



SRHM SOUTH ASIA

MENTORING

PROGRAM REPORT

SRHM | SEXUAL AND
REPRODUCTIVE
HEALTH
MATTERS
KNOWLEDGE TO ACTION

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INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

ABOUT SRHM

Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters (SRHM) is an organization that advances the creation and communication of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRH) knowledge that is grounded in human rights and based on scientific evidence. SRHM facilitates the transformation of SRH knowledge into action for improved sexual and reproductive health and rights. At the heart of SRHM is a multi-disciplinary, open-access, peer-reviewed international journal, that provides an independent voice, has a longstanding, trusted reputation and offers space to a truly global SRHR network, bringing together a community of researchers, experts and advocates and providing a platform for critical thinking, discussion and action. SRHM gives particular attention to ensuring that the knowledge generated and communicated reflects the perspectives of local communities and marginalized and structurally excluded populations, and that their visibility and influence is enhanced in the global evidence, policy, and advocacy context.

SRHM'S SOUTH ASIA REGIONAL HUB

Fostering the local and regional creation and ownership of knowledge with global relevance has emerged as an important need and priority with increasing relevance. In order to further this priority, SRHM initiated the formation of regional hubs in its 2018-2022 strategy and has taken that forward into its 2022-2025 strategy. One of the first regional hubs to be established, in 2020, was the SRHM South Asia regional hub, with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, India. The hub grew from SRHM's longstanding relationships with partners from the region and was a recommendation taken forward at a regional strategy meeting in March 2020 in New Delhi, India, where the hub was launched.

The hub had three programmatic pillars:

1. fostering the understanding of rights-based knowledge creation by *building a regionally grounded, globally connected dialogue space for rights-based and evidence-informed knowledge creation so that policy and practice is informed and influenced by rigorous evidence and rights-based analysis.*
2. the production of an **SRHM South Asia Journal with the aim of localizing knowledge production** and *providing a platform for rights-based and evidence-informed research and knowledge creation grounding local scholarship, activism and action in the region.*
3. establishing learning spaces in the form of a mentoring program that brings together mentees and mentors from the region to build capacity in *rights- and evidence-based knowledge creation.*

INTRODUCTION TO THE SOUTH ASIA MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PROGRAM

Based on the recommendation received at the regional strategy meeting in 2020, SRHM has developed and run a mentoring program in collaboration with regional partners and experts, from September 2020 to December 2021, with the participation of mentees and mentors from five countries (India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka), and in collaboration with SRHM global experts.

The aims of the program were:

- To expand the understanding of rights- and evidence-based knowledge that can inform action on SRHR, and that includes a wide range of sources, including knowledge generated and communicated by members of marginalized, structurally excluded populations
- To enable critical shifts in evidentiary regimes, centering as knowledge producers those who have been seen historically as research subjects, based on the principles of participation and inclusion, and fostering new scholarship on under-researched topics
- To create a localized understanding of an integrated rights-based approach to SRHR research and knowledge creation that can be translated into mentoring and capacity building in the region
- To create a cross-disciplinary platform for learning exchange between experienced and less experienced SRHR actors through a multidisciplinary, cross-generational, local-to-global lens
- To strengthen the rights- and evidence-based knowledge creation skills of early career researchers, practitioners, and advocates in South Asia, with particular attention to marginalized and structurally excluded people in knowledge creation.

Specific objectives of the program were:

- To bring together early and mid-career researchers, activists, community practitioners, and program implementers from the region who are working in the field of SRHR, and pair them with mentors with established SRHR expertise who can assist them to participate equally in the process of SRHR knowledge creation
- To publish knowledge generated by these actors in the peer reviewed SRHM South Asia regional edition, and make it available in local, regional and global spaces

- To establish a community of mentors embedded in the South Asian context to provide mentorship and accompaniment in a sustainable way to young researchers, community members affected by SRHR inequalities, and human rights advocates working in SRHR research and knowledge creation
- To generate tools and document processes that can facilitate similar mentoring programs in other regional, national or global spaces.

