Research Highlights

Women and Reproductive Health

Research on women’s health in the Arab region is finally gaining momentum as more studies are being conducted that examine its different dimensions. At the Centre for Research on Population and Health (CRPH), the Urban Health Women’s Reproductive Health Working Group (UH-WRHG) has been working on data from the Urban Health Study and has been actively collaborating with its partners in the local communities to render services of value to them. On a regional level, the Reproductive Health Working Group (RHWG), housed at the CRPH is organizing an annual meeting to consider health inequities, conflict and violence in relation to health and quality of care among other topics. Two research papers by CRPH affiliates address women’s physical and mental health status.

Below are some of the questions being addressed in the Urban Health studies covered in this issue of CRPHNews:

What are women’s health concerns in the low-income poverty belt around Beirut? What type of healthcare exists for them? How satisfied are they with the care received? What do health-care providers in these communities need in terms of training or support? How is the psychological health of women affected by husbands’ participation in household chores?

Mabrouk! Congratulations!

The Youth Component of the Urban Health Study recently received a major three-year award from the Wellcome Trust for its study entitled: “Impact of a community based randomized controlled trial to improve mental health of Palestinian refugee youth.” The project was conceptualized and developed by the Youth Working Group in partnership with NGOs and residents of the Burj El Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut using a community-based participatory approach. The study includes interventions with young people aged 11-13 years, their parents, and their teachers. A positive youth development (assets) approach guides the work. The specific interventions to be implemented with youth, parents, and teachers rely on evidence based interventions, but will be adapted to the context of the refugee camp. The main outcomes of the study include improved mental health, increased attachment to school, and enhanced civic engagement.

Mark Montgomery at the Urban Health Workshop.
Priorities in women’s health might look different if we listened to them

In the last decades a number of forces have converged to put women’s health in the spotlight globally and regionally. Priorities in women’s health have emerged, however, that tend to fit standard disease paradigms, are easily recognized and measured, and coincide with international funding priorities.

What priorities would emerge if researchers asked women themselves? As part of the Urban Health Study conducted in 2002-2003 in three impoverished communities on the outskirts of Beirut, 1,869 women were interviewed about their living conditions, general health problems and then specifically about gynecological conditions. Women responded in their own words to the questions, which interviewers recorded verbatim.

Researchers were surprised by the women’s high reporting of pain in the back, limbs and joints. Some of the complaints may well have been universally recognizable musculoskeletal diseases, while others may have reflected a culturally acceptable language for commenting on one’s difficult life conditions. Women’s responses suggest an all-encompassing definition of health; environmental, economic, social, psychological and physical determinants come together in women’s bodies. Their evocative words link emotions and bodily health, often troubled emotions lingering from war or a reaction to the daily degradations of poverty.

Women’s words encourage a re-examination of our priorities in women’s health. They reveal how interconnected women’s health and life concerns are, and underscore the total inadequacy of medical only solutions. The study also shows that it is possible, within the context of a standard demographic and health survey, to gain valuable insights into women’s perspectives and priorities by asking them open-ended questions.


Wives are happier when husbands help with housework

According to this study of 1,652 married couples living in low-income neighbourhoods in Beirut, Lebanon conducted by CRPH affiliates, Marwan Khawaja and Rima Habib, wives are happier when husbands help with housework. By the same token, wives whose husbands rarely help around the house are more likely to be unhappy.

This study - believed by researchers to be the first to examine the issue in the Middle East, where women have long been held to traditional roles inside the home - examines the link between men’s involvement in housework and women’s self-rated mental health status, marital dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Wives whose husbands have low levels of involvement in housework are 1.62 times more likely to be distressed, 3 times more likely to be uncomfortable with their husbands and 2.68 times more likely to be unhappy when compared to those with husbands who regularly help with household chores. In seventy percent of the couples surveyed, the wife alone is responsible for cooking, washing dishes and other household tasks.

The study’s findings are consistent with previous studies conducted in Western countries that found women’s psychological health is tied to their sense of fairness when it comes to the division of housework.


