Center of Expertise on Women’s Health and Empowerment

Letter of Intent

April 9, 2009

Participating Schools: This letter was developed by faculty from UCSF, UCLA, UCB, UCI, UCSD and UCD.

Lead Campus: UCSF

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Additional governance will be provided by an executive council. Proposed executive council members starred in the appendix.

Introduction: Advances in women’s health globally have been impeded by female poverty, limited access to education and economic opportunities, gender bias and discrimination, unjust laws, and insufficient state accountability. These forces intersect to restrict access to vital women’s health services and to the information women need to better their own lives. Investing in women’s health and empowerment produces surplus benefits for their children, families, communities and nations.

Objective: To build a Center of Expertise founded on the synergy of human rights, women’s empowerment and the health sciences that will work towards building a world where women and girls are empowered and healthy, by addressing the causes and consequences of gender and health disparities, as well as seeking to empower women globally to advocate for and achieve the highest attainable standard of health.

Methods: We will achieve this objective through: scientific discovery, clinical innovation and improved information and communication technology; the application of empowerment models and a human rights and social justice framework to women’s health programs and policies; transdisciplinary, collaborative, and global partnerships to improve the quality of women’s health care, particularly for poor and vulnerable women; training and inspiring a new generation of health leaders, with special emphasis on women leaders; and informing policy and practice through research and scholarship.

Areas of Focus: We will focus our initial efforts on assuring safe motherhood, reducing violence against women, improving family planning and reproductive technologies, advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights, and eliminating environmental threats to women’s health.

Training Component: One and Two-year Masters Program, Sandwich Program, Women Leaders Program.

Long-term Goals: By 2021, a decade after the creation of the CoE, we expect to achieve the following long-term goals in the geographic areas in which we and our graduates work, including California:

1. Reduce by three quarters maternal mortality and morbidity;
2. Reduce gender disparities so that women are equal partners in defining problems and solutions at the household, community and national levels;
3. Halve the number of new HIV and STI infections in women;
4. Identify and eliminate environmental contaminants that harm women and their children; and
5. Reduce by three quarters the number of women suffering from domestic violence and coercive sex.
**Vision:** We see a world where women and girls are educated and empowered; where every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, and every sexual experience is non-coercive; where women and girls can protect themselves from diseases across the lifespan, benefit from advances in science and technology, take advantage of economic opportunities, grow up free from discrimination and violence, and be equal partners in decision-making at the household, community, national, and global levels.

**Mission:** The mission of this CoE is to promote justice, quality, and innovation for women’s health and well-being. We seek to eliminate barriers to optimal health for women in California and around the world, and to advance the status of women within their sociocultural contexts. Men and children benefit from and can contribute to improvements in women’s health. Our mission will be achieved through: i) scientific discovery, clinical innovation and improved information and communication technology; ii) the application of empowerment models and a human rights and social justice framework to women’s health programs and policies; iii) transdisciplinary, collaborative, and global partnerships to improve the quality of health care, particularly for poor and vulnerable women; iv) training and inspiring a new generation of health leaders, with special emphasis on women leaders; and v) informing policy and practice through research and scholarship.

**Rationale:** “Being born female is dangerous to your health.”

Numerous factors—environmental, sociocultural, political and economic—affect women’s health outcomes. The excess health burden for women negatively impacts the health of families and communities. Poverty, limited access to education and economic opportunities, gender bias and discrimination, unjust laws, insufficient state accountability, lack of political decision-making power, and social inequities intersect to restrict access to vital women’s health services and information. Investment in women produces surplus benefits for their children and families, communities and nations. For this reason, promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment is one of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and is also considered central to the success of several other MDG goals (maternal health, reducing child mortality and HIV/AIDS). Nevertheless, few existing programs focused on improving women’s health merge the health sciences (medicine, public health, global health) with the empowerment sciences (law, sociology, public policy, etc.) to achieve long-lasting and extensive gains in women’s health while training future leaders.