NATURE AND CONTENT OF THE PROGRAM

The program was designed for early and mid-career researchers, activists, community practitioners, and program implementers who are working in the SRHR field and are interested in gaining in-depth knowledge on rights-based research and analysis skills and their application. Preference was given to those belonging to and working with marginalized and structurally excluded constituencies. Having some research and/or implementation experience with the potential to be developed as a paper for publication in the South Asia edition of the SRHM journal was one of the criteria for selection of mentees.

The call for applications was advertised in five focus countries, namely Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and mentees and mentors were selected from these countries.

A management team was established for the program (see below).

After a competitive selection process, ten mentees were invited onto the program, to be mentored by leading experts in SRHR from countries in the region. Mentees received training, support and mentoring on analysis, research and writing, with a rights- and evidence-based perspective. The mentoring platform has provided an opportunity for learning exchange between the mentees and mentors, sharing experiences about relevant issues in the region and in different countries. The program, which lasted for 16 months, has facilitated regional and disciplinary diversity. Allowances to cover field trips, ethics board approval fees, translation, and other related costs were provided to the mentees and an honorarium was provided to the participating mentors.

The primary language of the program was English. However, reasonable accommodation for those not proficient in English was provided in the form of informal translation during meeting sessions and formal translation for manuscripts.

The program also offered the opportunity for mentees to publish their research in the South Asia regional edition of the SRHM journal (subject to peer review and editorial approvals) with support from the SRHM editorial team.

MENTORSHIP PROGRAM PROCESS

ESTABLISHING THE MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

A steering committee was established to provide strategic guidance and advice during the implementation of the program, as well as overall management. The committee included:

- Three experts from South Asia to provide expert advice throughout the program, two of them co-editors of the SRHM journal South Asia edition
- A senior advisor, to provide overall advice and guidance to the program and develop tools as they became necessary
- A program coordinator, in this case the manager of the South Asia Regional Hub, to provide overall management of the program
- The Chief Executive of SRHM, to ensure the linkages between the mentoring program and SRHM's global goals and objectives, and to create opportunities for cross-regional collaboration.

Selecting the coordinator for the program proved to be key for appropriate management, especially in the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The role of the program coordinator included: coordinating the application process; organizing regular check-in calls with mentors and mentees and facilitating continuous relationships between mentors and mentees; coordinating the organization of thematic sessions and group webinars throughout the duration of the program; providing support in the form of translation and interpretation where needed for participants with a disability, or those who do not speak English or have difficulty participating in large group sessions (as their first experience in such a process); and providing overall oversight and conducting monitoring and evaluation at the end of the program.

Appointing a senior advisor ensured that the program met high quality standards with its content and could be continuously tailored to the needs of the mentees and mentors.

APPLICATION PROCESS

The application process included:

- Development of an application form (available upon request)
- Call for applications with a six-week time frame for submissions.
- Ongoing communication and support to prospective applicants throughout the application process, provided by the coordinator

- Development of an outreach and promotion strategy for the call for applications in each of the five target countries by the operational manager, in collaboration with the SRHM communications team. This included preparation of an outreach database: a list of academic institutions, research organizations, civil society organizations, NGOs, UN organizations, SRHM partners, networks, donors with South Asia presence engaged in public health and SRHR. One-on-one calls were conducted with identified experts, SRHM partners, and donor organizations to support dissemination, and with organizations working with marginalized groups to encourage applications from their constituencies.

Recommendations for future implementation of mentoring programs in relation to the application process:

- During the pre-launch phase of the program, hold in-country consultations with diverse stakeholders to ensure the widest possible dissemination of the call for applications
- Map potential SRHR experts and researchers as potential mentors and resource person for the program
- Map and hold consultations with early and mid-career researchers and advocates to encourage their interest in applying for the program
- Ensure dissemination of call for applications is not limited to academic and research institutions
- Map and reach out to organizations working with marginalized, structurally excluded populations and hold briefings with them about the program and application process to enable their participation
- Include in-country 'call for application' events in partnership with local organizations to ensure information about the program reaches a wider audience

SELECTION OF THE MENTEES

A total of 116 applications were received. The limitations of the outreach strategy to disseminate the call for applications were reflected in the geographical distribution of the applications received. Fewer applications were received from Nepal (17), Pakistan (17), and Sri Lanka (9) than from Bangladesh (26) and India (47).

