**CRPH Leads Discussion on the Impact of Conflict on Health in the MENA Region**

Violent conflicts between and within nation states are major causes of ill health and mortality. Despite the growing severity and range of its negative health consequences, armed conflict has received only modest attention from scholars compared to other causes of ill health and mortality. CRPH, in collaboration with both the Council on Middle East Studies and the School of Public Health at Yale University, organized an international symposium on Conflict and Health in the Middle East and North Africa to explore these issues.

The symposium took place at the Faculty of Health Sciences at AUB from March 16 to 18, 2009 and attracted 21 scholars from the MENA countries, Europe and the US. Case studies from Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, and Sudan were presented, with themes covering various aspects of the health consequences of war, occupation and armed conflict such as: conflict epidemiology; developing emergency services for conflict victims; war and male infertility; and community resilience at times of conflict. The papers presented will be considered for a special issue of Global Public Health journal forthcoming in 2010.

Participants also discussed holding this international symposium on an annual basis and creating a network of researchers working on conflict and health in the region.

**Maternal Health in the Arab World and the CCCC: Future Strategies in Research and Dissemination**

In early February 2009, the Choices and Challenges in Changing Childbirth (CCCC) regional research network hosted a three-day meeting at the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS) attended by the full regional team from Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria and three international resource people. The network is currently preparing for a new five-year application to the Wellcome Trust as part of the CRPH and the workshop provided a timely opportunity both to review past and ongoing research activities as well as to plan for the future.

The first half of the workshop consisted of presentations of ongoing research, including studies in Egypt on a post-partum going home informational package for mothers, on determinants of quality of life of Palestinian mothers in the postpartum period, on interventions in Lebanon to reduce stress in the transition to motherhood for first-time mothers, and a randomized control trial study in Syria testing the effects of a training package in interpersonal competence on changing providers’ behavior in maternity hospitals. There was also a report on the process of conducting a cluster randomized trial that was carried out in Lebanon to test an intervention to improve women’s communication skills and demand for better intrapartum and postpartum services. A new proposal was also presented for a study in Lebanon on health system constraints to improving maternal health. The rest of the workshop was devoted to discussing future plans of the group. The team hopes to expand its regional network in the next cycle of research to include a team of researchers in Jordan and a larger team in Egypt and welcomed these newcomers to its meeting.
Participating at the workshop were three distinguished international maternal health researchers. Dr. Ellen Hodnett, a member of the Scientific Steering Group for the research program, is based in Canada and is a professor at the Lawrence S. Bloomberg Faculty of Nursing, University of Toronto. Both Dr. Jane Sandall, who is a professor of Midwifery and Sociology and King’s College, London and Dr. Oona Campbell, Professor of Epidemiology and Reproductive Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical, are based in the UK and weathered the worst snow storm there in ten years to join the meeting. The input of these resource people was invaluable in providing feedback on past and ongoing research as well as in guiding the group’s future research directions. The group had a smaller two-day regional meeting at FHS in May to refine further its research agenda for the next stage.

Third CRPH Regional Workshop Addresses Challenges of Community-Based Participatory Research

The Center for Research on Population and Health (CRPH) in collaboration with the Community of Practice of ECOHealth in the Middle East and North Africa (CoPEH MENA) hosted a regional research workshop entitled “Community-based participatory research: Challenges and opportunities for research, practice, and policy in the Middle East and North Africa Region” from May 7 to 9, 2009. The workshop brought together researchers from Egypt, Iran, Morocco, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Dr. Stephen Fawcett, Kansas Health Foundation Professor of Applied Behavioral Science at The University of Kansas, and Dr. David Lewis, Professor in Social Policy at the Centre for Civil Society Department of Social Policy-London School of Economics and Political Science, were invited as resource persons. The workshop addressed the following objectives:

- Exploring methods in conducting community-based participatory research (CBPR) across the region
- Critically analyzing the challenges faced and strengths gained from conducting CBPR.
- Reviewing lessons learned from implementing CBPR.
- Proposing guidelines for CBPR in MENA region

Participants reflected on the many barriers that exist to applying CBPR in the region. One of the main challenges is the lack of sufficient evidence in peer reviewed journals on the effectiveness of this approach and the difficulty of ensuring sustainability of projects. Participants came out with a number of recommendations and next steps including: conducting workshops to build capacity on how to implement the CBPR approach, writing a joint regional paper on CBPR across countries in the region; and establishing a multidisciplinary network to share resources and experience.

Dr. Fawcett set up a webpage for the group to post the workshop material and share ideas on guidelines.