To advance women’s health worldwide, we are proposing a Center of Expertise (CoE) focused on Women’s Health and Empowerment, which will actively seek to integrate health and empowerment sciences. Our CoE will comprehensively address the causes and consequences of gender and health disparities, as well as seek to empower women globally to advocate for and achieve the highest attainable standard of health. We welcome the opportunity provided by the proposed UC School of Global Health to build a robust transdisciplinary academic community enriched by diverse external partnerships worldwide, which is fully engaged in action-oriented scholarship, research, and education aimed at advancing global women’s health.

**What is Women’s Empowerment?** In essence, empowerment is the ability to act on choices. This involves three related processes which are measurable and can be the focus of interventions. The first involves addressing the causes of disempowerment and overcoming these (e.g., reducing violence against women, eliminating discriminatory laws governing marriage and inheritance, reducing constraining gender role attitudes). The second involves improving women’s access to and control over current and future resources (e.g., removing barriers to education and work opportunities, including women in political decision-making and political processes). The third aspect of empowerment is using improved access to resources and decision-making to achieve individual and collective well-being and health.
Our CoE will help students learn how to link empowerment and health programs to achieve greater and more rapid health returns than either approach could accomplish alone. We will also develop and implement a research program that will help to set future priorities and give guidance to policy-makers globally including in California. While this CoE aims to address women’s health across the lifespan, initially we will focus on five specific issues that have the greatest impact on the health, wellbeing, and productivity of women worldwide. According to the scientific literature, the most pressing needs of women are in the areas of sexual and reproductive health, which shape much of their life trajectories.

1. Assuring safe motherhood and reducing maternal mortality
2. Reducing violence against women
3. Improving family planning and reproductive technologies
4. Advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights
5. Eliminating environmental threats to women’s health

The excess health burden for women derives from unequal gender power relations, socioeconomic disparities, and behavioral risk factors. Many of the basic tools to address women’s health problems exist, but the political will and resources do not. Refining these tools and developing approaches to scale-up and sustain their implementation through resource development and empowering women will be core tasks of this CoE.

To accomplish this, new strategies are needed to bring these tools to women and communities, building upon past progress and providing new opportunities in training, research and policy. As required by international instruments, each state must respect, protect and fulfill the right to health. By emphasizing health as a human rights obligation, this CoE will empower individuals and groups to make demands upon work with states thereby catalyzing action and advancing the goal of improved health.

By focusing on the need to prioritize women’s rights and empowerment, this CoE is uniquely poised to engender the societal-level changes and sustainability that will yield long-term improvements in health and wellbeing.

Innovative Strategies:

- Integrating human rights and women’s empowerment with the health sciences
  - Exploring the interplay of biological, behavioral, psychological, social and structural determinants that contribute to health outcomes across the course of a woman’s life, recognizing how each life stage influences the next and how burdens can accumulate.

- Developing new knowledge
  - Creating, adapting and transferring knowledge and technologies to diverse communities.
  - Developing evaluation indicators that measure how empowerment processes affect health outcomes.
  - Capitalizing on the emerging technologies in molecular genetics, epigenetics, and proteomics to design innovative and economical diagnostics and therapeutics that are easily accessible to women.

- Implementing innovations
  - Designing and evaluating translational, community participatory programs and strategies aimed at eliminating women’s health disparities.
  - Creating more effective communication and collaboration across disciplines and with communities by providing multiple forums to examine the dynamics of empowerment and health.

- Promoting collaboration
Providing technical assistance and consultation to other School of Global Health CoEs in the areas of health disparities, social determinants of health, gender analysis and the impact of health and empowerment strategies.

Mobilizing a variety of public and private partners to enhance their sustainable contributions to the health and well-being of women and their families

**Training the next generation**
- Recruiting and training the next generation of leaders in women’s health, with a focus on women, as well as increasing professional and systemic capacity through training and technical assistance.
- Offering transdisciplinary and mentored experiences to students to inspire them to develop and test new ideas, and lead to innovative programs to advance the goal of gender equality, empowerment, and women’s health and well-being.