Shortlisting of the applicants was done by a four-member panel of the South Asia Regional Hub steering committee and included four rounds:

- First round: exclusion of applications that did not meet the eligibility criteria, incomplete applications, and late entries
- Second round: review and scoring of applications by the panel, based on multi-level selection criteria and scoring scale (Box 1). Shortlisting of candidates and outreach to them to participate in interviews based on the assessment criteria for the interview (Box 2). Regret letters sent to applicants that did not make the shortlist.

BOX 1: APPLICATION SELECTION CRITERIA

- First level criteria and score (scale of 1-10): Marginalized identity, quality of statement of purpose including interest in capacity building on rights-based research
- Second level criteria and score (scale of 1-8): Thematic diversity and relevance of research
- Third level criteria and score (scale of 1-4): Expectations from program, career stage and writing skills

BOX 2: ASSESSMENT CRITERIA FOR INTERVIEWS

- Interest and commitment to SRHR
- Relevance of the proposed research topic
- Feasibility of and commitment to participating in the mentoring program
- Adherence to inclusion of rights in their work
- Their potential contribution in future in SRHR field

- Third round: online interviews were conducted with shortlisted candidates; average duration was approximately 40-45 minutes. Individual grading was done by the four-member interview panel and total scores were added to earlier scores based on applications. The top 10 scoring candidates were shortlisted for the program. Two candidates were held in reserve among the top ten candidates did not enter the program.
- Fourth round: Reference check with two individuals identified by the shortlisted candidates.

BOX 3: RESEARCH TOPICS OF THE SELECTED CANDIDATES

1 - RAPE LAW

Between 'resistance' and 'injury': the interpretation of medico-legal evidence in rape cases in Bangladeshi courtrooms - *Bangladesh*

2 - SRHR OF INTERSEX

Being intersex in Bangladesh: some preliminary case studies - *Bangladesh*

3 - HEALTH SECTOR PREPAREDNESS FOR LGBTQI

Symptoms of silence: a study of readiness of Indian hospitals for sex and gender minorities from a rights-based perspective - *India*

4 - NOMADIC TRIBAL WOMEN AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Access of SRHR services to women and girls of Nomadic and Denotified tribe communities in Thane district, Maharashtra, India - *India*

5 - DISABILITY - SPINAL CORD INJURY AND SRHR

Sexuality and relationship experiences of women with spinal cord injury in India - *India*

6 - DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND ADOLESCENT SRH

The Right to Technology – The evolving role of technology in the movements towards sexual and reproductive health and rights - *India*

7 - Disability and COVID-19 and SRHR

Impact of COVID-19 on women, girls and gender non-conforming persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka - *Sri Lanka*

8 - SRHR OF FEMALE PARTNERS OF MSM

Exploring the misogyny amongst gay and bisexual men in Pakistan towards their female partners - *Pakistan*

9 - TRANSGENDER & SRHR

Transgender sexual and reproductive health: unmet needs and barriers to care in Pakistan in COVID-19 crisis - *Pakistan*

10 - SRHR OF WOMEN WITH MENOPAUSE

Determinants of and experiences with menopause among rural and impoverished women affected by multiple shocks in Nepal - *Nepal*

Mentees were given a standardized stipend to cover some of their time participating in the process and additional fees were granted based on specific needs, for example to cover ethics review and translation costs.

INVITATION TO MENTORS

The program aimed to bring together a group of mentors with expertise on SRHR from the five target countries in the South Asia region. The role of mentor was primarily to provide individualized support to mentees, as well as to engage in the conceptualization of rights-based mentoring for SRHR with a sustained longer term vision, and in learning exchange and capacity building.

The aim was to pair each mentee with a mentor. In order to select appropriate mentors for the identified mentees, a mapping and listing of experts in the region across key thematic domains of SRHR was conducted. Based on specific criteria, mentors were selected from a long list of experts, to provide individualized support to mentees according to their profile and accompaniment needs. Efforts were made to identify a mentor from the same country as the mentee; only in exceptional cases was a mentor selected from a different country.

