

## Introduction to the Special Section on Global Women's Reproductive Health

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**W**E WELCOME YOU TO THE *Journal of Women's Health* 2010 special section on global women's reproductive health. Access to a full range of reproductive healthcare is fundamental to a woman's ability to exercise her right to control her body, to self-efficacy, and to maintain her health as well as that of her family. In 2010, no woman should die or suffer the morbidity associated with lack of access to contraception, safe abortion, or delivery with a skilled attendant. This special section addresses these issues related to women's reproductive health from multiple perspectives.

The article by Lester et al.<sup>1</sup> provides the reader an overview of global women's health, focusing on maternal and reproductive health and the relationship to poverty, access to healthcare, and status of women and girls. They stress the disparities in health between higher-income and lower-income countries as well as within countries. The authors suggest the important role of political will as a means to directly address these disparities.

Baptiste et al.<sup>2</sup> present a theoretical framework by which to conceptualize and address global women's health issues. The authors explore the premise that women's health research, while addressing health and wellness, can also advance women's freedom and equity. In order to do so, researchers must intentionally integrate a human rights framework into their women's health research. They suggest the Scale of Change<sup>3</sup> theory as a way to operationalize this and discuss a number of strategies to guide global health researchers to work not only toward improved health and wellness but also to advance women's freedom, equity, and equality.

Global health research in low-resource countries poses unique and complex challenges, even to the most experienced researcher. In the article by Stenson et al.,<sup>4</sup> the authors address key issues in conducting global women's reproductive health research, including community partnerships, ethical issues, training and development, data collection, and logistical matters. They present real challenges from the field, coupled with practical and feasible solutions.

Participatory research offers another opportunity to address some of the complexities of global women's health research, as well as to expand its role and relevance. Decker et al.<sup>5</sup> suggest that participatory research provides a scientifically sound approach to engage communities, especially women, into the research process to improve the relevance of

the study, as well as translation of the results into feasible and acceptable policy and programs. The authors offer their own field experiences as examples of international participatory research, both their successes and their challenges.

We were also interested in the various roles that different stakeholders play in global reproductive health research, from the World Health Organization (WHO) to donor foundations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and professional organizations. Representative authors from each group present varying perspectives on the importance of this work, commitment to funding, conduct of the research, case studies of practical workable programs, and translation of the findings into policy and practice.

The article by Requejo et al.<sup>6</sup> describes the work of WHO to advance women's health through formal and informal mechanisms, particularly the strategies WHO implements to increase global political commitments at the national and regional levels to reach Millennium Development Goal 5, the reduction of maternal mortality. Drake et al.<sup>7</sup> discuss the roles of NGOs in implementing and translating global health research into functioning, culturally sensitive programs. They use three illustrative case studies to demonstrate how NGOs shape evidence-informed policies and programs to improve women's health.

Meyer and Seims' article<sup>8</sup> reviews the unique role of U.S. philanthropies in supporting international women's health, particularly family planning and reproductive health. Using case study methodology, they argue that foundations, more than governmental organizations, have the freedom to stay committed to their goals despite changing politics and policies. The article on the role of professional associations in improving global women's health by LaLonde et al.<sup>9</sup> illustrates the collaboration of a developed country's medical society, The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, with the *Asociación de Obstetricia y Ginecología de Guatemala* (ACOG) and how capacity building has led the ACOG to become an important contributor in national efforts to improve maternal and newborn health outcomes in Guatemala.

We hope you enjoy this special section and learn from the experiences of these global health collaborators, each providing unique perspectives but all striving to advance women's reproductive health and rights.

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