
GUEST EDITORIAL

eHealth: Investing in Women

Four key areas of women's engagement in eHealth

A scan of the papers in this theme issue of the journal shows good coverage of the four domains of women's engagement in eHealth, as outlined in the WeHealth framework, and adopted by the Working Group on Women (WoW) of the International Society for Telemedicine and eHealth (ISfTeH), namely: leaders and policy makers; providers; developers of eHealth tools; and, of course, beneficiaries.

Our colleagues from WHO (Al Shorbaji and Ungerer) in their guest editorial begin and end their piece with a call to "make it happen" for women in eHealth, referring to the need to translate advocacy gains on behalf of women, as evidenced by resolutions and declarations, into concrete benefits on the ground. Touré continues in this vein, citing the exponential growth in uptake of ICT tools and services in developing countries, and the report of WHO and ITU on eHealth innovation for women's and children's health. She urges the adoption of a gender-related perspective in all aspects of the eHealth enterprise.

Invited commentary by Mechael explores women's leadership in the application of the telephone, and later mobile phones, for social purposes and specifically health. In "Coming full circle" she traces the position of women's leadership in mHealth – dominant in the early phases of the field, less so during its exponential growth period, and its recent re-emergence. Her suggestion to address gender and women's empowerment in mHealth projects, we trust, will become a routine feature of all health technology-related initiatives, much like the ever-present environmental impact assessment in project descriptions.

Green, drawing from her own experience at HingX, espouses the importance of not re-inventing the wheel, but rather breaking down the silos in information and knowledge portals on eHealth, by finding a common

denominator that enables sharing and reuse of information and knowledge resources.

The contributed papers are a "tour d'horizon" of the application domain, ranging from telemedicine for diabetic care (Kleinbreil et al.) through health workforce development (Perez-Chavolla et al.) to eHealth services for pregnant women (Lemaire et al., and Ayson Rivero et al.), and an overarching report on Women in eHealth (Thouvenot and Holmes).

Women leaders in eHealth

In 2014, an important event in the sidelines of the UN General Assembly was recognition of female leadership in eHealth in the naming by the ITU of Dr. Christine Kaseba, First Lady of Zambia at the time, as its Ambassador for eHealth. But, leadership of women in eHealth is not always high profile. It can be the muted, but methodical and persevering effort of a few committed women. There are two major telemedicine programmes running in Mongolia. Both led by female physicians – one a cardiologist, the other a gynaecologist. Both initiatives have spanned a broad spectrum of activities – finding funding through development partners, leading to national engagement and the development of a national eHealth strategy in 2009; capacity building through pre-service and in-service training programs; knowledge sharing including the inauguration of an annual telemedicine conference, now international in scope; and most important, empowering health in Mongolia and extending health services to the previously unreachable. As Margaret Mead put it "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

The power of nursing and nurses

Nursing epitomises the theme of women as providers - empowered by eHealth tools and services. It is our thesis that this is the key to wide-spread adoption

and scale up of eHealth. Nurses reach more inhabitants of the planet than any other professional category of health worker. And the International Council of Nurses (ICN), with its 134 national associations on six continents and a gargantuan membership of a healthy fraction of the 19+ million nurses worldwide, can serve as a launch pad for global scale-up of telemedicine and eHealth services. Through this same reach to people, nurses can extend the benefits of this great enabler to the largest number of beneficiaries (including women). Nursing and its practitioners can thus become a "force multiplier" in the dream of weaving eHealth into the fabric of the health system.

Global programmes recognise the importance of women actors

It is no coincidence that the Millennium Development Goals lay emphasis on gender equality and the empowerment of women (MDG3) and improvement of maternal health (MDG5). In addition, one of the critical factors to reducing child mortality (MDG4) is education of mothers. A strong statement on the importance of women's health is the UN Secretary General's "Every woman every child initiative", where the theme was earlier underscored in overarching recommendation 1 of the WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health – "*Improve the well-being of girls and women and the circumstances in which their children are born ...*"¹ Gender equality and women's empowerment continues into the Post 2015 Agenda, as one of the topics for the Sustainable Development Goals.

Conclusion

Every article in this special theme issue is authored, or co-authored, by a woman. Our hopes and expectations for the issue are that it inspires more women to engage in eHealth – in all aspects of the endeavour; as leaders, educators, developers, and beneficiaries and for male actors in the entire eHealth ecosystem to support that engagement. Nurses as a professional, and most heavily subscribed, category of the health workers are a major force for widespread adoption of eHealth. The eHealth community should leverage this "force multiplier" by investing even more in women.

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Reference

1. CSDH (2008). Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health. Final Report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2008.