Selection criteria of mentors included:

- Being based in South Asia
- Having expertise on the use of the rights-based approach for SRHR research, and strong thematic knowledge on SRHR
- Having experience in connecting community-based practices to programs and policies
- Willingness to commit 7-8 hours every month over 16 months
- Preference for those with experience of academic writing and publications

Ten mentors were invited based on their expertise and commitment to the mentoring program. Each mentor was assigned to a mentee on the basis of their expertise in that mentee's areas, including country level experience. Mentors received an honorarium for their contribution to the process.

PUTTING THE PROGRAM IN PLACE

The program began with an invitation to mentees and mentors to sign an agreement with specific terms of reference (ToR). (See Annex 2 and 3 for ToR developed for mentees and mentors respectively.)

Key features of the ToR for the mentees included:

- ❖ Time commitment (20-22 hours per month)
- ❖ Participation in various tutorial sessions, webinars and feedback sessions
- ❖ Regular meetings with their assigned mentor
- ❖ Commitment to prepare and submit a manuscript to the SRHM journal

Key Features of the ToR for the mentors included:

- ❖ Time commitment
- ❖ Participation in various tutorial sessions, webinars and feedback sessions
- ❖ Regular meetings with their assigned mentees
- ❖ Commitment to contribute to the overall mentoring program development and evaluation

The selection of mentees for the program prioritized inclusion of those from marginalized constituencies, who are typically excluded from evidence building and knowledge production processes. While English was selected as the primary language of communication for the program, the management team put in place mechanisms to ensure language accessibility for those mentees not proficient in English, to enable their full participation in the program. This included pairing mentees not proficient in English with mentors who could communicate with them in their own language. In addition, mentees were encouraged to present in the language in which they were comfortable during sessions and translation support was provided. The lack of simultaneous interpretation and relying on informal translation may have jeopardized perfect communication of messages and slowed down the process, but it ensured confident and equal participation of mentees who did not speak English. Access to literature for non-English speakers was jeopardized by the shortage or absence of publications in languages other than English, and related to specific research areas. However, mentors played a supportive role, not just in identifying resources in local languages, but also sharing briefs of some of the meetings in local languages during their one-to-one meetings.

Recommendations for future implementation of mentoring programs in relation to the mentee and mentor selection process:

Map and shortlist mentors who bring expertise and knowledge on the SRHR ecosystem in the focus countries and utilize their support during the application process.

- Inquire about specific capacity and skill building needs of the mentees that can be used to provide tailored mentoring
- Involve mentees in the mentor identification process and undertake a similar process with mentors before assigning mentees, to ensure expectations are met and to ease collaboration through the duration of the program.
- Involve mentors and mentees during the inception process at the start of the program and create structured communication schedules for one-to-one meetings that will take place throughout the program.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MENTORING PROGRAM

The implementation of the mentoring program included inception and introduction to the program, one-to-one mentoring, organizing thematic and capacity building sessions in webinars and group sessions, and preparation of the manuscript for the SRHM journal. The papers were then subjected to an independent editorial and peer review process, leading to publication (or not) of the papers in the South Asia edition of the SRHM journal.

INCEPTION MEETING WITH THE MENTEES, MENTORS AND THE SRHM COORDINATORS

The program started with a group meeting with the mentors, who were invited to give input to the structure and content of the program in advance. The mentees were then introduced to the mentors on a one-to-one basis, and an introductory meeting was held for mentors and mentees with the steering committee of the program.

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THEMATIC CAPACITY AND SKILL BUILDING SESSIONS

Three thematic sessions were organized as part of the capacity and skill building component of the program. These were always attended by all mentors, mentees, and members of the steering committee, and guest experts were invited to some sessions. Four topics were covered in these thematic sessions: (i) Application of rights into research; and knowledge creation (ii) Intersectionality in research; (iii) Ethics in SRHR research; and (iv) Orientation to academic writing. Each session lasted about three hours. The sessions were held in an interactive format to accommodate questions and answers and the application of the topic to the work of the mentees with the mentors.

