lynch says training and capacity-building should be bolstered by academic partnerships. 'If you're an AMR researcher, you don't necessarily have expertise in gender. It means that even if you have the tools we're producing, it's often important to pull people into your team who have the expertise.'

Qualitative research is an area where researchers specifically asked for support in navigating a gender landscape in which women are often not heard, says Sobane. 'They want to be able to reach people who usually have suppressed voices.'

Solomon says there was a determination among the experts 'to be able to implement change-based programmes and to mitigate the effects of AMR on the ground. They recognise that the capacity to address inclusivity and the way gender differentiation plays out, especially within the field of animal health, was really important.'

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What happens next?

The principal investigators have started developing a set of resources for AMR researchers across human and animal health settings. In doing so, they acknowledge the importance of applying an intersectional lens.

'The workshops gave us a full sense of how rich and diverse this field is,' says Lynch. 'Researchers are working in community, clinical and laboratory settings, and they are from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and using different research methodologies. We need to find a way to cut through that complexity and diversity to develop tools that are going to be useful to all of them.'

The team are also keenly aware of making the resources accessible at a language level and to researchers who don't have access to resources and technology. Sobane says inclusivity is the key. 'We want the resources to be accessible to everybody, and we want to make sure they are easy to use.'

This is a rich and diverse field, with researchers working in community, clinical and laboratory settings, and from a range of disciplinary backgrounds.



To this end, an additional workshop was held in which respondents who were already part of the consultations were asked to design the resources. Using the basic structure of a research and innovation cycle as a framework, they were

asked to explore the rationale for including a gender perspective at each stage, to share insights about information and tools which might be useful, and to share stories of their own experiences in applying a gender lens.

Workshop facilitator Robert Inglis, Director of Jive Media Africa, science communication partner to the HSRC, says: 'When audiences understand the "why?" of the work, they are far more likely to engage with the "how". Stories powerfully provide both and are a useful tool for making abstract concepts real – which is a critical step in creating resources which AMR researchers will find as useful tools in their work, not an add-on to their work.'

What can the wider AMR research community learn from this project?

Solomon says the workshops he facilitated produced a 'passionate realisation' of the importance of working with communities.

'Researchers talked about the high level of learning they experienced by working much more closely with community members when they're trying to implement an AMR mitigation programme or educate against misuse or abuse,' he says.

Lynch says researchers were concerned that some organisations and teams still regard gender concerns as a 'women's issue'. She adds: 'One participant said she would love to see more men commit to and lead gender initiatives.'

Naemiratch says she was particularly struck by the benefits of working with experts in different areas. 'It provides you with insights and perspectives that you wouldn't have been aware of otherwise,' she says. 'Consulting with experts in different areas is a must.'