

Equity-Informed Principles for Contraceptive Access Research

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Research can play a pivotal role in ensuring contraceptive access policy is evidence-informed, effective, and promotes universal, equitable access for all people. Yet, barriers often impede the use of evidence in policymaking, including differing priorities among researchers and policymakers and ineffective translation and timely dissemination of research findings. Scientific evidence is one of several factors that shapes contraceptive access policy; however, the field lacks a shared understanding of the policy-relevant research needed to drive action.

When considering the policy-relevant research gaps for contraceptive access, how the research is conducted can be just as significant as the research design and conduct. This is especially true in the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) sphere, given the history of research injustice in this field. Unethical testing of the birth control pill without proper informed consent on mentally ill Massachusetts women and Puerto Rican women is one notable example.

The [Coalition to Expand Contraceptive Access](#) (CECA) led a collaborative process to create a Priority Roadmap for Policy-Ready Contraceptive Research (“the Roadmap”) to identify the research needed in the next decade to advance research that can inform proactive, domestic contraceptive access policy, consistent with a vision of sexual and reproductive health equity and wellbeing for all. Based on their own research and experiences, the Research Roadmap Workgroup crafted equity-informed key principles and best practices for research conduct that centers reproductive justice and human rights.

These five principles serve as a guide for the conduct of contraceptive access research that promotes sexual and reproductive health equity, wellbeing, and justice:

1. Ground the research in a holistic vision of sexual and reproductive health that centers justice, equity, autonomy, and choice.

All aspects of contraceptive access research design and conduct should have a fundamental basis in the human right of all people, regardless of age, gender, race, and other intersectional identities, to realize their highest level of sexual and reproductive health based on their own self-determined goals. Realizing this vision involves dismantling all barriers to reproductive autonomy (the power to decide about and control matters related to contraceptive use, pregnancy and childbearing¹) and choice, including systemic racism and discrimination. Incorporating this principle into contraceptive access research requires honest and open-minded learning and reflection on the ways our research fails to uphold this vision for SRHE for all.

2. Interrogate and reevaluate the research practices that have guided us.

Equity-informed research requires that we critically examine and confront research practices and structures rooted in systemic racism and oppression. These practices consistently, and often subtly, surface in all areas of research practice and discourse, including how we define “research” and “researcher,” the evidence and expertise we validate and uplift, the theoretical frameworks we base research on, the questions we ask, and how we design, measure, interpret, and communicate research findings. Researchers have a responsibility to interrogate traditional research framings, confront personal biases regarding how research ought to be conducted, and reimagine a research approach that is based in human rights and centers community voices, priorities, and power.

Reevaluating the research practices that guide us may entail acknowledging that knowledge is socially constructed, and science is not objective; broadening our definition as “researchers” to include knowledge generators outside of academia; shifting the language we use to refer to people and communities away from damaging frames like “vulnerable” or “marginalized”; and actively pursuing dissemination opportunities outside

¹ Upadhyay UD, Dworkin SL, Weitz TA, Foster DG. Development and Validation of a Reproductive Autonomy Scale. *Studies in Family Planning*. 2014;45(1):19-41. doi:10.1111/j.1728-4465.2014.00374.x

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of traditional academic publishing to promote sharing and translation of findings for communities and other stakeholders, including policymakers. The work that has been undertaken to decolonize research with indigenous communities provides an example of how research methods can be questioned and modified in the pursuit of justice.^{2,3}

3. Honor and embrace communities as equitable partners throughout the research process.

Contraceptive access research often involves engaging a range of stakeholders, including community partners who collaborate to carry out research, individuals involved in research as participants, and people experiencing the issue being studied, even if not directly involved in the research. Community stakeholders offer researchers valuable expertise as they share their time, skills, talents, experiences, and perspectives. Equity-informed research must authentically and openly honor, embrace, and affirm community stakeholders as experts of their own lives, experiences, and communities.

Researchers honor and embrace communities when we approach stakeholders with humility and curiosity; foster ongoing, collaborative relationships; integrate opportunities for stakeholders to co-create questions, knowledge and solutions; and demonstrate the value of stakeholders' time by compensating research participants and equitably dividing resources and funding among partner organizations. This means that partners must be engaged as early as possible in the planning and visioning process, ideally in ongoing relationships that precede the research. Strategic research investments are necessary to ensure sufficient funding for researchers to meaningfully engage and support stakeholders' involvement in research.

4. Understand and reflect the impact of the historical, sociocultural, political, and economic contexts that influence the lived experiences of community members.

As researchers, it is necessary to understand the context of the communities where we conduct research and where our research findings will have an impact more broadly. Recognizing and honoring the history, culture, values, politics and other neighborhood contexts can contribute to the conduct of thoughtful and respectful research inquiry that centers the full lives and experiences of individuals and communities. Researchers must educate themselves on the historical injustices communities have faced, and the impacts of systemic racism and discrimination, in both its past and present contexts. This may involve conducting thorough background research prior to approaching community stakeholders, investing in long-term, meaningful and reciprocal relationships with community partners and stakeholders, and talking with community stakeholders about how research can help advance community priorities.

5. Design actionable research and use the results to impact the lives of individuals and communities through changes in systems, policies, and practice.

Research has often been used to problematize, place blame, and perpetuate stereotypes against individuals and communities. This approach has failed to hold systems rooted in racism and discrimination accountable for creating and sustaining unjust and oppressive policies and practices. Equity-informed research necessitates generating actionable research findings to drive policy towards creating equitable systems of care for all people, as opposed to creating further harm. Actionable research centers the experiences, priorities and needs of communities and prioritizes sharing findings with the community. Researchers should support translation of research findings into impactful, sustainable policy and practice change for the communities that are impacted by the research topic, ensuring that research findings are accessible to decision-makers and advocates.

² Datta R. Decolonizing both researcher and research and its effectiveness in Indigenous research. *Research Ethics*. 2018;14(2):1-24.

³ Evans M, Miller A, Hutchinson PJ, Dingwall C. Decolonizing Research Practice: Indigenous Methodologies, Aboriginal Methods, and Knowledge/Knowing. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*. ; 2014:179-194. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199811755.013.019