The lists of suggested readings for each session that were shared ahead of the meetings and the Powerpoint presentations used for the sessions, are available upon request. A guide on rights-based knowledge creation developed to accommodate the entire process is available at SRHM.org.

Thematic Session 1: Application of rights into research; and knowledge creation

The session included invited experts on the topic and was held in a webinar format. It introduced the concept of rights and theoretical frameworks on rights-based knowledge creation and then provided practical examples of how human rights principles can be applied to research. This included how human rights principles can be intersectional: for example, how the right to health, non-discrimination and autonomy can be applied in relation to the needs and rights of women living with disability, tribal or indigenous women, or LGBTI populations. As part of the session, all mentees were invited to reflect on how the human rights concepts and principles explored could be applied to their research topics, how the different axes of power impacted the populations they engage with throughout their research, and how the application of rights may influence differential SRHR outcomes.

Thematic Session 2: Ethics in research

This session was found to be very useful by both mentees and mentors. It entailed detailed discussion about the principles of ethics and their application to the mentees' specific research areas. Invited speakers from the steering committee shared detailed information about ethical reviews and the nature of the ethical approval process. The session provided an opportunity for mentees to reflect on the relevance of ethics to their research and to discuss what kind of approval processes each individual mentee would need in order to conduct their research and publish their findings.

The mentees were invited to reflect on questions, such as what specific ethics issues their project raised; whether their research met procedural requirements such as informed consent and anonymity/confidentiality; their positionality as a researcher within the community; and how to take on their role and responsibilities in ethical ways.

Thematic Session 3: Academic writing

This session, run by the editors of the SRHM journal, introduced key issues and concepts in relation to academic writing; the differentiation between research, review and other article types; and requirements and standards for submitting papers to the SRHM journal. This session provided an opportunity for interactive dialogue with SRHM editors in relation to the mentees' specific papers, and provided detailed information about the submission and article consideration and publishing process.

Recommendations for future implementation of mentoring programs in relation to the mentee and mentor selection process:

- Providing appropriate guidance to both mentees and mentors is essential at the beginning, as well as throughout the program, in order to build conceptual clarity and understanding of what a rights-based approach entails in relation to the specific research topic areas, and how the approach can be applied throughout the research and analysis.
- The research ethics session needs to be introduced at the very beginning of the program, since it raises questions that have practical implications for the work of the mentees: for example, whether they need ethical approval for their research, where to obtain it, and how long this may take, all of which can have implications for the research and writing process, including the timeline of their work.
- Academic writing sessions need to be scheduled once the research has been conducted by each mentee, that needs to be followed up by one-to-one mentoring. Ideally, this should take place either in the form of a 3-4 day in-person writing workshop, as was originally planned in the program but was not possible due to the COVID pandemic. Alternatively, it could take the form of a series of back-to-back sessions in a condensed period of time.

DEVELOPMENT OF MANUSCRIPTS THROUGH ONE-TO-ONE MENTORING

Individual mentoring was a key component of the mentoring program. It was scheduled at regular intervals on the basis of individual needs and based on the availability of mentors and mentees. The program coordinator ensured that regular meetings between the mentors and mentees were arranged, and monitored whether the teams needed additional support from SRHM. Each mentee and mentor group were required to develop and submit an individual work plan with timelines to the SRHM team (available upon request).

Mentors provided individual support in how to conceptualize and, in some cases, conduct the research and analyze the findings. They provided support, if it was needed, to data collection and/or analysis of existing data sets and taking forward ethics clearance as needed. They assisted the mentees, if required, to prepare documents for the ethical review processes in their respective countries.

The mentors have provided immense support to the analysis of data and research findings, writing and submitting the papers to the SRHM journal and assisting the mentees throughout the manuscript review process by the SRHM Journal. The mentors provided feedback on various drafts of the manuscripts and helped to incorporate rights-based principles into the analysis. They suggested readings and literature that helped the mentees to contextualize their research in their broader topic area and in the context of rights thinking. The SRHM steering committee and the SRHM editorial team were available to provide support to the individual mentee-mentor team if needed.

