

HRP Alliance in action:

Changing social norms through values clarification in Africa



A VCAT facilitator from IPAS takes participants through training norms during the first day of the VCAT training

The HRP Alliance supports research capacity strengthening by bringing together institutions conducting research in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). At the centre of the HRP Alliance are seven regional 'hubs' to empower and stimulate the research capacity of SRHR partner institutions, providing regional leadership through scholarships, training, fellowships and institutional mentorship. This story highlights the successful implementation of a values clarification and attitude transformation (VCAT) training by the regional hub based in Kenya, which has enhanced the capability of researchers and healthcare providers to engage with sensitive and critical issues in sexual and reproductive health, promoting a deeper understanding and respectful handling of diverse perspectives when conducting SRHR research.



Sexual and reproductive health involves respect, safety, and freedom from discrimination and violence, and it is **critically influenced** by gender norms, roles, expectations, and power dynamics. When these norms are harmful, it can lead to unconscious biases and even discriminatory actions. Addressing these norms is essential for improving **health and rights-based outcomes** and requires research, services, and policies that actively confront and transform inequitable gender power relations. In East and Southern Africa, there are examples where gender inequalities can lead to practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation, which adversely affect women's health and autonomy. Regional harmful social norms and practices, along with restrictive legal contexts and inequalities, **pose major challenges** to achieving healthy SRHR outcomes. Additionally, social expectations can discourage open discussions about **contraception** and reproductive choices, limiting access to family planning services.

The African Population & Health Research Center (APHRC) in Kenya, serving as the HRP Alliance hub for the African Region, has significantly advanced research capacity in sexual and reproductive

health and rights (SRHR) through the innovative implementation of a values clarification and attitude transformation (VCAT) training. Initiated in partnership with **lpas**, this training was strategically developed to address capacity building both internally among APHRC staff and externally across HRP Alliance partners and beyond. Hesborn Wao, principal investigator at the hub, emphasizes, "VCAT is essential for healthcare workers and researchers to critically evaluate their own values, ensuring these do not interfere with their research or service delivery."

Scaling and impact

Prior to offering this training, APHRC staff noticed several challenges hindering effective research and service delivery in SRHR. One of the primary concerns was the presence of personal and social biases that influenced the way researchers and healthcare providers approached sensitive SRHR topics, potentially affecting the objectivity of research. Cultural and ethical beliefs that researchers themselves might not even be aware of can lead to biased attitudes toward issues such as contraception, abortion and sexual health.



Recognizing these challenges, the hub at APHRC created a safe space for participants to critically reflect on their values, understand their biases that might hinder the research they engage in and develop the skills needed to navigate these complex issues with greater neutrality and sensitivity.

Peter Muriuki, coordinator of activities for the hub, explains the process: “the first training was among senior leadership from APHRC. Then, this was cascaded to other staff and then we started offering this externally, including researchers participating in a study led by HRP.” By engaging in these trainings, participants recognize how their values and attitudes might get in the way of producing evidence. They learn to recognise the basis for their attitudes and approach certain concepts with a new lens. In total, the trainings already counted 109 participants from APHRC and from HRP Alliance partners across the world.

Training dynamics and outcomes

The sessions are highly interactive and designed to challenge preconceived notions. Muriuki gives an example: “One interesting exercise involved a simulated scenario where a woman must make a life-altering decision about an abortion and at the end, she died. We then talked about who failed the woman. The conclusion was that everyone had a responsibility in the death of this woman. Instead of blaming the victim, they started to look inward.” Maryben Omollo, one of the VCAT participants, also reflected on this exercise: “One pivotal moment during the training was when we explored real-life case studies highlighting the struggles of women who have had abortions, the LGBTIQ+ community

and people living with HIV. Hearing these stories, combined with interactive discussions, made me reflect on the impact of stigma, bias and restrictive policies on their access to healthcare. It reinforced the urgent need for safe spaces and nonjudgmental services for these individuals.”

Moreover, VCAT promotes greater empathy and sensitivity among researchers. By exploring and discussing their values in an open environment, participants can better appreciate diverse perspectives and the complex realities of the topics they work with.

Broader implications and collaborations

The success of VCAT at APHRC shows that the hub not only enhances individual capabilities but also fosters partnerships for SRHR research across the region. A significant collaboration was established with the HRP Alliance hub at IRSS in Burkina Faso, enabling the delivery of the VCAT training in French for participants from Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire. Additionally, the hub partnered with two global VCAT consultants who contributed their international expertise to develop a structured curriculum for both in-person and virtual training. The training was then further integrated into the [APHRC virtual academy](#), allowing it to be delivered as a blended course. For this, the facilitators developed an online learning approach that integrates interactive activities, self-paced modules, and live training sessions to enhance the accessibility and scalability of the VCAT training.

The VCAT training also played a crucial role in supporting research teams involved in the [Cognitive Testing of a Survey Instrument to assess Sexual Practices, Behaviours, and other Health-related](#)

“ The training equipped me with the right tools to facilitate safe, open conversations and advocate for dignified, inclusive SRHR services that recognise the unique struggles of different individuals. ” Maryben Omollo



VCAT training participants match common terms used in SRHR to their correct meaning

Outcomes (CoTSIS) study. “The training equipped me with the right tools to facilitate safe, open conversations and advocate for dignified, inclusive SRHR services that recognise the unique struggles of different individuals. It has also helped me train healthcare providers, educators, and policymakers to approach these issues with greater empathy and understanding,” says Omollo.

Looking ahead, APHRC plans to continue these training sessions as part of its broader mission to strengthen research capacity by exploring researchers’ values and attitudes in SRHR for improved research quality. This will include further collaborations with international partners and continued focus on high-impact research and policy engagement activities. Omollo emphasises the training’s importance: “This type

of training is critical for researchers and professionals because it challenges deep-seated biases and encourages evidence-based, rights-driven approaches to SRHR. Without addressing personal and systemic biases, we risk leaving behind those who need these services the most.”

The VCAT training at the hub at APHRC in Kenya exemplifies how targeted educational interventions can profoundly transform institutional approaches to health and research. By addressing the foundational values affecting SRHR, the hub has not only enhanced its internal capabilities but has also contributed significantly to the regional discourse on SRHR. The ongoing success of the VCAT initiative is a testament to the power of thoughtful, well-implemented training programs in catalysing real change.

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