

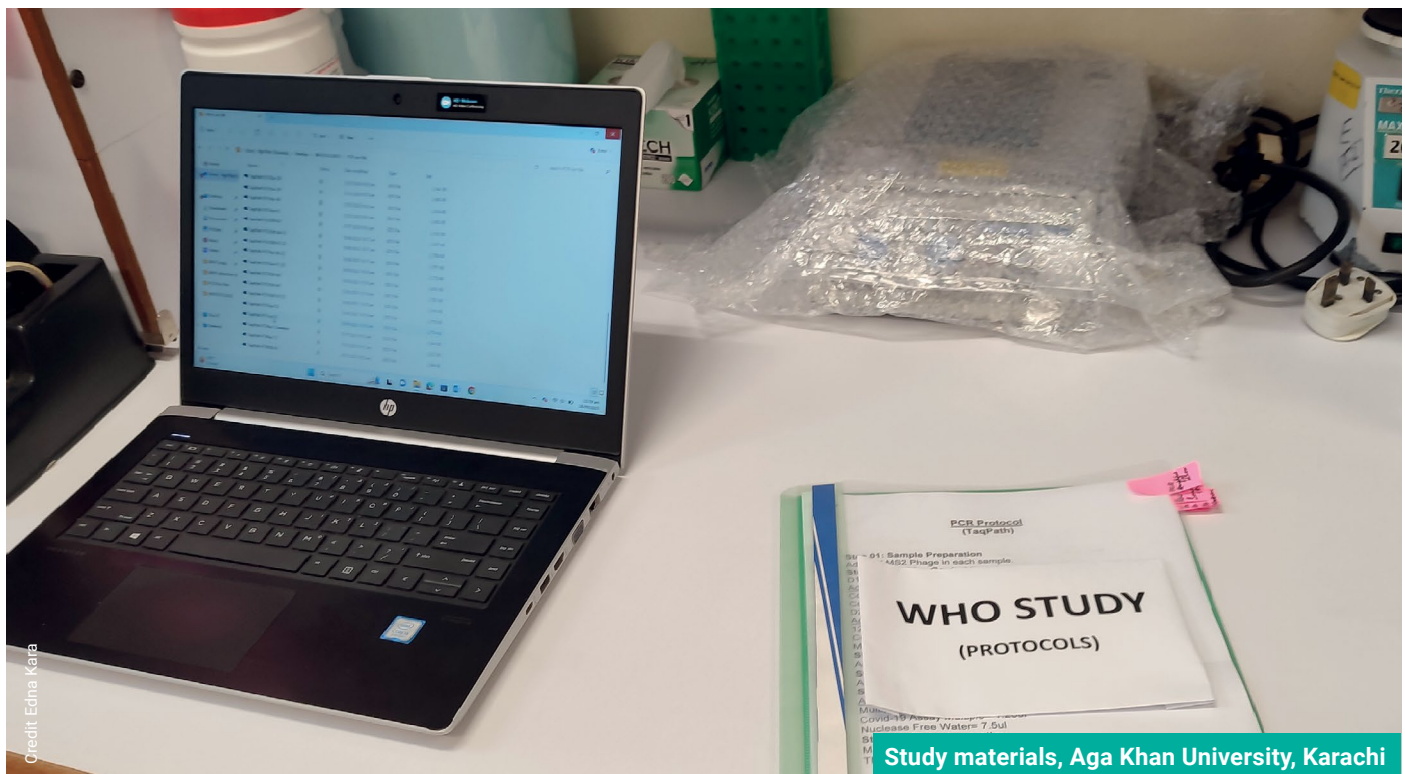
HRP Alliance in action:

Adapting to the unknown through partnerships
in the Eastern Mediterranean



Debriefing Session at AKUH during a WHO/HRP team visit. Karachi, Pakistan, September 2023

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 tells the success of the Eastern Mediterranean hub by piloting a direct collaboration with hospitals, proving their quick adaptability, strong sense of collaboration and deep interest in understanding the effects of COVID-19 on pregnant women.



Study materials, Aga Khan University, Karachi

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The Department of Community Health Sciences of the Aga Khan University (AKU) in Karachi, Pakistan serves as the Eastern Mediterranean regional hub for the HRP Alliance, focusing on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) research capacity building. This hub, with support from the HRP Alliance, has pioneered a direct collaboration with hospitals and training local researchers on SRHR matters, including groundbreaking research on the effects of COVID-19 on pregnancies. The hub's success can be attributed to their rapid adaptation of strategy when the pandemic broke out. They quickly shifted their attention both to operate under unknown and difficult circumstances as well as understanding how this virus affects the health of pregnant women.