GROUP SESSIONS BETWEEN MENTORS AND MENTEES, SHARING EXPERIENCES, CROSS-LEARNING

Regular group sessions organized between the mentees, mentors and the SRHM team provided an opportunity for the mentees to present their research and papers at various stages of their work, get feedback from each other and the whole group of mentors and the SRHM team. This facilitated cross-sharing and cross-learning between mentees about the learnings, the incorporation of human rights principles and concepts into research process and writing, and discussion and sharing of challenges being faced and how to overcome them.

SUBMISSION OF MANUSCRIPT TO SRHM JOURNAL AND EDITORIAL AND PEER REVIEW PROCESS

Submission of manuscripts to the SRHM journal was a critical deliverable for the program. Submitting the final manuscript to the journal and going through various revisions required significant support from the mentors and the SRHM editorial team. All papers were subjected to the usual independent review and editorial process of the SRHM editorial team. At the end, seven of the mentee submissions were published as articles in the SRHM South Asia edition.

Activities during this phase included finalization of their manuscripts by the mentees in collaboration with their mentors; submission of final manuscripts via the SRHM online submission portal; the independent peer reviewer process facilitated by the SRHM Team; incorporation of feedback into their papers by the mentees; as well as work with the mentees, in the case their article was rejected by SRHM, to rework and submit to other journals or knowledge platforms, with support from the SRHM editorial team.

Recommendations for future implementation of a mentoring program in relation to one-to-one and group mentoring and submission of manuscripts to journals:

- How to accommodate the individual needs of mentees requires assessment from the beginning of the program. For example, overcoming language barriers needs to be planned from the start, to avoid further excluding certain populations, often the most marginalized, who do not speak English (or the language of the program).
- Since mentees may have diverse requirements regarding meeting ethical clearance standards, ethical clearance needs should be assessed at the beginning of the program. The mentors and management team may play an important role in providing assistance in this regard.
- Risks and unexpected circumstances need to be calculated into the program as much as possible. This includes possible misalignment between mentees and mentors that need to be resolved by the management team. Change of mentor or drop-out of mentees needs to be properly and ethically facilitated by the management team with care and compassion while maintaining quality professional standards for the program.

PUBLISHED ARTICLES BY MENTEES

Dushala Adhikari & Ashok Bhurtyal (2022) Menopausal symptoms among middle-aged women and care providers' readiness to deliver menopausal services: an observational study in Kavrepalanchowk, Nepal, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 29:2.

Tanvir Alim, Md. Shihab & Adnan Hossain (2022) Experiences of intersex individuals in Bangladesh: some reflections, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 29:2.

Lakshya Arora, P. M. Bhujang & Muthusamy Sivakami (2022) Understanding discrimination against LGBTQIA+ patients in Indian hospitals using a human rights perspective: an exploratory qualitative study, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 29:2, DOI: 10.1080/26410397.2022.2104678

Taqbir Huda (2022) "No signs of rape": corroboration, resistance and the science of disbelief in the medico-legal jurisprudence of Bangladesh, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 29:2, DOI: 10.1080/26410397.2022.2096186

Deepa Pawar (2022) From criminalised histories to rightful present – nomadic women demand equal rights to sexual and reproductive health: a study in Maharashtra, India, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 29:2, DOI: 10.1080/26410397.2022.2064051

Seema Sharma (2022) Sexuality and relationship experiences of women with spinal cord injury: reflections from an Indian context, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 29:2, DOI: 10.1080/26410397.2022.2057652

IMPACT AND OPPORTUNITIES, CRITICAL TAKE-AWAYS

At the end of the program, the SRHM regional team conducted an evaluation which showed that the program has been seen as a unique cross-learning opportunity among researchers, advocates, human rights lawyers and members of structurally excluded communities, connecting with experts in the SRHR field from both local and global SRHR spaces. The introduction to rights-based knowledge creation and the collaborations across the region in this regard were listed as the top strengths of the program. The program has created engagement and a vision for regional collaboration and a basis on which to continue a sustained mentoring program for rights- and evidence-based knowledge creation connected to action. In addition, the rich learnings from the program became an opportunity for cross-regional exchange: the program has been adapted and the materials used to establish a similar program run by SRHM's regional partners in francophone Africa.

