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LETTER TO THE EDITOR OPEN ACCESS

Indexation Gap as a Form of Systemic Exclusion in Authorship and Publication of Gender-Transformative Sexual and Reproductive Health from Francophone West Africa

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Abstract:
The aim of gender-transformative sexual and reproductive health research is to improve sexual and reproductive health by challenging the unequal power dynamics and structures that perpetuate disparities. This letter to the editor aims to explore the role of the indexing gap as a form of systemic exclusion in the authorship and publication of gender-transformative sexual and reproductive health research from Francophone West Africa. The article draws on findings from a scoping review conducted by the School of Public Health at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa.

Keywords : Gender-transformative, Disparities, Sexual, Reproductive, West Africa, Publication, Indexing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In May 2024, the School of Public Health at the University of the Western Cape (South Africa) conducted a scoping review [1]. The review aimed to assess authorship patterns, geographic and institutional contexts, and funding sources in studies applying gender-transformative approaches to Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) across Africa. It searched prominent public health and social science databases for published articles from 2012 to 2022. The search strategy included both French and English keywords. It identified 45 eligible articles published in PubMed and Scopus. The articles were classified and grouped into regions: Southern Africa, Eastern Africa, Western Africa, and Northern Africa. The findings revealed unequal patterns in authorship. Southern Africa accounted for 21.2% of first authorships and 28.0% of last authorships, which is more than twice the share in other regions, including Northern and Western Africa. West Africa accounted for only 11.1% of first and second authorships (five papers), and none of the included studies were from Francophone West Africa. While the review and another paper [2] suggest that the scarcity of papers from countries in the Francophone region of West Africa may be due to a lack of visibility rather than a lack of research, a further discussion on the "indexing gap" as a form of systemic exclusion would strengthen this argument.

2. INDEXING GAP AS A FORM OF SYSTEMIC EXCLUSION IN GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE SRH RESEARCH FROM FRANCOPHONE WEST AFRICA

The question this article seeks to explore is whether Francophone journals are underrepresented in major indexing databases, which could explain why the scoping review found no studies from Francophone West Africa. Available evidence suggests Francophone journals are indeed underrepresented. An analysis of 560 indexed African biomedical journals found only seven French-language journals from West Africa and 20 bilingual

(French and English) journals; only 5.1% of these journals were indexed in Scopus, and they were mainly from Anglophone countries [3]. Similarly, a survey of 63 African medical journals reported that in French-speaking West Africa, fewer than 10 medical journals publish regularly and only five are indexed in MEDLINE [4]. By contrast, Anglophone West African countries (*e.g.*, Nigeria) produced 44.5% of African journals indexed in Web of Science and Scopus [5].

Francophone journals in West Africa face similar indexing challenges as Anglophone West African journals. These include limited funding for indexing, weak infrastructure, and perceived lower prestige compared to Global North Journals [6]. However, they also face the added challenge of linguistic barriers. The dominance of the English language in scientific publishing has resulted in the isolation of Francophone journals in West Africa and a lack of global visibility for their papers compared with Anglophone journals. It has been reported that local scientific journals in French-speaking West Africa are not always online or indexed due to language barriers [2]. As a result, the review may have missed studies applying gender-transformative approaches to SRH from Francophone West Africa.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the analysis in this paper focuses mainly on biomedical and public health journal indexing, which may be insufficient for explaining disparities in authorship and publication in this field. Some Francophone SRH research may be published in non-biomedical and public health journals (*e.g.*, gender studies, development studies, sociology) that may not be captured by PubMed or Scopus.

Addressing this systemic exclusion would require a shift from relying heavily on Western and English-dominated indices to supporting high-quality, Open Access (OA), African-oriented, and French publishing platforms. The African Journals Online (AJOL), PubMed, and Medline have begun to support this transition. Medline and AJOL now index some French journals from West Africa, such as Mali Médical. The Pan-African Medical Journal (PAMJ), which publishes articles in both English and French, is also indexed in PubMed. However, these digital publishing platforms still have not covered all scientific publications from Francophone journals. While this limited representation may reflect that many Francophone West African journals (like Anglophone West African journals) may not meet indexing standards, it nonetheless contributes to the continued invisibility of gender-transformative SRH research from Francophone West Africa. Ensuring that scientific publications on the gender approach to SRH are discoverable and visible would therefore require the deliberate indexing of local French journals in major indexing databases. It would also require training on international indexing standards and digital publishing skills for local French journal editors, providing funding mechanisms for digital infrastructure and platform maintenance, as well as promoting south-south cooperation and partnerships between Anglophone and Francophone academic and research institutions to facilitate knowledge exchange. Addressing the limitations in meeting indexing standards for local French journals would also require strengthening their editorial workflows, including transparent peer review and anti-plagiarism policies, which are strongly preferred and mandatory for PubMed and Scopus [7]. Promoting multilingual publishing (*e.g.*, offering abstracts or full texts in French and English) to enhance visibility without requiring journals to abandon their primary language could also serve as a complementary strategy.

CONCLUSION

This article argues that gender-transformative SRH literature from Francophone West Africa may not be visible due to indexing gaps, and to address this systemic exclusion, future efforts should include developing a specialized, multidisciplinary SRH database or a thematic collection within existing platforms that explicitly seeks to index Francophone West African research, ensuring that gender-transformative SRH scholarship from the region is discoverable alongside biomedical, social science, and policy-relevant work.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The authors confirm their contribution to the paper as follows: ML: Conceptualization; literature search; methodology; writing—original draft; review and editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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