Research Highlights

Published Papers

Marriage to a relative and its effect on offspring mortality

The practice of marriage to a relative, or consanguineous marriage, is very common in the Palestinian Territories. In 2004, it was found that the rate reached 45.4% of all marriages, 27.7% of which were between a woman and her first cousin. While this research found that the offspring of consanguineous parents are more likely to have congenital disorders and a decrease in birth-weight compared to non-consanguineous parents, other research on the effect of consanguinity on the mortality of offspring (miscarriages and stillbirths) is contradictory with some studies showing an increased risk and others showing no effect. The purpose of this research was to see if this is a risk factor in the Palestinian Territory as there are high rates of consanguineous marriages as well as high fertility rates.

The research was conducted through the analysis of the 2004 Demographic and Health Survey from the Palestinian Territory on 4418 women between the ages of 15-49. The analysis looked at consanguinity as well as other factors found in previous studies to be risk factors for reproductive wastage (or miscarriages and stillbirths combined). These variables included: age of the mother, education of the mother, locality type, income status, occupational status of the mother and past IUD use.

The findings indicated that, after age, consanguinity was actually the strongest risk factor for reproductive wastage. In the West Bank the risk was only significant for first cousin marriages and marriage to a distant relative lost its significance after adjusting for other variables. In the Gaza Strip both first cousin marriages and marriages to distant family members were significant risk factors for reproductive wastage with equal incidence risk ratios. Age of mother was the strongest risk factor for reproductive wastage as established in the literature, and parity was another significant risk factor. Surprisingly, all other variables for women were not found to be significant including: locality type, income status, education level, occupation status and past IUD use.

This research indicates that awareness needs to be raised in the Palestinian Territory about this possible risk. It is however difficult to arrive at definitive conclusions regarding possible interventions from a single study based on observational data and a cross-sectional design. In the future, the risk of reproductive wastage with consanguinity should be studied using longitudinal study designs.


Is living with married children advantageous?

In many Middle Eastern countries including Lebanon, the family as a social institution is greatly valued and local norms regarding family ties and living arrangements are especially important for older adults, in particular older women. Owing to their higher life expectancy and younger age at marriage, the situation of older women differs a great deal from that of older men. The experience of losing marital support is faced earlier by women, and it is also highly likely that a woman would survive her husband without getting married again.

While the presence of an adult child is often seen as responsive to the financial, health and social needs of older parents, it is not clear whether co-residence with married children offers a similar advantage as in the case of co-residence with unmarried children. In lower income countries, co-residence with an adult married child is envisaged to benefit older parents, by expanding their relational networks and their opportunities to exchange material and non-material resources.

Using data from a national Population and Housing Survey, this study examines associations of co-residence with adult children among ever-married women aged 65 years and older in Lebanon. Excluding women who had no surviving child yielded a total of 5,995 eligible subjects: 3,363 were currently married at the time of the survey and 2,632 unmarried, with the majority of the latter (98.6%) being widowed or divorced.

Results showed a considerable proportion of elderly women who were living alone (18%) at the time of the survey. Co-residence was more frequent with unmarried (50.1%) than married (9.7%) children, but the gender ratio of the co-residing child varied with the marital status of both the older woman and the child. Moreover, among those co-residing with married children, results indicated a greater likelihood of co-residence with married sons (8.2%) over married daughters (1.6%). Co-residence with an adult child associated positively with the availability of surviving children and negatively with the socioeconomic status of the woman and her spouse. Compared to other living arrangements, co-residence with a married child entailed the least advantageous Household Socioeconomic Status (HSES) score in terms of housing characteristics, infrastructure, and material possessions, for both married and unmarried women.

The Women's Reproductive Health Group (WRHG) Intervention Kicks Off with Qaderoon: Progress and Transition

The Qaderoon project is a social skills building intervention aimed at enhancing the positive mental health of children aged 10-14 years in the Burj El Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp of Beirut. The intervention started in August 2008, has consisted of 45 sessions with children, 15 sessions with their parents and six workshops with their teachers. As this newsletter goes to press, the first phase of the project is nearing completion.

On May 10, a final event showcased the work of the Qaderoon kids, specifically, the work they carried out in the social action part of the intervention. The children picked a project to carry out with and in their community, planned every aspect of it, implemented it, and evaluated their work all the while using skills enhanced through Qaderoon. Projects ranged from cookbooks, a booklet of stories that grandparents used to tell children, as well as a song and a play transmitting the Qaderoon messages of communication, conflict resolution, self empowerment, and how to avoid health risks. Other activities that day included the Qaderoon children facilitating an arts and craft project for younger children who attended, teaching smokers in the community about the dangers and consequences of tobacco use, and presentations of dances and national songs. Parents and teachers who participated in the intervention received certificates and the youth mentors who have been key partners in implementing Qaderoon presented a skit and songs about their experience in the program.