Where research and community service meet: The Women and Reproductive Health Working Group (UH-WRHG)

The CRPH has been conducting research in the poverty belt around Beirut city for five years. This research has contributed to a better understanding of women’s health in the three studied communities of Hay el Sellom, Bourj al Barajneh camp and Nabaa.

The close interaction between the CRPH and these communities has transformed into a mutually beneficial relationship. Richer knowledge of the social interactions within the communities and a better understanding of their needs contributes to the intervention study. In parallel, increased collaboration has allowed community partners to identify important areas in which researchers can help them fill gaps, train trainers and form core groups of staff and personnel: the formation of trained core groups well, in turn, participate in intervention implementation and further serve research.

In view of this, the UH-WRHG recently embarked upon four activities with its three community partners in Hay el Sellom: the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), the Islamic Health Society (IHS) and the Amel Association:

1. Clinical training for physicians, nurses and midwives in each center including: history taking, physical exam for pregnant women, physical exam for non-pregnant women, counseling on pregnancy issues, counseling for preventive measures, and on medication prescriptions and side-effects.

- Quality control training for nurses, nurse aides and other involved personnel including: personal hygiene, auto-claving and incineration, drug storage and disposal and waste disposal.

- Training on Medical Charts and Filing for nurses, midwives and other personnel involved in filing in each centre including: completing missing information, filing records and tagging of records.

2. Analysis of data collected after the July-August war of 2006. The IHS collected data from its mobile and fixed health centers between September and December 2006 mainly in the South but also in Hay el Sellom, Dahyie, the Bekaa and Jbeil. Physicians classified diseases using the ICD-10 coding system, medications prescribed and some other basic data were also collected for over 500,000 patients. The CRPH is providing data analysis support which may serve in a future emergency plan.

3. Awareness Sessions at the MoSA health center: A 3-month first-aid and awareness program was organized by MoSA for women in the community. As part of this program the UH-WRHG scheduled five sessions between March and May 2007 to discuss the topics of most interest to them: sexually transmitted infections, reproductive health in emergency situations, questions and answers session on reproductive health, nutrition, breast and ovarian cancers.

4. Communication Skills Workshop for Nursing Assistants at the Amel Association. This workshop (May/June 2007) led by the Communication Skills Working Team (based in Family Medicine, AUBMC) is a component of a 9-month vocational training for nursing assistants. It is divided into 3 sessions: how to talk to patients; breaking bad news; and the screening and discussion of the movie, WIT.

Joanna Khalil leading an awareness session on nutrition at the MoSA, Hay el Sellom.

Faysal El-Kak conducting an awareness session on STI’s at the MoSA Health Center, Hay el Sellom.
CRPH Affiliate News

Rima Alaifi-Soweid (Associate Professor, Dept. of Health Behavior & Education, rais@aub.edu.lb)

Rima Alaifi co-authored a report for ESCWA entitled “Youth Health in the Arab Region” which will be included as a chapter in the 2007 Arab Countries Millennium Development Goals Report for Arab Countries. She was responsible for the qualitative component of the completed study (in collaboration with Dr. Monique Chaaya) on the impact of the Israeli war on Lebanon on psychosocial health and well-being of adults who were displaced or who stayed in their homes in the South and in the Southern Suburbs. The study was funded by International Medical Corps.

Jocelyn Dejong (Associate Professor, Dept. of Epidemiology and Population Health, jd16@aub.edu.lb)

Jocelyn Dejong gave a presentation entitled “Are Hospital-Based Policies in Maternal Health in the Middle East Evidence-Based?” at the Arab Association of Obstetrics and Gynecology Conference, Khartoum, Sudan, February 12-14, 2007. In May she gave a presentation entitled: “Policy Challenges to Changing Childbirth in the Middle East” at a Workshop on Health Policy Analysis sponsored by the Overseas Development Institute, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and King’s College London, May 21-22, 2007.

