GUEST EDITORIAL

Women's Empowerment Through Digital Health

As 2020 approaches, it is timely for the Journal of the International Society for Telemedicine and eHealth (JISfTeH) to publish its third special issue on "Women in eHealth". As we near the 25th anniversary of the United Nations 4th World Conference on Women, we are reminded of the associated document, A Declaration and Platform for Action, detailing the strategy for gender equality and increased opportunities for women. The UN General Assembly, in September 2015, pledged to work towards universal Internet access by 2020. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals focuses on ending poverty and hunger, promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, protecting the planet and sustaining economic growth and work for all. Women and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are critical to the success of these initiatives and goals. The recent United Nations 2019 Inaugural report of EQUALS Research Group illuminated the complexity of the gender digital divide and its persistence irrespective of geographic location, income level, economic performance or level of ICT access level in a country. It highlighted the need to make significant- and urgent- investments in digital gender equality with a focus on identifying, addressing and eliminating barriers women face in ICT.

The World Health Organization (WHO) in its pursuit of universal health coverage, has highlighted the role of nurses and midwives in achieving this objective. Nurses and midwives constitute more than 50 percent of the health workforce in many countries and play a critical role in health promotion, disease prevention and delivery of primary and community care. The NursingNow! Campaign is an ongoing three-year strategy which began in 2018 and will culminate in 2020, designed to raise the status of nursing to improve health outcomes. WHO has designated 2020 the "Year of the nurse and midwife" in recognition and honor of the 200th birth anniversary of Florence Nightingale. The first State of World's Nursing Report and State of the World's Midwifery 2020 report are expected to be released for country level dissemination and policy action. Tapping into this workforce with the utilisation of technology has the potential to deliver a successful model for providing universal coverage.

The International Society for Telemedicine and eHealth (ISfTeH), as a global leader and partner in digital health, has made consistent efforts to promote and advocate for gender equity in eHealth. In 2013, the working group on Women (WoW) was founded to address gender inclusion and parity in eHealth. It continues to be one of the most active and progressive groups, partnering with the Women Observatory for eHealth of the Millennia2025 Women and Innovation Foundation, an NGO acting under the patronage of the UNESCO and UN ECOSOC, with Klughammer GmbH, the German company developing telemedicine software and manufacturing hardware, and with local NGOs to advocate for women's issues, gender equality and leadership roles in the digital health space.

The continued gender equity and women's rights initiatives of global organisations, governments, campaigns and social movements and the inclusion of ICT are encouraging. Have we made progress? Yes. How much? Not enough. Change requires initiatives and goals backed by action on macro and micro levels.

In middle- and low-income countries, first and foremost, issues of ICT access must be the focus of decision makers, stakeholders, governments and NGOs. It is estimated that 390 million women are unconnected. With over 5 billion mobile subscribers worldwide, and mobile use as the primary way to access the internet, it has the ability to empower and transform lives through access to health services, education, job opportunities and information. Women in low- and middle-income countries are 10 percent less likely to own a mobile phone than men. Even when they own phones, they are less likely to utilise the Internet creating an even larger gap. Addressing key barriers of low digital literacy, cost, and safety and security concerns is a priority requiring customized solutions on a local level.

Despite ubiquitous access to the Internet in many countries with advanced economies, women are primarily end users; recipients with minimal participation as innovators and leaders in the development and conceptualisation of digital health solutions. In the last few years, we have seen the rise of Femtech, a term coined to describe software, products and services designed to address women's health. The focus has been narrowed with 60% of solutions addressing pregnancy, nursing, reproductive health and fertility. This limited scope ignores a significant percentage of women. Little attention is paid to gender related issues including chronic conditions and diseases that disproportionately affect women. The lack of representation in the conceptual and design phase is clear.

A global survey of chief information officers noted 9 percent of senior IT leadership roles were held by women in 2017, unchanged from 2016. In the US, often viewed as a

leader in gender equality, the percentage of women in digital health leadership is dismal. Only 10.2 percent of CEOs at digital health start-ups are women. Only 12.2 percent of digital health VC firms' partners are women. Female leadership is not only important from the standpoint of fairness. Studies have shown that companies with the most women on their management staff are more profitable compared to those with less women. These companies are also more innovative which is important in the rapidly evolving and disrupting world of digital health. We are encouraged by female entrepreneurs and CEOs in ICT who are paving the way for women leadership in the digitization of healthcare. Sheila Lirio Marcelo, founder and CEO of Care.com runs the world's biggest online care platform with more than 7 million clients worldwide. Dr Suzanne Saffie-Siebert of the United Kingdom and founder and CEO of SiSaf Ltd, is a pioneer in drug delivery and leader in the pharmaceutical industry. Judy Faulkner is founder and CEO of health record giant EPIC systems in the United States which has more than 250 million patient records.

We are encouraged by many women-led digital health start-ups that are disrupting the healthcare industry. Unima in Mexico offers a fast, low cost, diagnostic and disease surveillance tool for healthcare providers to diagnose at point of care. NanoX in Australia has revolutionized the delivery of radiation therapy. WaziVision in Uganda provides affordable eyeglasses recycled from plastic and Tonic app in Portugal improves medical doctor clinical efficiency.

Each article in this special edition is first authored by a woman. It highlights the many ways women are utilizing ICT to impact health and health outcomes. In this issue we see the power of social media as the #MeToo movement mobilized people internationally. The term, coined by American social activist Tarana Burke in 2006, became an effective rallying cry in 2017. As we continue to use ICT to raise awareness of women's issues, improve the lives of women thus their families and communities by empowering them with access to ICT, eliminate the gender digital divide and advocate for more leadership roles for women in digital health, I invite you to become a part of this. With awareness and understanding comes responsibility. Achieving gender equity is not a passive process. It requires action. It starts with you- right where you are.

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