

ROAD MAP  
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# Harmonization of gender mainstreaming in health research ethics:



*towards a community of practice in  
West Africa*

*A product of the projet "Building capacities for ethics committees in gender mainstreaming from Senegal to West Africa"*

## On January 31, 2021,

Following his broadcasted message to the Senegalese nation on the occasion of the New Year, President Macky Sall declared the following concerning the issue of gender-sensitive education:

***"As long as I am here, no one is going to change our school programs. I was very surprised to hear this debate about "introducing sex education in schools," but I reassure parents that it will not happen. If it's UNESCO, we ask them to put their case away and take it back to where it came from. No one will be able to change the way things are done in this area in Senegal. We have our values. UNESCO cannot force Senegal, the United Nations cannot. We are a sovereign nation. I told all our partners who want to force this on us to keep their money."***

This statement is a testament to the political sensitivity aroused by gender-related issues in Senegal as well as in most countries in West Africa. In addition to this political reality, which testifies to a social reluctance to debate around sex and gender, most researchers, as well as national research ethics committees (NRECs), have demonstrated a need for capacity building on the question of gender.

On the one hand, it is needed for the purpose of knowledge production, and, on the other hand, to improve the ethical evaluation of research projects from a sex and gender perspective. As part of its capacity-building activities, the BCA-WA-ETHICS project organized its 2nd International Scientific Congress on Gender Mainstreaming Harmonization in West Africa between the 2nd and the 25th of March, 2021 to contribute to this debate.

## Methodology

This event follows the 1st Congress organized over a year ago between March 23 to 26, 2020. In terms of statistics, the second edition of the Congress, during its 4 days of proceedings, included 30 presentations by scientists and ethicists from 7 countries: Senegal, Benin, Mali, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Egypt & Spain. For logistical reasons, Guinea Conakry, which was included in the agenda, was unable to participate. The Congress was organized by videoconference due to constraints related to the Covid-19 pandemic. On the Zoom platform, 20 to 30 conference speakers were connected daily during the 4 days of the Congress.

The Congress proceedings were also live-streamed on YouTube with a viewership ranging between 21 and 50 viewers, which was considered a significant success for the project by its beneficiaries and stakeholders. As a result, the Congress has been the subject of media follow-up and a series of publications in social networks, print newspapers and online press as well as on radio stations in Senegal. Seven publications relayed in social networks followed and were commented on by hundreds of Internet users, demonstrating the interest and the passionate debates aroused by questions of sex and gender in health research and the ethics of its conduct.

## Results

### 1. *Agreeing on what sex and gender represent*

Before tackling the issue of harmonization, it was important that both researchers and members of NRECs agree on the definitions of sex, gender, and ethics.

Indeed, due to the cultural, social and political trajectories of the different participating countries, these 3 concepts are not understood, applied, and evaluated in the same way depending on whether we are in Senegal or Benin or Mali, Egypt or Spain. The discussions thus made it possible to agree on the significance of gender and sex. So the term "sex" refers to anything biological, such as the difference in chromosomes, hormones, and other anatomical and physiological attributes between females and males. "Gender", on the other hand, has been understood to refer to the values, norms, roles, and responsibilities traditionally attributed to women, men and gender minorities by their respective societies.

## Results (cont.)

### 1. *Agreeing on what sex and gender represent (cont.)*

These socially constructed gender differences can often lead to gender inequalities, presented in the form of a myriad of power and resource disparities between women, men, and gender minorities. It should be noted that this consensus on these key terms could not be achieved a priori because these themes are politically and socially charged. This Congress also made it possible to emphasize the role of the NRECs in the promotion of sex- and gender-sensitive research and in political advocacy for a better scientific and objective consideration of the question of gender in West African societies.

### 2. *Harmonize what? To what end? For whom?*

Over the course of four days, the discussions focused on several themes. The first day was marked by a sharing of experiences on the state of gender considerations in research in the different countries of the participants. Women researchers also provided feedback and personal data on their professional career and the difficulties of accessing positions in the academic world. To encourage young women researchers to get involved in the field of research, discussions were had around the positive impact that would arise from young women researchers carrying out research projects as principal investigators.

