Decolonizing Global Health and Strengthening Vaccination Programs Using Online Platforms: a Bottom-up Approach

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Background
- Vaccination advocacy efforts have traditionally relied on in-person gatherings to design and implement interventions.
- The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by national lockdowns and travel limitations, led to innovations in in-country stakeholders and frontline health workers leading health initiatives.
- Physical gatherings can reinforce hierarchical structural barriers and power dynamics by limiting participation from certain groups and neglecting voices who may be most impactful in strengthening vaccination programs.

Objectives
- To incorporate online platforms to design a community-led intervention to strengthen vaccine uptake.
- To lead to a more horizontal and equitable approach to partnerships between researchers and the community.
- To bring together diverse perspectives to conduct effective research and facilitate long-lasting, sustainable changes in vaccine uptake, led by the community and local experts.

Methods
We took a multi-pronged approach:
1. Development of a Community Accountability Board (CAB) of local influential leaders;
2. Use of online human-centered design (HCD) workshops to co-create interventions to improve vaccine uptake;
3. Implementation of a co-designed, community-led six-pronged intervention incorporating online activities.

Results
- Using online platforms to design an intervention provided an opportunity to combat systemic barriers that in-person activities often facilitate in terms of gender, social standing, professional standing, and background.
- Online workshops brought together a high number of women who are typically unable to participate in these types of activities due to societal expectations or logistical household barriers.
- We strengthened the diversity of participants, provided a space for more marginalized groups to speak up, and minimized logistical barriers to attendance.
- Using online platforms to facilitate meetings and workshops enabled the community to have a larger voice in the planning of activities and the creation and implementation of interventions to strengthen vaccine uptake.
- Researchers must still grapple with doing more to ensure equity, particularly in populations without internet access.

Conclusions
Online platforms can overcome economic and travel-related barriers, which contribute to lower participation from institutions and countries with limited resources. Online platforms also empower women who bear more social costs to attending in-person meetings, as well as early career practitioners. To further strengthen equity, there is a need to recognize the power of virtual strategies to facilitate underrepresented groups to meaningfully participate in all aspects of research.

References

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