**How will this CoE address the five barriers to sexual and reproductive health and empowerment?**

**Assuring Safe Motherhood:** Maternal mortality and morbidity are among the most glaring examples of global disparities. The CoE will test approaches to reduce maternal disability and assure maternal survival. Advances in maternal health not only benefit women but also vastly improve neonatal and child health outcomes.

- **Explore** the medical and sociocultural barriers to implementing evidence-based strategies and technologies that reduce maternal mortality and morbidity, and
- **Develop** approaches to scale up the implementation of strategies, using empowerment models.

**Reducing Violence against Women:** Gender-based violence affects about one in four women worldwide at some point in their lives. Not only is it a gross violation of women’s human rights and in extreme cases causes death, but it also has negative short-term and long-term consequences for women’s health and wellbeing.

- **Learn** about the root causes and effects of the continuum of violence against women (from domestic abuse to rape to sexual trafficking), and the links to gender disempowerment, and
- **Build and implement** programs that incorporate legal, political, medical and sociological approaches to reducing violence against women.

**Improving Family Planning and Reproductive Technologies:** An important worldwide need is to improve access to and quality of family planning services, as well as to advance research in reproductive health technologies to provide better choices in contraception, abortion, and infertility treatments, with a special emphasis on the underserved. Students and faculty together will:

- **Analyze** the legal, social, structural, ethical and medical aspects of contraceptive access and choice and its intersection with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STI), and
- **Work** directly with host governments, NGOs and family planning investigators to conduct research, design policy evaluations, and participate in local and international training in family planning.

**Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights:** Economically and educationally disempowered women are less able to negotiate safer sex, leave an abusive or violent relationship, and avoid exchanging sex for money or material goods. Violations of women’s sexual and reproductive rights increase their vulnerability to HIV/STI infection, and their HIV/STI status increases their vulnerability to rights violations. Gender inequality, stigma and discrimination are recognized drivers of the global AIDS epidemic.

- **Create** programs that ensure healthy sexual development and fulfillment, equitable and responsible relationships, freedom from harmful practices related to sexuality, and reduce HIV/STI transmission
- **Study** how women’s empowerment influences the potential efficacy and acceptability of microbicides
and other preventative technologies, leads to greater prevention of mother-to-child transmission, and increases screening for and treatment of cervical cancer.

Eliminating Environmental Threats to Women’s Health: Awareness about the consequences of environmental contaminants on women's health, is rapidly advancing. Students will participate in research that examines the disproportionate exposure of and effect on women to common chemicals in the environment, and how women’s empowerment and other social factors can help to modify these risks.

Develop programs to eliminate a broad spectrum of environmental threats, in particular to pregnancy and fetal development, with an emphasis on air and water pollution, including indoor air pollution from cooking stoves and contaminated drinking water in the developing world, and toxic chemicals in air, water, food and beverages, and personal care products worldwide.

Training Component:

One and Two Year Masters Programs – We envision admitting students who hold a prior master’s degree, a bachelor’s degree with considerable related experience, or a professional degree who want to advance their skills and develop a career in women’s health and empowerment. The one-year masters program will be geared towards mid-career professionals, and doctoral and professional students (e.g. medicine, nursing, law) while the two-year program offers more in-depth and specialized study. Students in the one and two-year programs will be required to carry out field research for three and nine months, respectively, leading up to a thesis project.

Sandwich Program – Highly trained individuals from international partner institutions in resource-poor countries will have the opportunity to access the training and research opportunities at the UC School of Global Health through the Sandwich Program. Masters and doctoral students from partner institutions abroad will undertake three months to one year of intensive didactic and experiential learning in Women’s Health and Empowerment. Students successfully completing the program will earn a certificate. This program will build on existing Sandwich programs such as the current Kenya Medical Research-UCSF Training Program.

