

AWC Reporter Session 1: Gender, Technology, and Innovation in Healthcare

Despite having to adapt all activities and presentations virtually this year, Western's International Week was a wonderful success thanks to the planning and collaboration of all those involved. A highlight of the week was the Africa-Western Collaborations (AWC) Day which brought together Global Health professionals from all walks of life to discuss and share their experiences in global health research. AWC Day was kick-started by Dr. Melanie Katsivo, who moderated a panel of eight current students and alumni who each presented their research about gender, technology, and innovation in health care.

These presentations revealed the dynamic landscape of the world's most pressing global health problems, and the transformative impact of integrating a gendered approach in the areas of technology and innovation. For example, Ebenezer Yeboah presented his project that aims to shift the focus within the field of sexual and reproductive health (SRH), its research, policy, and practice, to include the perspectives of young adolescent males. Since adolescent and young males' social networks greatly influence their SRH behaviours, the provision of contextually relevant health information has the potential to help men live safer sexually active lives and disseminate this information and practices amongst their peers.

A common theme discussed during this panel was the importance of community healthcare workers (CHWs) to perform basic medical duties and disseminate healthcare information throughout a population. As outlined in a presentation by recent graduates Amina Osman, Ayah Karra-Aly, and Josephine De Leon, task shifting to CHWs presents a viable option for healthcare system cost savings and serves as a strategy to minimize the negative impacts of healthcare worker staff shortages on overburdened doctors and nurses. Mentorship positions created for female CHWs can foster a sense of empowerment, which not only improves staff retention and patient care but also builds capacity in healthcare facilities. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fragility of healthcare systems around the world; the necessity of CHWs is more prevalent now than ever before, as these professionals serve as additional frontline healthcare workers that can help to alleviate the burden on strained healthcare systems.

In the interactive discussion following individual presentations, another emerging theme from this panel was the impacts brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in global health research, particularly the barriers faced in international travel and field data collection. While these impacts were initially framed as obstacles towards achieving research objectives, COVID-19 has also pushed the limits of research opportunities that were not previously considered. For example, conducting research by proxy and not having to be physically present in a location has unveiled a multitude of potential opportunities to expand future research practices. Furthermore, an increased reliance on mobile devices throughout the pandemic has introduced the potential of using mobile applications as educational opportunities to increase awareness of health and social issues, such as gender-based violence.

Overall, this panel session exemplified the strength and diversity of global health research led by current Western students and alumni, in addition to the transformative impact of integrating gender, technology, and innovation in healthcare. It is important that we never place limits on what we think is possible within innovation as we tackle some of our world's most pressing global health issues.