Having identified the pitfalls to the recognition of women in research that go beyond the academic field, another call was made to political actors for the establishment of legislative and regulatory mechanisms for the promotion of and the non-discrimination against women in the field of research. It would not be a question of limiting oneself to pious wishes, but of encouraging active indignation and a personal will, an accompaniment, with a particular emphasis on female solidarity, coaching and, undoubtedly, positive discrimination to allow women to be accepted, recognized, and empowered in the field of research...

During the second day, the debates focused mainly on the integration and consideration of gender in the legal field in Mali, but especially in NRECs. Several countries including Benin, with its NREC and Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Applied Biomedical Sciences and Senegal with its NREC, reported on their efforts in favour of the integration of the sex and gender dimensions in the evaluation of research projects.

## Results (cont.)

### **2. Harmonize what? To what end? For whom? (cont.)**

While all the NRECs are not at the same level of expertise on these issues, the seven countries thus shared their experiences with a view to harmonizing the consideration of sex and gender in the field of research. They nevertheless noted the long road which remains to be covered for this harmonization. Strategies were proposed to encourage and implement the harmonization of gender mainstreaming in the governance of NRECs and the field of the evaluation of health research protocols.

The third and fourth days were marked by a series of presentations by the different NRECs, firstly by Guinea Bissau with the pioneering role that the Committee is trying to play in promoting gender mainstreaming in their country. As political entrepreneurs, the committee measures the complexity of this issue and the time required between legitimizing the notion of gender and its translation into society and research projects. The other countries also shared their experiences: Ivory Coast, Mali, and Benin. All returned to the difficulties of integrating gender into health research in their countries, but also to the efforts made at the national level, although insufficiently translated within the NRECs as was the case with Ivory Coast and Mali. Whereas in Mali and Benin, certain issues such as gender-based violence and the controversies around it largely influenced the ethical considerations of gender.

Practical cases and socio-anthropological and social science reflections in general on gender in the field of health interventions and research were presented. These practical cases focused on Senegal with emphasis on the institutionalization of gender at the level of the Ministry of Health and the efforts made by the authorities for its mainstreaming in Mali with an experience of more than 30 years of experience in Africa on the integration of gender in the field of research. This experience made it possible to highlight the strong political and institutional dimension for the promotion of gender in the field of research. Two key recommendations focused first on the importance of taking into account the needs of third parties and for gender ownership by the African stakeholders themselves, and in particular by women.

## Results (cont.)

### 2. Harmonize what? To what end? For whom? (cont.)

Other experiences were shared, particularly on the difficulties of respecting gender equality principles in health emergencies, gender categories in education and the need to think about gender from early childhood. All of the presentations made it possible to insist on the fact that gender is not, contrary to popular belief, limited to issues of sexual identity but must be considered in a more holistic way and in particular in the different forms of vulnerabilities to which both men and women are victims in the way their roles and responsibilities are thought out in society.

## Discussion: towards a community of practice on gender

Based on all the presentations, exchanges, and discussions during this Congress, the various participants agreed on the importance of forming an epistemic community to help strengthen the capacities of researchers on gender, to promote sex- and gender-sensitive knowledge production, and to advocate for a gender-transformative paradigm shift in public policies.

This epistemic community can advance towards the constitution of a community of practice because, beyond the researchers, it will be able to integrate NREC members, but also practitioners, journalists, and politicians. After all, the objective of science is not only to change the world but first of all to understand it and explain it as it is. Better understanding can therefore lead to culturally appropriate interventions to address health and gender disparities in each specific context.

This community will then be able to “**mobilize knowledge and consolidate a dynamic of learning, exchange, mutual aid, and innovation between members, whether they are organizations or researchers, intending to strengthen their capacities in the field of 'gender mainstreaming' both at the level of research projects and at the internal level of organizations**”, to find new approaches to talk about gender to make it more acceptable, politically and socially. As the issue of gender is politically charged, it will be necessary, as Guy Peters suggests, to subdivide it into several sub-issues to make it more digestible for the general population as well as for the political decision-makers.