The South Asia SRHM Mentorship Program has created opportunities with local, regional and global relevance. It has:

- Established a journal-led mentoring program for new authors in South Asia that is relevant both locally and globally, and guided by core principles of advancing the decolonization of knowledge and evidence creation, and a focus on the rights and needs of structurally excluded populations;
- Enabled critical shifts in evidentiary regimes, centering those who have been seen historically as research subjects and enabling them to be knowledge producers; advanced the inclusion and participation of activists, advocates and researchers from or working closely with marginalized, structurally excluded communities (such as women subjected to discriminatory laws and practices, persons with disabilities, women from Nomadic and Denotified tribes, intersex and LGBTQT populations);
- Generated dialogue and developed tools on rights-based SRHR research and knowledge creation, addressing all aspects of research and knowledge production;
- Created a cross-disciplinary community of mentors embedded in the South Asian context to provide future mentorship for a wide range of SRHR knowledge creators;
- Fostered new scholarship on under-researched topics that has led to publication following a rigorous peer review process and *enhanced the credibility of mentees as knowledge producers.*

The Program has led to critical shifts:

- A transformative shift for some mentees from being *subjects of research to producers of knowledge*, claiming ownership of their own issues and taking the lead on evidence building
- Investment in processes and accessibility allowing mentees to meaningfully locate their *identity and voice as part of creating rigorous academic scholarship*
- Exploring ways of creating *safe and non-hierarchical spaces* within which to engage in both a learning journey as well as locate oneself as a knowledge producer
- Allowing for *critical interrogation of balancing neutrality and subjective bias in the research process*, and what it means for marginalized persons to engage in academic research on issues that impact their communities and to foreground an insider's perspective
- Demonstrating *the empowering role that mentorship and accompaniment* can play in transforming the research and evidence building processes.

The program demonstrates ways research and publication processes between journals and researchers can be linked to the SRHR ecosystem in the South Asia region, not just fostering learning exchanges but also leading to action.

LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SOUTH ASIA MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

The mentoring design needs to accommodate mentees' diverse professional backgrounds. A diverse group of mentees embarking on a shared journey of learning and capacity building created significant potential for cross-learning. Capacity building inputs that could cater to the differing needs and experiences of mentees from different backgrounds (early carrier or mid-level public health researchers, community members, human rights activists) became more complex to design.

There is a need to accommodate diverse starting points with regard to the research cycle. Mentees were at varying stages of their research when they joined the program, and this created challenges in integrating a rights-based approach into both their research process and analysis of findings. Where a rights-based approach had been limited or absent in framing research objectives or choosing methodologies, this also limited the extent to which rights-based analysis could be applied throughout the complex evidence building process.

Flexibility and reflexivity are essential components. This ensures the program is responsive to the needs of the individuals involved particularly the mentees. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting need to shift from in-person to virtual engagement made this particularly critical.

Expectations need to be balanced and revisited. Managing expectations is a vital aspect of implementation. In the present case, all participants had to contend with the COVID 19 pandemic and its impact on their lives and well-being for the entire duration of the program.

Long-term investment in capacity building is essential. Meeting the expectations and needs of a diverse cohort of mentees requires time and resources. The first eight months of the 16-month program were devoted to capacity building through various processes - group mentoring, one-on-one mentoring, thematic webinars, skill, and knowledge building workshops. However, the total shift to online engagement reduced the time available for capacity building inputs and impacted quality of inputs.

Accompaniment for critical research related milestones is essential. Many of the mentees were first-time researchers and needed ongoing accompaniment with regard to some of the more complex and essential processes related to academic research e.g. ethical clearance, data collection and analysis amongst other things. These proved to be resource-intensive and demanded more sustained and longer-term engagement that was not fully accounted for in the program

Learning and capacity building journey of mentees, who learnt how to

- integrate a rights-based and intersectional lens in their research
- put in place robust research methodologies
- ensure ethics are a core component throughout their research
- develop skills in academic writing and use of appropriate terminology
- use a systematic rights-based approach to data management and analysis
- build critical evidence on under-researched topics and communities and fill gaps in the literature
- conduct a comprehensive literature review
- work through peer review processes and incorporate feedback to meet publication standards
- engage with research topics and processes and present on their own research and participate and contribute to others' research

Mentors' journey and contributions

- In supporting mentees to build their perspectives and apply rights-based approach in their research, mentors also embarked on a shared learning journey, revisiting and refreshing their knowledge with new literature, concepts and research methodologies and approaches.
- The mentorship and accompaniment role was itself a significant learning experience for all mentors, including navigating relationship building and communication with mentees and ensuring a non-hierarchical rather than a didactic approach to fostering learning.

