SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS (SRHR)

Research programme with focus on Bangladesh, Burundi & Jordan

Dutch Research Council (NWO)
WOTRO Science for Global Development

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The Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) research programme aims to generate insights in and a better understanding of processes that determine and strengthen the sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of people, as well as their ability to claim their sexual and reproductive rights. The programme strives to contribute to improving and innovating SRHR policies and practices, with a special focus on empowering young people and key populations as specified per call.

The SRHR research programme is based upon agenda-setting exercises carried out by the Knowledge Platform for SRHR (Share-Net International) in cooperation with local organisations in the three focus countries – Bangladesh, Burundi, and Jordan. NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development developed the calls for proposals building upon the thematic areas and knowledge gaps and manages the research programme.

The programme is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands with co-funding from the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation and NWO. As Knowledge Facilitator, MannionDaniels is working with the research partners and NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development to support knowledge exchange and research uptake.

**Introduction**

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**Policy context**

The policy of the government of the Netherlands recognises that the individual’s free choice regarding sexuality and reproduction is essential for (young) people to attain the highest standard of health. SRH, including HIV and AIDS, has been a priority in Dutch development cooperation policy since the ‘Cairo Consensus’ of 1994.

Dutch SRHR policy’s specific objectives are:
- Better information and greater freedom of choice for young people about their sexuality;
- Improved access to Reproductive Health and Rights;
- Better health care during pregnancy and childbirth, including safe abortions;
- Greater respect for the sexual and reproductive rights of groups who are currently denied these rights.

**NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development**

The SRHR research programme is managed by NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development.

The Dutch Research Council (NWO) funds top researchers, steers the course of Dutch science by means of research programmes and by managing the national knowledge infrastructure. NWO plays different roles: financing, programming, bringing together, supporting and influencing.

**Share-Net International**

Share-Net International is a knowledge network that combines the expertise and strengths of Dutch organisations, Southern partners and key international actors working in the area of SRHR to achieve the SRHR and HIV related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Share-Net International aims to share existing knowledge, generate new knowledge to address prioritised research gaps, and translate knowledge into formats appropriate for intended audiences so as to contribute to the development of better policy and practice.

Share-Net International consists of national knowledge networks in four countries: Bangladesh, Burundi, Jordan and the Netherlands.
A trusted entity in the SRHR policy landscape

Young people in Jordan generally feel that family planning services fail to take their concerns seriously and fear being stigmatised by sexual and Reproductive Health service providers. The crisis has made young girls increasingly vulnerable to early pregnancy, child marriage, gender-based violence and sexual assault. Yet until recently, the needs of the youth in Jordan did not figure prominently in government policy.

Youth account for a fifth of Jordan’s overall population. Yet a national survey conducted among youth in 2011 discovered that over a quarter of the young women and just under half of young men were unaware of the meaning of Reproductive Health and Rights. What’s more, the conflict in neighbouring Syria seems to be aggravating the problem. Almost fifteen per cent of Jordan’s population are Syrian refugees, yet Syrian youth lack basic Reproductive Health and Rights knowledge and don’t know where to turn for help when they need it.

A NWO-WOTRO funded collaborative research project in Jordan, in which American academics and Jordanian academics and practitioners joined forces, has played a key role in feeding the development of a national sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) strategy that also targets the youth. The project, entitled ‘Understanding and meeting the sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights needs of Jordanian and Syrian youth’ and led by Dr Ana Langer, professor of the practice of public health at the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health, focused on identifying the SRHR needs of youth in Jordan and developing policy recommendations to cater to these needs. Along the way, the project has established itself as a known and trusted entity in the SRHR policy landscape. Along the way, the project has established itself as a known and trusted entity in the SRHR policy landscape.

Culture of silence

The SRHR project has initiated a major change, according to researcher Dr Areej Othman from the University of Jordan. After examining the policy, programmatic and research landscape it became clear that ‘youth are not considered a defined population segment and that SRHR services for young people are embedded in the general health-care system’. Getting SRHR services for youth firmly on the agenda required engaging the following stakeholders: government officials, representatives from NGOs and donors, academics, people working in the SRHR domain and, of course, Jordanian and Syrian youth. ‘No one had bothered to get the youth’s perspective,’ says researcher Dr Jewel Gausman from the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health. ‘We organised a workshop with all of these stakeholders, including the youth, to discover where their priorities lay.’