A post-assessment followed with those who provided pre-assessment data prior to the initiation of the intervention. These include both children who participated in the program and those who were part of a comparison group. Results will be compared between the groups and across time to assess the impact of the Qaderoon intervention. Results will also be analyzed in the context of extensive data gathered as part of an implementation evaluation, and from the perspective of mentors through in-depth interviews asking about their experience of the program. The summer of 2009 will continue to be busy for the team as the children of the comparison group will participate in intervention activities as part of a summer camp experience.

As this phase of the project ends, the research team is already occupied with crafting and molding its future, as always in partnership with the community of Burj El Barajneh. The community-based aspect has greatly facilitated plans for continuity. The mentors form a ready-to-go, active, committed, well trained, and eager implementation team. The intervention package is ready, has been tested, and improved upon. At this stage, the idea is to continue the project through an NGO. The continuity of Qaderoon is felt by all to be - among other things - an ethical concern as children, parents, and teachers as well as the implementation and field teams have stressed that it must continue for there to be any hope of long term change.

The Qaderoon project is made possible by the Youth Working Group of the Urban Health Study which received a major three-year award from the Wellcome Trust in May 2007, for its study entitled: “Impact of a community based randomized controlled trial to improve mental health of Palestinian refugee youth.”

The Women’s Reproductive Health Group (WRHG) Intervention Kicks Off with Free Health Checks, Relaxation Exercises and Social Support Groups

Entering the Social Development Center of the Ministry of Social Affairs in Hay Sellem, a disadvantaged neighbourhood in South Beirut, one cannot but notice the buzz of activity: small groups of women in their colorful track suits are getting ready for relaxation exercises and social support sessions in the Center’s newly refurbished fitness room. The exercise and social support are part of an intervention study that researchers at CRPH are currently undertaking in Hay el Sellem to test whether reducing depression and/or anxiety symptoms of married women using a community based psycho-social intervention would decrease their complaints of medically unexplained vaginal discharge. The study, funded by the Wellcome Trust, is unique and was prompted by the findings of the Urban Health Study that CRPH undertook in 2002-03 where a considerable number of married women complained of vaginal discharge.

The WRHG recruitment campaign ran from March 30th to May 14th, 2009. 1,016 women were offered free health checks, obstetric check ups and, when necessary, lab tests. The aim of the recruitment was to find eligible women for the psychosocial community based trial. Eligible women are married women aged 18 to 49 years with low to moderate levels of common mental distress as well as medically unexplained vaginal discharge. Ten intervention and ten control groups were thus formed. Women in the program and those who were part of a comparison group. Results will be compared between the groups and across time to assess the impact of the Qaderoon intervention. Results will also be analyzed in the context of extensive data gathered as part of an implementation evaluation, and from the perspective of mentors through in-depth interviews asking about their experience of the program. The summer of 2009 will continue to be busy for the team as the children of the comparison group will participate in intervention activities as part of a summer camp experience.

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“People are getting better,” said a BHP volunteer, adding that the project would have continued if it had not been for funding limitations. “I think this project has made a big difference,” she said.”

The Bedouin Health Project: Disseminating to Stakeholders and Brainstorming Ideas for Model Intervention

Bedouin woman voices grievance over healthcare access at BHP dissemination session in the Biqa’a

“A human being is nothing without nationality,” said HS, a Bedouin woman from the Idena tribe in Taarab, at a general dissemination meeting held by the Bedouin Health Project (BHP) in the Agricultural Research and Education Center - AREC (AUB farm) last month. She proceeded to recount how her ailing granddaughter was denied admission to a local hospital because she has no Lebanese nationality. She was among the many community members who urged the BHP to prioritize the nationality problem in its upcoming phase of intervention for improving reproductive and child health for Bedouins in the Western and Central Biqa’a.

Although indigenous to this territory, many of Lebanon’s Bedouins, especially women and children, remain non-citizens, and therefore cannot benefit from public health services. Bedouin health and health-seeking behavior is characterized by curative and predominantly biomedical practices, and shaped predominantly by consideration of cost of and distance to health services. But their irregular nationality status is the single most influential factor distinguishing them, health-wise, from other marginalized rural groups in Lebanon. Community members have repeatedly said that, as have policy-makers, politicians and the project’s international advisers. But arguably the thorniest issue in Lebanon’s political structure, naturalization will be impossible for the project to tackle head on. Stakeholders and team members have, however, discussed numerous alternative actions, designed to alleviate the outcomes of this unjust status.

