

## **The Reproductive Health Working Group**

Coordinator: Dr. Jocelyn DeJong, Faculty of Health Sciences, American University of Beirut

Program manager: Mrs. Noha Gaballah, Cairo, Egypt

Regional Consultative Committee: Drs. Asya Al-Riyami (Ministry of Health, Oman), Hyam Bashour (Damascus University, Syria), Rita Giacaman (Birzeit University, occupied Palestinian territory), Belgin Tekce (Bozagici University, Turkey) and Huda Zurayk (American University of Beirut, Lebanon)

The Reproductive Health Working Group (RHWG) is an interdisciplinary group of researchers and practitioners in the Arab region and Turkey with a concern to foster exchange among and build capacity of reproductive health researchers in the region. Focusing on providing scientifically generated evidence to improve, change or inform policies and practices in the area of women's health, the RHWG engages in across- and in-country investigations of issues that are relevant and important for health system development in the region. The RHWG was established in 1988, from a base at the Population Council in Cairo, in order to study women's health in its broader socio-cultural and policy contexts. Its coordination was moved to the Faculty of Health Sciences at the American University of Beirut in the late 1990s. Now governed by a coordinator and regional Consultative Committee, consisting of long-standing RHWG members (who are also active researchers and mentors), the RHWG's membership is open to researchers and practitioners in the field of women's health in the Arab region and Turkey. RHWG members participate actively in conceptualizing, formulating, and implementing RHWG current and future objectives.

The RHWG three-day annual meeting serves as a venue in which members present work to each other, with the presentations ranging from initial stages of formulating research questions to sharing research results. This forum has proved to be very valuable in capacity building as well as networking, particularly for younger scholars. Over time, its members have developed, collectively, more appropriate frameworks for conceptualizing and measuring health in the region, based on their research but also their lived experiences.

From its inception, two particular elements have characterized the work of the RHWG. The first is inter-disciplinarity – having among its members medical doctors, epidemiologists, biostatisticians, demographers, anthropologists, sociologists and economists who engage on an equal footing. The second is regionality – making an explicit effort to include researchers working on reproductive health from across the region. As a result of these two aspects, the comparative nature of the research is strengthened, with different approaches to a particular issue being examined. Researchers rooted and engaged in specific national contexts are encouraged to appreciate the commonalities and differences in historical and developmental trajectories within the region.

The original concerns that motivated an initially small group of researchers in the late 1980s to address collectively were: reproductive morbidity, quality of health care and dignity. These

topics reflected their desire to bring to the fore a more explicit attention to women's health care and rights – at a time when international debates were just beginning to question the exclusive focus on fertility reduction with regard to population policies – while resonating with the needs of women in the region. Thus its establishment was pioneering in that it predated the International Conference on Population and Development and the concerns that conference endorsed. The same process has characterized the development of the group's subsequent research themes, which have emerged simultaneously from their interests and from critical engagement with international debates but which are reflective of regional concerns. The RHWG does not define a particular research agenda per se; rather, it builds on individual or group initiatives and consolidates common research topics among its members which are identified as relevant and important for the region.

An important objective of the RHWG has been to reduce the sense of isolation that many researchers face in the region. It does so by working explicitly to nurture a critical mass of researchers through a number of activities such as theme meetings, intra-regional exchanges and seed grants, as well as the annual meeting and frequent email exchange as needed. Finally, the group aims to stimulate the production of high-quality research that can inform policy making and interventions.

By focusing on exciting new areas of research, working collaboratively and supporting the capacity building of young researchers in particular, the RHWG has investigated a wide range of issues related to women's health, including: reproductive morbidity; maternal health; comparison of quality of care to evidence based practices; post-natal quality of life and its determinants; rising caesarean section rates, women and children's mental health, the impact of political conflict, refugee health, the quality of life of people living in conflict, as well as infertility. The group has throughout its history addressed issues at the intersection of health system development and reproductive health, such as curricular reform and the introduction of social perspectives in medical education, as well as health sector reform and critical reflection on ways of measuring the 'effectiveness' of health services. Ethics has remained a recurring theme, and members' research has embraced topics such as the ethics of new reproductive technologies and genetic diagnostic tools and their ethical implications. Panels have also been convened at annual meetings providing perspectives on securing ethical approval of reproductive health research and sharing lessons from experience across different countries, particularly for those that do not have established Institutional Review boards.

The network has also been active in supporting young researchers and practitioners, in mentoring them, and in helping them ask the right research questions relevant for the region. Training workshops are held at the RHWG's annual meetings, most recently on the topic of "Writing for Publication" given by Editor-in-Chief of *The Lancet* Richard Horton. This active and engaged mentoring of young researchers both helps to keep young researchers with potential actively working in the region, and fosters an ever-expanding interdisciplinary network of new, insightful and paradigm-challenging research into women's health in the Arab region.

Annual meetings occur over three days in a different city in the Arab countries or Turkey. The call for abstracts, inviting papers on selected themes but also any relevant research, is circulated by the agenda team. Abstracts are selected on the basis of relevance to themes of the RHWG and their quality. The RHWG invites a different international key-note speaker each year to speak on a topic relevant to the concerns of the group; this allows for greater exposure of the members to international debates and research, as well as provides an opportunity for wider international networking and exposure. The agenda team also makes a special effort to invite researchers and observers (who do not want to present research but who participate in the discussions) from the country hosting the meeting. The meeting consists of panel presentations on particular themes in which typically 3-4 researchers present their work, at any stage of completion – from, for example, initial questions and thoughts to final results. Presentations are sometimes reflections on a critical theoretical issue, such as social capital, and its relevance to reproductive health in the region. Panel presentations are followed by plenary discussions, which are typically lively and engaged, and contribute to issues presented from research experiences in various regional contexts and from different disciplinary perspectives.

In addition to annual meetings, the RHWG organizes ‘theme meetings’, typically back-to-back with the annual meeting to save travel costs. This allows researchers working on common issues to exchange methodological approaches and ideas. For example, in January 2011, the group working on a comparative study on quality of life of women surviving breast cancer met to share experiences and plan joint publications. In earlier years, the group working on childbirth have also held theme meetings.

Finally, the RHWG has made possible ‘regional exchange visits’ of individual researchers to visit other research teams in other countries. For example, a young Palestinian researcher working on quality of life of women in the post-partum period travelled to Lebanon to exchange ideas and conceptual frameworks for research on the same issue in Lebanon.

In a region where networks have historically not always been sustained, the RHWG represents an important example of a motivated and active network that is promoting and raising the standard of reproductive health research in the region.