“We started during COVID-19, and everything was

new, so we quickly transitioned to online platforms to develop and deliver courses. I prepared and reviewed sessions, conducted literature searches, and collaborated with others to ensure we addressed critical topics in research and reproductive health effectively,” said Sarah Saleem, Head of the Population and Reproductive Health Section of the Department of Community Health Sciences at AKU and HRP Alliance hub Principal Investigator (PI).

Addressing challenges through collaboration

Simultaneously, the initiative fostered direct collaboration between researchers and local hospitals. At that time, studies showed severe challenges to maternal health as lockdowns and



prioritization of COVID-19 care led to [declines in facility-based births and postnatal visits in Pakistan](#).

Financial barriers forced lower-income women toward under-equipped private hospitals, while fear of infection and movement restrictions delayed care-seeking. Hospitals thus faced two prominent challenges: first, a lack of human and material resources to provide adequate maternal health care and second, there was little to no knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on pregnant women.

The hub addressed this gap by organizing targeted capacity-building efforts, such as qualitative and quantitative research training, tailored to the needs of healthcare practitioners and emerging researchers. These courses equipped participants with the skills needed to undertake methodologically sound studies, analyse data and translate these data into groundbreaking publications which are the cornerstone to improved policies.

Learning and innovations

One of the key learnings from the work of the hub was the value of leveraging digital platforms for training and collaboration. By offering online courses, including manuscript and research proposal writing, the hub ensured inclusivity, enabling young researchers from remote areas and other Eastern Mediterranean countries to participate. Furthermore, the emphasis on mentorship allowed trainees to connect directly with experienced researchers, facilitating knowledge transfer and fostering a community of practice. Topics usually marked as sensitive and taboo in the region were discussed and explained from an evidence-based perspective. The concepts were introduced, following World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines and definitions, and then they would go in depth on how to conduct research around these issues, including training on ethical data collection.

Another critical lesson was the need for cultural sensitivity when addressing topics such as abortion and contraception. Through careful stakeholder engagement and a focus on health outcomes, the hub was able to shift conversations and encourage understanding that all SRHR issues are vital for the health of their populations.

A model for global adaptation

The impact of these efforts has been multi-fold. Over 100 researchers in the region have completed advanced research training since the hub began activities. Among them was Sheikh Irfan: “In the first years of my PhD, it was extremely challenging to commence and conduct field research in Pakistan due to COVID-19 and related lockdowns, but I still made progress by writing and publishing the study protocols, including the one for a Cochrane review. The HRP Alliance collaboration led me to achieve something completely new in the context of my local setting, focusing on the feasibility of [FAST-M intervention for early recognition and management of maternal sepsis in a low resource setting](#); something which apparently had never before been done in Asia.” Due to the close collaborations with the hospital, Irfan’s work was quickly taken up: “Consequently, the hospital administration decided to include FAST-M tools in the files of all maternal patients for early recognition and management of maternal sepsis which is considered a major achievement of our work,” he said.

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WHO/HRP staff meeting with country team at the Princess Zehra Pavillion, Aga Khan University Hospital, Karachi

Furthermore hospital collaborations have led to actionable insights into COVID-19's effects on pregnant women, influencing healthcare practices during a health emergency. "We contacted all public hospitals in the region and looked at their capacity for COVID-19 testing. We selected six to seven hospitals in Pakistan, established protocols on the tests, did the groundwork, and brought them to the standard of research. We provided hospital staff with training in ethics, data entry operations, and more," said Saleem. She shared her gratitude in developing these linkages, seeing local staff's enthusiasm to understand the topic better. Together, they figured out innovative solutions to local challenges.

The hub's collaborative model, together with its

adaptive spirit to the COVID-19 pandemic, has set a precedent for integrating academic and clinical expertise, proving that partnership with local medical personnel is key to addressing pressing SRHR challenges.

The hub's approach, together with the strong support of the HRP Alliance, demonstrates a scalable model for research capacity strengthening that can be adapted across regions. The combination of hospital-academic collaboration, digital training platforms and a mentorship-driven framework offers a replicable solution to address similar gaps in different settings. The success of the hub based in Pakistan underscores the transformative potential of innovative partnerships in advancing SRHR research globally.

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