- There was significant collaboration and cross-learning between mentors, who emerged as a strong informal network that is committed to fostering young researchers and advocates and new scholarship on SRHR issues in South Asia.
- The program was elevated by each mentor's commitment to SRHR issues, their ownership of the program and their willingness to step into varied roles as needed through the duration of the program.

CHALLENGES: THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE PROGRAM

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented crisis that impacted the daily lives of all individuals associated with the program. One of the most significant changes in the specific context of the program was the need to adapt the entire program as a virtual engagement. While to some extent this enabled communication and reduced logistical challenges between mentors and mentees in the region, given the complexities of the visa and travel regime due to geopolitics in the region, there were a number of factors that created barriers to delivering a long-term capacity building program via virtual platforms.

Some of the key challenges are listed below:

- The duration of meetings had to be reduced. In-person sessions that were originally scheduled to be held over several days were reduced to 3-4 hour virtual meetings, compromising the delivery of content and capacity-building inputs to the mentees. The gaps between sessions due to the changing intensity of the pandemic disrupted the flow and delivery of content and impacted the quality of inputs during the inception phase of the program.
- Online meetings and discussions were at times disrupted by connectivity issues. Mentors and mentees had to contend with poor quality audio and video. Zoom fatigue emerged as a key issue during the pandemic and was an issue that everyone had to deal with throughout the course of the program.
- The group of mentors and mentees were from diverse backgrounds and were coming together as a group for the first time. Relying solely on virtual platforms to build trust-based relationships was a challenge that impacted the nature and quality of communication. Mentees, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds and participating in a regional initiative for the first time, found it challenging to freely share experiences.
- The reduced time available for capacity building inputs in virtual meetings impacted the time available for mentees to share experiences and learn from each other by presenting their own research and engaging in a peer review process of shared feedback and reflections.

- The second wave of the pandemic, lasting for several months during 2021, was a particularly challenging time for everyone associated with the program. This affected individuals' health – both mental and physical - and led to emotional fatigue that impacted how they could deliver on their commitments.
- Working from home presented particular challenges for many participants, such as trying to balance priorities of childcare, care-giving and other household work during a period of lockdown with a reduction in the support that one typically relies on. Several mentees held full-time jobs which also created competing priorities, including the need for extended hours of on-line engagement as well as adapting their work to pandemic realities. This compromised the time mentees could contribute to the mentorship program and was reflected in the quality of the research papers.
- Several mentees faced numerous challenges and two of them opted out of the program because of health and personal difficulties posed by COVID-19. Nevertheless, they found the program useful and intend to apply what they have learned.

FROM THE PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Overall reflection about the design and inclusion of marginalized persons in the program

"The program design was wonderful. I have never ever seen any journal doing that much to reach out to bring out the unheard experiences of the vulnerable communities." - Mentee

Knowledge to action

"I got so inspired that I even started sensitization of various medical, educational and social institutions. This helped me in taking learnings from my findings to the advocacy and community engagement level" - Mentee

Voice, Identity and Applying a Rights Based and Intersectional Lens

"It helped me to put forth the voices of the community that I have been working for not because their needs are unmet but because their fundamental human rights are violated. Through the multiple input sessions, I felt equipped to confidently articulate not only the multiple layers of rights violations through an intersectional lens but also the mechanisms that can be put in place to address them". - Mentee

Research Methodology and Ethics

"I have greater clarity on key issues pertaining to the SRHR of women and girls with disabilities, greater understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on SRHR in South Asia, greater appreciation of research methodology and ethics, especially when working with marginalized populations". - Mentee

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