Faysal El-Kak (Lecturer, Dept. of Health Behavior & Education, fk01@aub.edu.lb)


Judy McMahon (Associate Professor, Dept. of Health Behavior & Education, jfm1@aub.edu.lb)

Judy McMahon attended The Arab Families Working Group Conference titled “Framings: Rethinking Arab Family Projects Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine”, that took place from the 16th of March 2007 – 18th of March 2007 in Cairo, Egypt. She was one of the speakers at this conference and presented a paper entitled: ‘Displaced Arab Families: Coping and Changes in Post-war Beirut’ from her research project supported by AFGW funds.

Iman Nuwayhid (Professor, Dept. of Environmental Health, nuwayhid@aub.edu.lb)

Iman Nuwayhid attended the Urbanization, Poverty, and Health in Developing Countries (AUB-FHS, May 17-18). She was involved in the formulation of a study (questionnaire design and training) for the Rapid Need Assessment for public and environmental health concerns in the war-hit towns in South Lebanon.

Marwan Khawaja (Professor, Dept. of Epidemiology & Population Health, and CRPH Director, marwan.khawaja@aub.edu.lb)


Huda Zurayk (Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences, htzurayk@aub.edu.lb)

Huda Zurayk attended the 2nd International Conference on Health, Environment and Development, 28-30 November 2006 held on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the High Institute of Public Health, Alexandria University, and presented on Graduate Public Health Education: Challenges for the Future. From January 6-7, 2007 Dr. Zurayk attended the Regional Reproductive Health Working Group Coordination Committee meeting in Cairo, Egypt.

CRPH News

CCS and SSG

The regional research program under the CRPH entitled Choices and Challenges in Changing Childbirth (CCS) hosted their Scientific Steering Group from May 3-5, 2007 at FHS. Two members of that international group, Dr. Sioban Harlow, Professor of Reproductive Epidemiology at the University of Michigan, and Dr. Laura Rodrigues, Professor of Infectious Disease Epidemiology at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), attended, as did resource person, Dr. Oona Campbell, Reader in Epidemiology and Reproductive Health at the LSHTM. The third SSG member, Dr. Ellen Hodnett, Professor and Chair in Perinatal Nursing Research at the Faculty of Nursing, University of Toronto, was not able to attend but gave very useful comments over the telephone.

The purpose of the SSG meeting was to review four proposals from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Egypt that are proposed for funding under the Wellcome Grant to the CRPH. The SSG meeting was hosted as an extremely valuable opportunity to exchange ideas and to get feedback on the proposed research. It was preceded by a one-day regional exchange of research ideas among the teams from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. That discussion focussed on a major theme from the proposals – that of post-partum care for women, a neglected research and policy area in the Middle East. The team also deliberated over the key “media messages” to disseminate based on its regional research to date, given the agreement recently reached between the CCCC and Future TV to convey messages related to childbirth in one episode a month of that weekly program.

Visiting Fellows in 2007

Ms. Yara Jarallah who graduated with an MS in Population Health from AUB in 2005, joined the CRPH as a visiting fellow in April and plans to stay till July. She is working on drafts of papers from the qualitative and quantitative data of her thesis from the Urban Health Study “ Adolescents’ health and well-being: the role of ethnicity, built environment and social support”. She is drafting a manuscript on Marriage Dynamics in Changing Childbirth (CCS) which will be included as a chapter in the 2007 Arab Countries Millennium Development Goals Report for Arab Countries. She was responsible for the qualitative component of the completed study (in collaboration with Dr. Monique Chaaya) on the impact of the Israeli war on Lebanon on psychosocial health and well-being of adults who were displaced or who stayed in their homes in the South and in the Southern Suburbs. The study was funded by International Medical Corps.

Sponsored Research Publications

January-May 2007


CRPH Monthly Research Seminars

May 8, 2007 - Relative deprivation, health and mortality: the case of South Africa by Nareen Sali, Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, AUB

March 20, 2007 - Palestinian Refugee Camps Territory of Exception and Disciplinary Space by Sari Hanafi, Associate Professor, Social and Behavioral Sciences Department, AUB.

February 27, 2007 - Self-rated Health: What is it? By Sawan Abdulrahim, Assistant Professor, Department of Health Behavior and Education, Faculty of Health Sciences, AUB

January 18, 2007 - Citizenship and Social Welfare: An Analytical Framework by Melanie Cammett, Assistant Professor, Political Science Department, Brown University.

