

What works?

Global Equity in Research: A Gender-Inclusive Approach, Dr. Saima Afaq

Project summary:

This project addresses the funding and power imbalances driven by the Global North, disproportionately affecting women scholars in the Global South. The researchers spoke with women scholars in Pakistan and Afghanistan at different career stages during a series of workshops. The participants' experiences in, and perspectives on, the current structures were recorded in a series of small case studies. The project team then analysed these case studies to understand the challenges the women face and find possible solutions and put together a practical toolkit for researchers to support the global research culture transformation, emphasising gender equity. The ultimate aims of this toolkit include increasing the number of grants and manuscripts led by women scholars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and a rise in women's early career promotions and fellowship applications.

What challenge did this project set out to address?

The main focus of the project was to promote gender-inclusive health research by creating a toolkit to support a more equitable global research culture, emphasising gender equity. Although there weren't any anticipated risks or challenges involved, we faced challenges in terms of:

- Limited participation from Afghan women: the contextual instability in Afghanistan, particularly related to the current regime, affected our methodology and reduced the

number of Afghan participants, especially senior researchers. We also could not find an Afghanistan-based research assistant to collect data from Afghan women.

- Absence of male perspectives about gender equity in research: we were unable to collect data from male researchers, as the original proposal focused on the experiences and perspectives of females only.
- Difficulty in comprehension of topic: individuals shared their perspectives and experiences on overall gender based discrimination in society, rather than specifically in the context of research/academia. Many participants had no prior experience of sharing their experiences in such studies.
- Due to perceived sensitivity of the project, particularly in Afghanistan, participants expressed more concerns/cautions about confidentiality and anonymity.

What worked, for who and why?

- In the case of Afghanistan, we had to adjust our methodology and collect data from Afghan women scholars/researchers through individual interviews online instead of in-person participatory workshops as planned initially. Secondly, we worked in collaboration with local partners (organisations/universities) in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which helped in building trust and credibility. Ultimately, we were able to collect data from a fairly good number of female researchers across the two countries.
- The need for including men's perspectives in this study was realised by the research team as well as pointed out by women participants on multiple occasions. Therefore, the team has included men's perspectives and experiences by collecting data from male researchers/scholars, subject to the availability of funding.
- The issue of difficulty in comprehension of the topic/questions by the participants was solved by using concrete vignettes and case studies for discussion rather than abstract questions during the workshops/interviews, which helped participants to anchor their reflections in recognisable scenarios. These hypothetical case studies were especially effective in overcoming language barriers as we had to collect data in a number of languages, including Pashto, Urdu, and Dari (Persian). The case studies helped in

transcending language barriers to a significant extent.

- Confidentiality, anonymity and other ethical aspects of the projects were taken special care of, and these principles were assured and reiterated time and again. Moreover, the data collection team, consisting of two female research assistants, were completely independent of the collaborating institutions to reduce any chance of biases or breach of identity of the participants.

What didn't work and why?

What didn't work:

- Limited engagement of senior, influential researchers: Time constraints and competing commitments of senior researchers meant this group was under-represented in participatory workshops and interviews.

What we would do differently:

- We would prefer to conduct individual interviews with senior research leaders (male and female) rather than workshops to accommodate their time and valuable expertise/experiences.
- We would try to collect data from more women in Afghanistan, especially senior-level women researchers, as no senior Afghan woman was found to participate in our study.
- We would also like to focus more on how to practically promote gender equity in addition to exploring the extent and nature of gender based discriminations in research practices/projects.

Audiences that did not engage:

- Senior, high-influence researchers.
- Male researchers and academic leaders within institutions having power to frame policies.

What changed as a result of your project?

The draft toolkit produced by this project is both an outcome and a platform for future work on equitable and responsible research. It was co-developed with participants, whose lived experiences ensured the guidance is firmly rooted in institutional realities. A notable shift observed during the Centre for Impact Annual Meeting dissemination activity was the openness of discussion: participants contributed without visible hesitation. Afterwards, several women approached the team voluntarily to share additional accounts. A small but meaningful change was seen in one workshop: a junior researcher disclosed harassment; a senior researcher acted immediately, advised on options, and invited confidential reporting.

What next?

Follow-up work from this project would include:

- Collecting data from men researchers and senior academic leaders to explore their perspectives and possible role in fostering gender equity in global health research.
- A longitudinal/pathway study particularly for women researchers towards leadership positions.
- Findings from this toolkit can also be expanded in terms of its design, such as the creation of leadership training modules, gender sensitisation workshops, mentorship models and similar training, and tested in diverse institutions for better impact.
- Exploration of policy models, particularly on the role of men as allies in decolonisation and building a gender-inclusive work environment.
- More inclusive and in-depth models for Monitoring and Evaluation for organizational capacity building initiatives, funding flow/model analysis, and a comparative study between Global-North and Global-South can be studied.

Progress towards equitable and responsible research practices

- The project highlighted the importance of reflection, particularly for individuals in leadership positions.
- It created opportunities for researchers at all career levels to engage in a critical reflection of policies surrounding gender equity, harassment, workload distribution, and other policies and practices within their respective institutions. They also realised the gap between theory and practice at the ground level.
- Participants realised and suggested an “Annual audits” of Institutional policies and practices to ensure gender equity in research cultures. Such audits can promote good practices and adherence to policy guidelines and suggest areas of improvement.
- The output of the project will help the senior leaders of the institutions to realise their responsibilities with respect to ensuring an inclusive and equitable work environment and take corrective measures towards a women-friendly research culture.