Women Leaders Program - The CoE is committed to promoting women’s leadership and closing global gender gaps. We will strive to increase the participation of women internationally in program leadership, policy making, and political participation. Building on the successful elements of prior international leadership programs funded by foundations such as Fogarty International Center at NIH, Ford, MAC AIDS Fund, Hewlett and Packard, the Women Leaders Program will provide women from California and international partner organizations with the opportunity to increase their knowledge of reproductive health, gender equity and empowerment theory, to enhance their advocacy skills and to advance their leadership through training and mentorship, international workshops, and field experience.

Core Competencies: Students and researchers affiliated with the CoE will be expected to master the following core competencies:

- An understanding of the complex link between gender equity, social disparities, and health
- Familiarity with and ability to use international instruments to promote women’s right to health
- An understanding of the major causes of women’s morbidity and mortality globally
- The ability to apply and develop technological interventions to improve women’s health
- Familiarity with global governance and macroeconomics
- An understanding of the impact of religion, politics, structural inequality, and policy on women’s health
- The ability to incorporate this knowledge into program planning, implementation, and policy
- The ability to analyze the impact on women’s health of existing and emerging biological research
- Skills in advocacy, negotiation, and leadership
- The ability to measure both women’s health and gender equity outcomes
- The ability to assess the quality and impact of interventions, and translation of findings into policy
- Mastery of proposal, grant, report and budget writing
Courses will be co-taught by faculty from multiple disciplines to provide a holistic and synergistic foundation for students’ engagement with these complex and intersecting areas of study. Students will be guided by our core team of leading experts and will be challenged to build upon their coursework through collaborative group exercises. Students will be required to select faculty advisors from two or more academic disciplines and an additional advisor from their field site.

**Field Experience:** Students will apply skills and strategies in a professional setting through an individualized field experience. Field placements will be arranged through existing and new partners, tailored to students’ areas of interest. Examples of possible field placements include:

- Reforming reproductive health curriculum in Vietnamese medical schools to improve clinical care.
- Integrating microfinance, family planning and HIV care in Kenya to improve health outcomes for families.
- Planning public-private partnerships in reproductive health in California to improve access to quality family planning services, and reduce teen pregnancy.
- Participating in a RCT of the non-pneumatic anti-shock garment to reduce maternal mortality in Zambia and Zimbabwe in pregnancy.

**Outcomes:** This COE will have short-term objectives and long-term goals. Our long-term targets are linked to the MDGs. We will test innovative approaches, scale up evidence-based strategies, and contribute to the increasing general body of knowledge on the linkages between women’s health and empowerment.

- To support the creation of rights-based policy, community and structural interventions that will improve women’s health as measured by their health outcomes, impact on gender equity and empowerment.
- To develop technologies and other interventions to improve women’s health as measured by their health outcomes, impact on gender equity and contribution to women’s empowerment.
- To identify the facilitators and obstacles to implementation of evidence-based interventions, and improve the knowledge base on how to scale up proven pilots of interventions.
- To increase workforce capacity and access to care through training programs, curriculum reform, information technology and skills transfer to all health care professionals and health workers worldwide.

**Our short-term targets are:**

- To graduate students who become leaders in the field of women’s health and empowerment
- To equip graduates with the skills to implement change in research, policy and practice
- To provide consultation to other CoEs and external partners in the area gender equity/empowerment.

**In 2021, a decade after the creation of the CoE, we expect to achieve the following long-term goals in the geographic areas in which we and our graduates, work:**

- Reduce by three quarters maternal mortality and morbidity;
- Reduce gender disparities so that women are equal partners in defining problems and solutions at the household, community and national levels;
- Halve the number of new HIV and STI infections in women;
- Identify and eliminate environmental contaminants that harm women and their children; and
- Reduce by three quarters the number of women suffering from violence and coercive sex.

**Benefit to people and economy of California:** The CoE will attract to California a sizeable number of high-quality students, professionals and researchers from all over the world. Our graduates will add diversity and quality to the workforce in California who will address the health and empowerment issues of women from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds in the state as well as globally. The CoE will create new research opportunities and innovative programmatic responses in California, with neighboring countries, and in numerous countries-of-origin as represented within California through its diverse population.