

Empowering African Women Leaders: Insights from the Global Health Leadership Fellowship training in Cape Town

Written by: Vuyokazi Mdlungu and Kamla Ross McGregor



Fellows and organizers after an exciting talk with Professor Nomafrench Mbombo (who sat in the middle dressed in fuzia), the current Minister of Health and Wellness for Western Cape, in South Africa.

The Women in Global Health Leadership Fellowship (WGHLF), part of the Health Futures South Africa project in the Faculty of Health Sciences, kicked off its inaugural in-person week-long leadership training in the vibrant city of Cape Town, South Africa from March 10 – 15th, 2024.

This training is part of a hybrid year-long fellowship specially designed to elevate the leadership skills of talented African women who are public health professionals and passionate about promoting gender equity in global health systems. Timed shortly after International Women’s Day, the 12 remarkable fellows from Kenya and South Africa immersed themselves in dialogue about global health and gender equity, introspective and collaborative exercises, health system site visits, presentations by esteemed guest speakers and invaluable networking opportunities.

The twelve fellows kicked off their year-long fellowship journey in September 2023 by engaging in weekly online sessions on global health, gender policy and knowledge translation. The fellows hail from diverse backgrounds and work as doctors, health practitioners, administrators, and researchers in government, academia, and health systems.

In Cape Town fellows worked collaboratively to draw a picture of the Kenyan and South African health systems and determine areas in the systems that were gender-neutral, gender-blind and gender transformative. Fellows explored similarities and differences in each health system along with strategies for overcoming barriers faced by women leaders in health care and research spaces and public policy.



Kenyan fellows working on a collaborative training exercise.

In between training sessions, the fellows spent a day touring the Michael Mapongwana Community Health Centre in Khayelitsha & Eastern Sub-district, one of the largest townships in South Africa. Here, the fellows witnessed firsthand the pivotal role of integrated community health services in addressing diverse population needs.

Reflecting on her experience, Rachel Ngugi, one of the fellows from Kenya, stated she “was impressed by the presence of mental health services at a level three [community health centre] facility and specialists [who were present] to ... see mental health clients ... in a government-run facility.” From there, they ventured to Groote Schuur Hospital, a renowned state-of-the-art teaching facility celebrated for its pioneering contributions to healthcare such as successfully conducting the world's first heart transplant in 1967.

Through the collaborative activities and health site visits, fellows observed striking parallels in the challenges confounding the healthcare systems of both countries.

Charlyn Goliath, a fellow from South Africa, emphasized this sentiment when she stated “We are all sharing the same challenges within the health system. How we are organized as a health system is different, but both are dependent on partnerships across sectors. Community health workers are the foundation of both countries. Strong leadership and governance are key to support the health system in both countries.”



A collaborative drawing done by the South African fellows of the health system in South Africa. The actors, policies, and spaces and how they connect to gender equity and global health concepts and theory.

The guest speakers featured throughout the week were prominent global health leaders who epitomised the idea of being locally relevant and globally connected. Dr Precious Matsoso, the former Director General of the Department of Health, shared her remarkable journey from a young student passionate about chemistry who went on to study Pharmacology and later became a prominent figure in global health.

Through her quiet leadership style, she built a solid coalition of medical professionals that transformed drug regulation and management in South Africa. Her exceptional achievements garnered international recognition, propelling her to senior leadership roles at the World Health Organization and she is now the co-chair of a global body that is drafting a future pandemic treaty for the WHO. Matsoso candidly shared her triumphs and challenges while crediting her mother as her greatest mentor.

Minister Nomafrench Mbombo, another guest speaker and the current Minister of Health and Wellness for Western Cape, shared her inspiring journey from humble beginnings in Mdantsane, the second largest township in South Africa, to seizing critical study opportunities that led to a PhD in gender and human rights.

She worked in academia and local health departments before becoming involved in politics and using her background as a health advocate and researcher to shape Western Cape's health system. Additionally, the fellows gained valuable insights from two other pioneering women leaders, Professor Lydia Cairncross, Head of Department: Department of Surgery, and Professor Salome Maswime, Head of Global Surgery, both at the University of Cape Town. All the speakers emphasized the importance of claiming one's space and harnessing personal power to drive meaningful change within their respective health systems.



Professor Lydia Cairncross, Head of Department: Department of Surgery, and Professor Salome Maswime, Head of Global Surgery, both at the University of Cape Town leading a discussion.

Throughout the week, Faculty and staff encouraged the fellows to be open, honest and to take ownership of their learning experience, which led to rich and diverse exchanges of perspectives while maintaining a collaborative learning space. The training culminated in fellows pitching innovative ideas for projects aimed at addressing gender equity and global health challenges within their respective organizations.

Additionally, fellows had the opportunity to engage in their first one-on-one meeting with their assigned professional mentor. Hermes Gichane, a fellow from Kenya, reflected on this experience, stating “My mentor, Dr Anita Parbhoo, she was such a breath of fresh air, like meeting someone the first time, the first time you even hear about them and connecting so fast was such an amazing experience.”

While many fellows were strangers at the onset of the fellowship, they forged deep bonds and connections by the end of the week. The group's WhatsApp chat overflowed with snapshots capturing moments of camaraderie, from mingling with esteemed guest speakers, faculty,

and staff to exploring various health sites and indulging in after-hours adventures across the picturesque Cape Peninsula. These lively interactions extended to spirited dinner outings, fostering a sense of collegiality and mutual support among the participants.



Charlyn Goliath, Nontuthuko Khumalo, and Tumelo Assegaai, fellows from South Africa sharing a meal.

“The different guest speakers were amazing and an inspiration to me, the hospital visits were benchmarking opportunities to what can be improved in the Kenyan health system, I gained a lot of new knowledge and content from the different lectures...[and] understand myself better and ... [how to] improve my leadership.” (Kenyan fellow, provided anonymously in the post-evaluation survey).

The WGHLF is run in collaboration between the Centre for Global Health at the University of Toronto’s Dalla Lana School of Public Health, Moi University’s School of Public Health in Kenya, and the University of Cape Town School of Public Health in South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation.