What does it take to have gender-responsive AI-driven health research? - Takeaways from the Gender Action Learning Workshop in Nairobi

Authored by Lucía Mesa Vélez, Ladysmith (May 2023)

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On February 22-24, 2023, members of the AI4COVID research teams[1] COLEV, ACADIC[2], APHRC[3] and UCAD[4] convened in Nairobi, Kenya for the third and final workshop of the Gender Action Learning (GAL) process, a peer-based learning methodology for building gender-responsive capacity, which they had engaged in since July 2021.

This in-person peer learning event was an opportunity to **reflect and connect experiences on the intended and unintended outcomes, challenges, and lessons learned from their efforts to meaningfully and intentionally integrate gender equality and inclusion (GEI) into their multi-disciplinary research**. Research teams' participation in the GAL explored what it takes to have gender responsiveness in developing and scaling up responsible and evidence-based AI and data science approaches that support COVID-19 responses and recovery in the Global South. Below is a summary and key takeaways from the rich discussions around key guiding questions.

What does it take to have safe, inclusive, culturally appropriate and needs-driven (in other words, gender-responsive) AI-driven health research?		
Skilled researchers with sufficient knowledge of matters of gender and intersectionality.	Transparency models for gender and intersectionality in the data, both in analysis and recognition of gender gaps.	Diverse teams with adequate local knowledge of culture, background, and gender.
Algorithms-based and validated data made openly, publicly available for scrutiny.	Safe spaces for women and minority groups to train and progress in AI-driven research.	Digital divide tools to be available to all including those in poor access settings.

The participants highlighted a list of challenges to advancing, gender-responsive, AI-driven health research, such as:

[1] Universidad de los Andes. Based in Bogotá, Colombia.

[2] Africa-Canada Artificial Intelligence and Data Innovation Consortium. With participants from Botswana, Cameroon, Canada, Eswatini, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

[3] African Population and Health Research Centre. Based in Kenya and Malawi.

[4] Université Cheikh Anta Diop. Based in Dakar, Senegal.

What are the key barriers/challenges experienced by the teams in advancing gender-responsive AI-driven health research?		
At the individual level	**At the organizational level**	**At the policy level**
• AI's potential disclosure of personal private information. • Comprehension of AI concepts for those new to AI. • Translating AI concepts into local languages. • The ability to ask well-structured questions for desired answers.	• Having conceptual clarity of GEI terms such as sex and gender. • Training teams in gender and AI. • Understanding AI concepts for those with a social sciences background in interdisciplinary teams. • Having few engagement and communication spaces about AI and gender. • Ethical handling of data. • Working with biases in research design or data. • Focusing only on health without involving other stakeholders. • Difficulty in accessing official COVID-19 data due to government hesitation.	• Assumptions both about gender being binary and about who will be more perceptive about GEI issues. • Lack of knowledge and resistance from policymakers to this kind of research. • Difficulty in branding and packaging gender-responsive research. • Identifying windows of opportunity. • Demonstrating alternative solutions.

When talking about how to influence the broader fields of health and AI, participants suggested the following "Do's and Don't's" to best engage with relevant stakeholders:

Influencing the broader fields of health and AI: how best to engage relevant stakeholders		
	Do's	**Don'ts**
With Policymakers	• Listen to their needs and priorities. • Be transparent. • Use evidence-based decisions. • Involve citizens.	• Do not just show outcomes, be prepared to show the process as well. • Do not assume you know what the policymakers need.
With AI Researchers	• Develop inclusive AI solutions for women. • Train and empower women to create their own solutions. • Verify data for equality and representation.	• Do not accept AI tools without contextualizing them. • Do not work in isolation. • Do not stick to poorly designed research to adapt to evidence.

	• Include diverse feedback. • Ensure data is stored in a password-protected secure storage system.	
With Community Groups and GEI stakeholders	• Develop a relationship and plan with the community. • Have participatory workshops. • Value community knowledge. • Be open and objective to the research process • Take time to build trust and frank discussions.	• Do not assume AI tools address priority community problems. • Do not neglect the community's viewpoints. • Do not expect a representative response – use other methods as well.
With Health Researchers	• Set an interest and common ground about gender and intersectionality methods and concepts.[5] • Involve all stakeholders throughout the project cycle.[6] • Use gender and intersectional tools[7] to evaluate work.	• Do not rush the needs assessment process. • As researchers, we should not be working alone. • Try to remove your own beliefs and ideologies on gender before the process.
With Research Networks	• Map interventions that include gender. • Ensure networks are explicit about gender and intersectionality. • Work with other fields. • Do routine evaluations throughout the process to identify gaps and challenges.	
With Donor Organizations	• Give enough time for sharing results and advocating. • Adapt to their systems. • Respond to their requirements in a flexible way based on evidence.	• Do not minimize the research time, the analysis time, or the time taken to share results.
With the Private Sector	• Identify common ground. • Understand data-sharing policies. • Have a clear distinction between consultancy and cooperation.	• Do not compromise your independence. • Do not work in silos. • Do not be taken advantage of for free work.

The final reflection brought key takeaways, burning questions and future plans, such as:

[5] See Technical Brief 2: a guide for more gender-responsive health research.
[6] See Technical Brief 3: Stakeholder Engagement for Gender Responsive Health Research.
[7] An example of tool is the checklist and questions guide developed by APHCR.

- **Key takeaways from the Gender Action Learning (GAL) program** include recognizing that everyone has a gendered experience, the importance of gender champions, using diverse experiences to make a difference, acquiring better understanding and confidence in integrating gender analysis, strengthening networking, breaking silos through participatory and multi-disciplinary research, and having a formal structure of learning strategies to integrate gender approaches into research practices.
- **Participants plan to continue building on gender and inclusion in AI efforts made in the GAL process** by writing policy papers, sharing key lessons and research findings, adopting a gender lens in their research, doing participatory research, integrating gender and inclusion in data at the organizational level, exploring gender and intersectionalities in their thesis, initiating new research projects that include a strong gender and inclusion focus, translating the AI tool into multiple languages, and networking with other researchers.

Burning questions about gender-responsive AI		
Is there an optimal level of bias?	How can we incorporate a mixed-method approach (qualitative and Quantitative) in gender-responsive AI?	What is the legal framework for Gender-Responsive AI?
What are the available approaches that systematically examine gender-bias (socio-cultural) differences between gender-diverse groups?	Should AI algorithms be assessed and validated by an independent body?	What can we do so that communities can benefit from AI?
How can we ensure that African experts in AI are not excluded especially, women?	How can we involve more allies in gender-informed approaches to AI?	How can we ensure sustainability towards gender approaches in AI?