Given the culture of silence in Jordan around SRHR issues, what happened was remarkable. ‘We expected the youth to feel somewhat intimidated by the other stakeholders and hold back information, but we were all amazed how actively engaged and outspoken they were in the discussion,’ says Gausman. ‘We were also surprised to find that they wanted to involve their parents, who are usually assumed to be the last people youth want included in these kinds of issues.’ It led the team to alter their approach and include the parents as one of the focuses of the research. This outcome was certainly a major and welcome step forward in breaking down some of the barriers in the culture of silence around SRHR.

Identifying needs

Engaging the youth was a crucial step towards identifying young people’s SRHR needs. One of the ways the team managed to achieve this is through a method called ‘concept mapping’, which encourages talk openly about issues. In this case it consisted of three separate activities involving 288 boys and girls. These different exercises culminated in a visual map that distils what they think their SRHR needs are.

‘The project is filling an important gap in the SRHR landscape in Jordan by generating new knowledge that can significantly contribute to and inform policy,’ Othman says. Gausman is especially enthusiastic about her colleague’s trajectory in this process. ‘She’s gone from being relatively new in the field of youth SRHR at the start of this project, to reviewing the National Reproductive Health and Rights Strategy. I think that’s a very tangible way in which this project has helped build capacity in the area of sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights among the youth in Jordan, but also effectively engaged and influenced policy.’

Read about this project, and others, via de website

www.nwo.nl/SRHR

The Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) research programme

Research in Jordan

In 2016, a call for proposals on Jordan was launched. This call also solicited proposals for research to be carried out in Jordan by consortia of at least two partner organisations, of which at least one from Jordan.

Research projects in Jordan (2017 – 2020)

- Examining Reproductive Health and Rights Services of Women, Female Youth, and Female Refugees in Northern Jordan with a Behavioral Economics Lens
- Consortium leader: Dr Heath Prince (The University of Texas)
  - Consortium members: Jordan University of Science and Technology, Jordan Ministry of Health, and The University of Texas
- Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Women and Young People in Jordan: A Mixed Methods study using Interactive Theatre
  - Consortium leader: Prof. Jocelyn DeJong (American University of Beirut)
  - Consortium member: National Centre for Culture and Arts (Jordan)
- Syrian Refugee Youth in Jordan: Early Marriages in Perspective
  - Consortium leader: Dr Marina de Regt (VU University)
  - Consortium members: Varmou University, Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies Geneva, Caritas Jordan, and Association Ahel-Aljabal for Human Development
- Understanding and Meeting the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Needs of Jordanian and Syrian Youth
  - Consortium leader: Dr Analanger (Harvard TH. Chan School of Public Health)
  - Consortium members: University of Jordan and Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development
The Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) research programme

Research in Bangladesh & Burundi

The calls for proposals on SRHR research in Bangladesh and Burundi required consortia with international partners, including those from the countries concerned. The aim of these calls was to generate insights in and a better understanding of processes that determine sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of people, with a focus on young people and some key populations, as well as their ability to claim their sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.

The specific objectives of the calls were:

- To get a better understanding of the socio-cultural and gender-related norms, beliefs and behaviours determining people’s reproductive and sexual health, and their ability to claim their SRH;
- To identify institutional and systemic barriers to the availability of SRHR services, as well as access to and continued utilisation of quality health and social services;
- To identify successful strategies for addressing socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers to the realisation of sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights for especially young people and some key populations;
- To share the knowledge generated with relevant actors (practitioners/policy makers) to inform SRHR policy and practice in Burundi and Bangladesh.

 Consortia were granted with researchers and practitioners from Bangladesh and Burundi and their partners from the Netherlands, Belgium, Cameroon, France and the United States to contribute to improved policies and practices, focusing especially on young people’s SRH.