The project’s past five months of focused dissemination and brainstorming sessions with community members, healthcare providers, and policy makers, combined with local officials at a March 30 meeting, kicked up a wide range of suggestions for intervention. Top of the list was training of healthcare providers on the particular needs of tribal and other marginalized people, and awareness-raising activities on basic health concerns for community members. Other ideas included capacity-building for community-based organizations (CBOs) on networking and fund-raising, and advocacy for national health ID cards. Healthcare providers and policy-makers proposed introducing community health workers who could champion awareness campaigns, conduct health promotion, and advocate for improved health services for and treatment (in both senses of the word) of Bedouins. These key persons could potentially be integrated in existing rural health structures to optimize sustainability.

In its upcoming phase, beginning in June 2009, the BHP team will embark on a two-tiered intervention plan. Firstly, and in the vein of participatory development, the project will design a Community Health Volunteer (CHV) system taking into account stakeholder priorities, while catering to the realities of Bedouin reproductive and child health. The suitability of such a system to this context include low-cost, increased community ownership, simple organizational structures, and adaptability to multiple and flexible partnerships.

BHP’s second intervention scheme will introduce Bedouin health topics within higher education at the Faculty of Health Sciences. This will include two 2-hour sessions on Bedouin health in a 2-credit tutorial entitled Shaping Community Health. The topic of Bedouin health has already been added to the list of research topics in the social and preventive medicine clerkship course for 1st and 4th year medical students. Finally, the project will develop a week-long workshop targeting graduate students and professionals in the field. The course begins in the Easter break, 2010.
Abdulrahim presented a paper on the health of Arab Americans at the Population Association of America meeting in May 2009. The paper titled: “Differences in self-rated health by immigrant status and language preference among Arab Americans in the Detroit Metropolitan Area,” and co-authored with Wayne Baker at the University of Michigan, has been accepted for publication in Social Science and Medicine. Building on a workshop she attended at the Lebanese Emigration Research Center in 2008, she wrote a paper on social mobility of Palestinian migrants in the United States, accepted for publication in a peer reviewed migration issue of the Palma Research Journal. This academic year 2008-09, Abdulrahim became a member of a transnational thematic group working on issues related to place, migration and health. She also joined the Faculty Advisory Committee of the “Population Change and Reproduction in the Palestinian Refugee Camps” committee of the Issam Fares Institute and was elected to the board of the Health Care Society, an NGO providing mental health and medical services in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

Hyam Bashour (Professor at the Department of Family and Community Medicine, Vice Dean for Scientific Affairs, Faculty of Medicine, Damascus University, hbashour@ics-net.org) Hyam Bashour, the Syrian team coordinator of the CCCC group, is currently writing the report from the Wellcome Trust funded study on the effect of doctors’ training in interpersonal skills on women’s satisfaction at labor and delivery; a stepped wedge randomized trial in Damascus. The field work for the study was finished and dissemination activities are to start soon. Two papers are planned including one paper on the development of the training package which specifically describes the steps taken to develop the training package for the trial in collaboration with Hoda Habib, an internal consultant in the field of communication. Bashour just finished the development of resource package on reproductive health for non-governmental societies for the benefit of the Ministry of Social affairs and labour in Syria. Findings from previous research were included as case studies.

Faysal El-Kak (Senior Lecturer, Department of Health Behavior and Education, f001@aub.edu.lb) Faysal El-Kak is a resource person to the WE PASS project on women empowerment for reproductive health. He is being consulted by UNFPA to lead a task on updating “Standards protocols of Practice” in primary health care. He participated in the “Regional Advisory Panel - WHO” in Dubai in October 2008, and in the “Gender and Rights Advisory Panel - WHO” in Geneva, November, 2008. He was consulted by the Ministry of Health in the Sultanate of Oman to review women’s health clinical guidelines, in April 2009, and is a resource person on a study on “Maternal morbidity and near miss” for the MOPH, Lebanon. He presented on sexual health for older women in the “Sexuality for the Aging” conference in Jeddah, KSA, April 2009, and also presented on “Menopause Treatment”, and “Maternal Morality” in the annual meeting of Ob/Gyns, and NCNPN, Beirut 2008.

Ziyad Mahfoud (Assistant Professor, Department of Epidemiology and Population Health, zm15@aub.edu.lb) Ziyad Mahfoud presented a poster entitled “Parental Influence on Narghile Smoking among Adolescents” at the 14th world conference on tobacco and health from March 8 to 12, 2009 in Mumbai, India. He also co-authored the report “Child Sexual Abuse: The Lebanese Situation” based on a study conducted with the Wellcome Trust funds from Save the Children (Sweden) and in collaboration with the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs. Mahfoud was nominated for the “Excellence in Teaching” award at the American University of Beirut.

