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Report

Sexual Violence Research Initiative Forum, 14–17 September 2015, Spier Estate, Stellenbosch, South Africa

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The Sexual Violence Research Initiative Forum (SVRI), initiated in 2003 by the World Health Organisation with support from the Global Forum for Health Research, encourages research on sexual violence, particularly in settings that are resource poor. In 2015, the SVRI Forum was hosted by the South African Medical Research Council, with sponsorship from several partners. The theme, “Innovation and Intersections,” invited participants to debate key issues around the prevention of sexual violence. According to the conference chair, Claudia Garcia-Moreno, these include:

the role of social norms in prevention of different forms of gender-based violence; the importance of integrating prevention and response into other sectors and programmes; the global trends and best practices in terms of prevention and, most importantly, what is working, why is it working, how do we measure success, how much does it cost and how do we scale up?ⁱ

More than 300 delegates to the SVRI Forum had access to 115 oral, and 59 poster, presentations as well as to 12 special sessions engaging in key aspects of sexual violence and sexual violence research methodologies. The SVRI Forum also pushed the boundaries of information dissemination through the SVRI Forum Theatre where participants shared their research through short videos or films and TEDx Talks.ⁱⁱ An interesting aspect of this SVRI Forum was the encouraging of partnerships, not only North-South, but also South-South, and academic-practitioner research partnerships.

In the opening plenary, three keynote addresses provided a platform to contextualise the debates on sexual violence. Professor Rashida Manjoo, who held the position of United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women for six years, spoke first. Her UN work had entailed “monitoring and reporting on States’ compliance in responding to and preventing violence against women, its causes and consequences, both generally and in different country contexts.ⁱⁱⁱ” Giving an overview of the status of violence against women in different countries, she argued for the importance of seeing the intersectionality of discrimination and violence against women, in particular the relationship between socioeconomic conditions, race, and historical and cultural contexts. She also emphasised the importance of seeing and acknowledging the interaction of interpersonal, institutional, and structural violence. She therefore argued for a holistic approach to addressing sexual violence, pointing out that violence against women is a barrier to citizenship, depriving women of their human rights. The lack of a situated understanding of violence against women underpins a “one size fits all” approach from the state—which clearly does not work. She warned, however, against creating hierarchies of violence against women, for example, sexual violence in conflict, human trafficking, and so on, pointing out that it does not serve women well.

Dr Shereen El Feki, the second keynote speaker, spoke of the prevalence of violence against women in the Arab region, and how the state is often both the author and the perpetrator of violence against women. She made clear the relationship between “what happens in the bedroom and what happens in the public.” She, however, pointed out that sexual attitudes and behaviours across the Arab region were changing, indicating their intersections with politics and economics, religion and tradition, gender and generations.

Noura Bittar Soborg is a Syrian refugee (now living in Denmark) and a women’s rights activist who made the voice of refugee women heard at the conference. Since the war in Syria started in 2011, people have fled and filled refugee camps—with half of the refugees being women and girls. She painted a picture of women who carry fear with them: fear of sexual violence, but also fear of losing the right to access or parent their children should they leave the marriage.

The second plenary focused on interventions, with the presentation of “The Good School Toolkit: Systematic Approach to Preventing Violence Against Children in Schools,” offering an interesting model of drawing on education, a whole school approach, and a health programme. The concern that the violence the children experience becomes part of their constructed worldview, which in turn has an effect on how they approach the world, throws light on the continued violence in communities. While piecemeal interventions in school don’t get traction, the “good school” is positioned as the best framework in which to bring about systemic change. A challenge, however, was experienced in that the school curriculum is brimful, leaving little time for added prevention programmes. This speaks to the prevention programme—albeit evidence-based—being brought by outsiders and not developed with the school and its personnel as partners. A further consideration pertains to the question of how being part of such a study influences stopping violence. How can the research simultaneously be an intervention? How might theory of change be utilised with the participants (principal, teachers, and learners) to provide some insight in this regard?

The range of parallel sessions focused on topics such as:

- Conflict, post-conflict, and emergencies: Community responses, tools and methods, and prevention
- Parenting and families in East and Southern Africa
- Sex work: Epidemiology and responses
- Perpetration
- Violence against children and adolescents
- Men and masculinities
- Trafficking, transactional sex, and sexual exploitation
- Sexual and gender-based violence in South Africa
- Health and violence
- Using research to influence policy
- HIV and violence
- Violence against children and adolescents in school
- Faith-based initiatives
- Mental health
- Understanding risk and protective factors

- Primary prevention in East Africa
- Care and support
- Addressing violence in people with disabilities.

The special sessions included:

- Seeing how it works: Transnational dialogue on the use of the visual and digital media in girl-led “from the ground up” policy making to address sexual violence
- The vision workshop: Three keys to accelerating impact while maintaining self-care practices
- Integrating culture into interventions to prevent gender-based violence
- Strengthening health services to deliver care and prevention
- Violence against women and girls: The Lancet special series
- Addressing violence against women and girls across development sectors: Initiate, integrate, innovate
- What works to prevent violence against women and girls initiative
- Drivers of violence: The multi-country study of violence affecting children
- The challenges and hopes of interventions around gender equality and intimate partner violence prevention
- The power to prevent: Oxfam’s use of innovative, participatory strategies to change negative social norms that perpetuate VAW/GBV.

The poster sessions included themes such as:

- Prevalence of sexual and intimate partner violence across contexts
- Men and masculinities
- Violence against children and adolescents
- Interventions
- Trafficking, sexual exploitation, and violence against vulnerable groups
- Health and violence
- Health and justice
- Tools and methods.

The commitment of the SVRI Forum to engage with the very important theme of “Innovation and Intersection” in terms of addressing sexual violence from a health perspective revealed interesting knowledges. The vibrant atmosphere demonstrated the enthusiasm of the SVRI Forum delegates in focusing on contributing to changing the lives of women and girls in relation to sexual violence.

In reflecting on the programme and the presentations, on who was there and who was not there, I note, for example, that the knowledges of the teachers—in a context where education is seen as a key tool for prevention—seemed to be relegated to the margins or if present, were presented on

behalf of the teachers. This clearly calls for more and closer links between health and education in addressing sexual violence. I also note the absence of girls and young women in speaking out about their experiences of sexual violence, and what they think could be done. Boys and young men too, could have been part of debate on what might work as solutions. The knowledges of the LGBTI community seem to be marginalised too—in a context of Africa, where “other” sexualities are criminalised.

So, whose knowledges were presented? How were these knowledges produced? By whom were these knowledges produced? And to what end? How were the participants from resource-poor settings participating? Who is disseminating the knowledge? Who is talking on behalf of whom? If we had heard the voices of the women and girls on the ground, how might that have contributed to our deeper understanding of addressing sexual violence in South Africa, Africa, and the rest of the world?

ⁱ Conference programme, p. 4, <http://www.svri.org/forum2015/Programme.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ted.com/watch/tedx-talks>

ⁱⁱⁱ Conference programme, p. 6, <http://www.svri.org/forum2015/Programme.pdf>