Research projects in Bangladesh (2015 – 2019)

**Breaking the shame. Towards improving SRHR education for adolescents and youth in Bangladesh**

Consortium leader: Dr Els Rommes (Radboud University Nijmegen, Institute for Gender Studies in the Netherlands)

Consortium members: BRAC University, BRAC Institute of Global Health, and Bangladesh SRHR alliance

**Digital Sister for Urban Youth**

Consortium leader: Prof. Anita Hardon (University of Amsterdam)

Consortium members: James P. Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, and Mayalogy Pvt. Ltd.

**Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Young Migrant Women in Dhaka**

Consortium leader: Dr Ellen Bal (VU University)

Consortium members: Jahangir Nagar University, Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB), Bangladesh Sanjukta Sramik Federation (BSSF), Indigenous Peoples Development Service (IPDS), HIV/AIDS Research and Welfare Centre, Bangladesh (HIARC)

**The Campus Hero Café: Engaging Young Men to Prevent Violence**

Consortium leader: Dr Gary Barker (Promundo-United States), Consortium members: Dhaka University Center for Men and Masculinities Studies, United Nations Youth and Students Association (UNYSA)

**Theater Intervention to Engage Young Men in Sexual Education**

Consortium leader: Prof. Malabika Sarker (BRAC University)

Consortium members: Rotterdam Global Health Initiative/Erasmus University, Bandhu Social Welfare Society, National Institute of Mental Health Bangladesh (NIMH), KIID Foundation

Research projects in Burundi (2016 – 2020)

**Empowering Young Women in Bujumbura to Improve their Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Claim to their Rights**

Consortium leader: Dr Jocelyn Finlay (Harvard University, USA)

Consortium members: University of Burundi, and Pathfinder International

**Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Youth and Adults with Disabilities in Bujumbura - Burundi (HANDI-SSR)**

Consortium leader: Prof. Gervais Beninguisse (Institut de Formation et de Recherche Démographiques – IFORD in Cameroon)

Consortium members: University of Burundi, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement – IRD, and Nouvelle Esperance

Involving youth is vital for long-term change in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

“Nothing about us without us”, this was one of two key take home messages from the NWO-WOTRO Policy Roundtable on Vulnerable youth and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, which took place at the 8th African Population Conference in Uganda in November 2019. For real, sustainable SRHR change to happen, youth, including those who are most vulnerable, need to be involved in all aspects of SRHR planning and development. Their voices and views must form a vital part of research, implementation and policymaking, otherwise, their needs will not be met effectively and the chance for sustainable change will be lost.

**Insights from the session**

- Progress in SRHR will not happen without addressing youth SRH, and improved SRHR for youth would not be achieved unless the multiple dimensions of vulnerability the youths face are understood and addressed;
- For the right change to happen, the youths, including those who are most vulnerable, need to be involved in research, implementation, and policy-making to ensure that their needs are met. Such inclusive discussions and approach are essential in eventually leading to an effective and sustainable policy;
- Parents play a critical role. Where parents are able to communicate effectively and accurately about SRH, vulnerable youths are able to access the SRHR information and services they need and are empowered. Conversely, when the parents are unable to communicate such information to their children, this deepens their children's vulnerability and puts them at high risk.

**SRHR programmes can better target vulnerable youth by:**

- Identifying and addressing the multiple dimensions of vulnerability the youths are facing;
- Involving vulnerable youth in scope, designing, implementing, and evaluating SRHR programmes;
- Mainstreaming the needs of vulnerable youths through effective communication;
- Ensuring the education and empowerment of the parents of vulnerable youth;
- Demonstrating the disproportionate SRHR burden the vulnerable youth may face and investigating why this is;
- Understanding the needs of the vulnerable youth further by involving them as researchers and disseminators.

Research can contribute by:

- Defining and collecting disaggregated data on specific vulnerable youth populations such as: youth with disabilities, refugee youth, and at-risk young girls;
- Demonstrating the disproportionate SRHR burden the vulnerable youth may face and investigating why this is;
- Understanding the needs of the vulnerable youth further by involving them as researchers and disseminators.