Regional Networking and Collaboration

CRPH Hosts Annual Regional Workshop “Urbanization, Poverty and Health in Developing Countries”, May 17-18, 2007

As part of its continuous multidisciplinary efforts and activities related to urban health research, the CRPH held its first annual workshop on “Urbanization, Poverty and Health in Developing Countries”. The purpose of the workshop, held with support from the Wellcome Trust, was to advance the regional knowledge base and to offer an “academic” space for sharing experiences between the region’s researchers working in the field of urban health and urban poverty.

Participants were researchers from Lebanon, Egypt, Iran, the Sudan, Syria, Turkey, Yemen, and the US and focused on questions such as: how the process of urbanization has affected the health of populations living in urban areas; how urban living and poverty affects the health of individuals and communities; whether the regional trend is pointing to an urban penalty or more to an urban advantage, and what the health conditions of the urban poor are in this region of the world.

The workshop was divided into six sessions: Urban Health – an Overview, Urban Poverty and Health Inequities, Social Capital and Urban Health, Environmental Challenges in Urban Settings, Mental Health in Urban Areas: Research and Intervention, Wrap up and Future Steps.

For more information on the details of the workshop, please visit our website: http://staff.aub.edu.lb/~webcrph/crph/default.htm

Youth Working Group hosts Community Youth Coalition

On January 12th, 2007, a group of 40 young persons aged 11-14 years participated in focus groups at FHS conducted by the Community Youth Coalition of Burj El Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp. The purpose of the focus groups was to get feedback on specific survey items related to mental/psychosocial health; as well as to explore youth expression of mental health including its dimensions and the terminology they use to express their feelings. The results will be incorporated into a more in depth understanding of youth mental health in the camp, and more specifically into the development of a mental health survey instrument that is valid and relevant to the context of youth in the Camp.

The Reproductive Health Working Group (RHWG) Annual Meeting

The Reproductive Health Working Group Annual Meeting is scheduled to take place on July 16-18, 2007 in Cairo. The meeting will discuss received abstracts and carry over emerging debates.

Discussion themes such as those listed below have been chosen based on current research:

• Conflict, Violence and Health
• Health Inequities
• Health Systems and the Quality of Care

Upcoming Events

Visit our new website at http://staff.aub.edu.lb/~webcrph

The Network of Arab Demography (NAD) is pleased to announce the launching of its website at: http://staff.aub.edu.lb/~webcrph/NAD/About_Us.html
About CRPH

Join Us as a Visiting Fellow

CRPH has been sponsoring a Visiting Fellows Program since January 2003. Selected fellows from the Arab region may visit CRPH for one to three months to collaborate with FHS faculty affiliates on ongoing research projects, or to use the Center’s facilities and data resources to undertake their own research. Candidates need to be affiliated with an academic university or research institution, to hold a postgraduate degree and to have good working knowledge of English. A fellowship application may be requested from Mrs. Ruba Ismail, Program Administrator, at crph@aub.edu.lb and should be submitted at least three months prior to the proposed starting date.

Contact Us

To learn more about CRPH research activities, to subscribe to CRPHNews, or to request an application for the Visiting Fellows Program, contact us at:

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The MSc in Population Health

The graduate program is designed to provide training in Population Sciences, focusing on the impact of population change on health. It offers basic training in population theory and analysis as well as in quantitative research methods. Students will participate in collaborative research activities with FHS faculty through the Center to gain practical experience. Students will also have access to the Center’s data generated by the Urban Health Study and other studies for thesis research.

The university catalogue and graduate admission application form can be requested from the AUB admissions office via e-mail at admissions@aub.edu.lb, or downloaded from http://www.aub.edu.lb

Opportunities for qualified students to receive financial aid are available in the form of Graduate Assistantships, Graduate Scholarships, and other sources of funding, such as FHS administered research grants (when available). Information regarding financial assistance for FHS graduate programs can be obtained from Ms. Aline Germani at ag24@aub.edu.lb

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