## **Discussion: towards a community of practice on gender**

It will be a matter of explaining the pitfalls of gender mainstreaming, be they political, social, economic, cultural, or institutional. Based on the knowledge generated by this epistemic community, policy briefs will thus be produced associating activists, religious leaders, and politicians so that they appropriate the results of this research, and that evidence-based decisions are made. These can only be done if bridges are established between the stakeholders of knowledge production, the authorities in charge of gender-related decision-making and the beneficiaries of the research.

There is a need to rethink the concept of gender, localise it, and adapt it to the West African context in order to avoid statements like that of the Senegalese President on January 31, 2021. Today, in many countries, gender has become unspeakable in political and scientific terms, eventually leading to a dead-end where we can no longer debate on this subject. It is important that this epistemic community, this community of practice, reflect deeply on what gender has been like in Africa, what it is, and what it will be.

It remains important to prevent gender from being perceived as an international offering and to prevent the imposition of research and intervention policies on this subject on West Africa from outside. The Africanized gender is necessary for its political and social acceptance and for this to materialize, research has a fundamental role to play.

## **Towards a harmonized evaluation of research protocols from a sex and gender perspective**

Building on the lessons learned throughout the capacity building and networking activities of BCA-WA-ETHICS, here are some points that NRECs in West Africa, could consider during protocol evaluations from a sex- and gender-sensitive standpoint:

- Description of the relevance of sex and gender to the study in question. This also includes a description of the knowledge gaps related to sex and gender concerning the topic of the study.
- Correct use of the terms "sex" and "gender" without confusion and/or conflation.
- Equitable engagement of community members, women, men, and vulnerable populations in the design of the study. This is a crucial step in reducing the possibility of social harm and exploring in advance how the study can potentially impact the community where it is to take place.
- The study includes both women and men in the study population. If not, researchers must provide a strong rationale for their choice of a single-sex study population.
- The study's recruitment strategy does not discriminate against certain minority groups who would otherwise meet the inclusion criteria.
- The research team is gender-sensitive, where at least one member had received training in gender and gender analysis.
- Local gender norms are reflected in informed consent documents. For example: taking into account power relations, decision-making factors, the social distribution of tasks, etc.
- Analyzes based on sex and gender are proposed and will take into account the different intersectionalities and determinants of health. This will help identify the factors that contribute to health disparities and inequalities.



## **Towards a harmonized evaluation of research protocols from a sex and gender perspective (cont.)**

- The data are presented in a sex-disaggregated format.
- The scientific dissemination and communication of sex-disaggregated results at the community level are planned.
- Gender-sensitive budgeting is applied (for example, there is no gender pay inequality between field agents who have the same responsibilities).
- Risk mitigation strategies for research participants were proposed taking into account existing gender inequalities and intersections.
- Procedures have been established to ensure that the reporting of adverse events to regulatory authorities during clinical trials takes place under equal conditions regardless of the sex or gender of the affected participant.
- Health insurance coverage for clinical trials does not benefit one gender group over the other without adequate justification.
- Women and men of the research team are engaged in the quality control of research under equal conditions.

## This Road map is a product of the BCA-WA-ETHICS Gender Mainstreaming Secretariat

The Gender Mainstreaming Secretariat is a virtual helpdesk at the service of all West African ethics committees. Its purpose is to promote the development of sex- and gender-sensitive regulations, guidelines and standard operating procedures. This is meant to help ethics committees:

- Consider gender representation in their composition.
- Establish gender-sensitive recruitment, budgeting, procurement and administration procedures.
- Incorporate a sex and gender perspective into research protocol evaluation activities.
- Promote sex and gender approaches in data collection and analysis.
- Develop gender-sensitive educational and professional development programs.
- Develop and facilitate training programs on gender equality.
- Design and implement gender equality plans.

Representatives or members of West African ethics committees can get in touch with the Gender Mainstreaming Secretariat to request advice and technical assistance in any of the areas listed above.

**Technical services are provided free of charge.**

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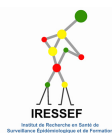
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