Rima Nakkash (Assistant research professor, Department of Health Behavior and Education, rm06@aub.edu.lb) Nakkash won a 45,000 CAD award from the International Development Research Centre Research in International Tobacco Control (IDRC-RTIC) in Canada to lead a study analyzing smoke-free policies in Lebanon. On March 7-12, 2009 she presented five different abstracts at the 14th World Conference on Tobacco or Health in Mumbai, India. In October and November 2008 she attended the American Public Health Association Annual meeting and 5th National Conference on Health Issues in the Arab American Community Dearborn, Michigan. Nakkash presented on the paper “Measuring the Mental Health of Arab Youth: A locally constructed and context specific scale” and “A community based logic model for child mental health promotion in a refugee setting”.

Hibaib Osman (Assistant Professor, Department of Health Behavior and Education, ho02@aub.edu.lb) Hibaib Osman is in the process of recruiting women for her study looking at interventions to reduce stress in first-time mothers. The study should be completed by June, 2009. Osman’s paper on obstetrical drills from the maternal mortality study was published in Birth in March, 2009. Osman received a travel scholarship from the International Association for Hospice and Palliative Care (IAHPC) to attend the 11th Congress of the European Association for Palliative Care in Vienna in May, 2009.

On March 18, 2009 CRPH hosted a panel public with researchers, practitioners and policy makers entitled: Understanding the Impact of Conflicts and Wars on Health: bridging research and practice. The panel was moderated by Drs. Iman Nuwapryid (Dean of FHS) and Marcia Inhorn (Yale University). Presenters included: Dr. Kaveh Khoshnood, Yale University. Dr. Alisar Rady, World Health Organization (WHO) – Beirut Office, Dr. Satu Arnaout, Nahr al-Biirid Reconstruction Unit at the Prime Minister’s Office, Mr. Hassan Ammar, Islamic Health Society and Dr. Mounir Mabsout, Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service, AUB.

The CRPH has just published its first in a series of bilingual Research and Policy Highlights. This March issue was entitled Listing to Women about their Health in Disadvantaged Beirut Neighborhoods and was based on the article: Zuroy, H., Myntti, C., Salem, M.T., Kaddour, A., El-Kak, F., & Jabour, S. (2007), “Beyond reproductive health: Listing to women about their health in disadvantaged Beirut neighborhoods.” Health Care for Women International, 28(7), 614-637.

Kaveh Khoshnood, Yale University. Dr. Alisar Rady, World Health Organization (WHO) – Beirut Office, Dr. Satu Arnaout, Nahr al-Biirid Reconstruction Unit at the Prime Minister’s Office, Mr. Hassan Ammar, Islamic Health Society and Dr. Mounir Mabsout, Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service, AUB.

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About CRPH

The CRPH staff are:

- Nasser Yassin, PhD  Acting Director
- Loulou Kobeissi, DrPH  Assistant Research Professor
- Rima Nakash, DrPH  Assistant Research Professor
- Ruba Ismail, MPH  Program Administrator
- Hala Dimechkie, MA  Communications Coordinator

CRPH News is published bi-annually by the CRPH.

Upcoming Events

The 21st Reproductive Health Women’s Group annual meeting will take place in Aleppo, Syria from July 15 to 17, 2009. Topics on the agenda include:

- Violence, suffering and health
- Motherhood: Health, Domestic Politics, Work Pressures
- Childbirth
- Women’s Health Beyond Reproductive Health
- Women and Cancer
- Gender Constructions and Gendered Lives
- Health equity and social policy

In collaboration with the Department of Reproductive Health and Research at WHO headquarters in Geneva and the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean in Cairo, CRPH is organizing a three-week course on Operations Research in Reproductive Health from June 15 to July 3, 2009. The course is designed to build the capacity of decision-makers, program managers and researchers working in ministries, universities, social centers, NGOs and community based organizations (CBOs) coming from countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region. A total of 16 candidates from Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria will be trained in the various technical aspects of operations research in reproductive health.

Fellowships

Ms. Manal Benkirane, who works with the Association de Lutte Contre le Sida, an AIDS NGO in Morocco, visited CRPH as a visiting fellow in March 2009. During her stay Ms. Benkirane worked with Dr. Huda Zurayk on a paper on maternal mortality in the Arab world for presentation in the forthcoming International Union for the Scientific Study in Population (IUSSP) conference in Morocco in September 2009.

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.

The MSc in Population Health

The graduate program is designed to provide training in population and reproductive health 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.

Contact Us

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

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