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Letter to the Editor

# Applying a socioecological model lens to improve equity and inclusion in global mental health conferences

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**Abstract** *Researchers from low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) face numerous barriers, such as visa issues and financial constraints, that prevent them from participating in global mental health conferences. In September 2022, key researchers from countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, or Bangladesh, countries that are common targets for global mental health interventions, could also not attend the 6th World Congress of the World Association of Cultural Psychiatry (WACP) held in the Netherlands. In our submission, we apply a socioecological model (3-I-model) lens to improve equity and inclusion in global mental health conferences like the WACP Congress.*

**Keywords:** Global Mental Health, Socioecological Model, Equity and Inclusion, Representation, Low- and middle-income countries

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**Dear Editor-in-Chief,**

Having been virtual for months during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many conferences returned from online gatherings to in-person meetings in 2022. Researchers from around the world could finally gather in the

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same location again to discuss scientific interests and advances. But as people celebrated the return to making connections and exchanging ideas over coffee and biscuits, it was clear that, in one respect, not much had changed - not every researcher was able to be in the room. Researchers from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) faced the same barriers and restrictions that they have confronted for many years, but which seem to have intensified, e.g., due to accessibility of mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations, in the months since the world, at least for the most privileged, 'opened up' following the restrictions of the pandemic. These barriers include long delays and extortionate costs in obtaining visas as well as outright denials (Alayande, 2023; Hawkes, 2018; Madhukar, 2022; Sidney, 2019; Tsanni, 2023; Vervoort, 2019), prohibitive conference fees, high costs of flights and accommodation (which have also escalated since the pandemic), challenges around accessing scholarships, limited opportunities for virtual participation and, even when this was offered, digital exclusion (Velin et al., 2021).

The organizers of the 24th International AIDS Conference held in Montreal in July 2022 recently announced that they would re-evaluate how they organized international conferences after many key researchers from countries with high numbers of HIV and AIDS cases and expertise in HIV research and care were unable to attend due to visa delays and denials (Serebrin, 2022). However, this is far from an isolated example of global health. In September 2022, key researchers from countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, or Bangladesh, countries that are common targets for global mental health interventions, could also not attend the 6th World Congress of the World Association of Cultural Psychiatry (WACP) held in the Netherlands. The researchers' absence led to numerous cancellations of workshops, symposia, and presentations and meant that, in the words of one attendee, "People from the Global North talk to people from the Global North about people and communities from the Global South." A comment which received enthusiastic applause from the audience.

This letter intends to urge WACP membership, board, and conference organizers, as well as those considering attending future conferences, to move beyond applause to identify and implement specific actions that have the potential to increase equitable participation during the next World Congress of the WACP. Actions should aim to not only improve the participation of researchers from the Global South but also to increase the diversity of participants in general (e.g., in terms of gender, people with lived experiences, people with disabilities, professional background, and level of seniority). We understand that WACP does not organize a congress annually and relies on local and commercial partners for logistic and financial support. However, we do believe that the following actions, guided by a socioecological model (“Ecological Models”, 2024) focusing on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional domains (3-I-model), can be turned into specific, measurable, achievable,

realistic, timely, and equitable (SMART-E) goals for benchmark and tracking purposes. We chose a socioecological model to tackle the inequity challenge from different levels – the proposed solutions across levels can synergistically complement each other. The authors sincerely hope that the proposed steps will guide a process to increase representation at the next meeting to reflect more on beneficiaries across the countries the WACP serves.

On the intrapersonal level, WACP members must acknowledge that any honest engagement with the roots of these inequities will require discussions and reflections, which are likely to be complex and emotionally challenging. Understanding and acknowledging one's motivations, roles, and privilege within global mental health, the WACP, and beyond is vital, as is the necessity for people to be willing to step aside from positions of privilege to amplify minoritized and excluded voices and enable greater representation in positions of influence within the organization. WACP members can also think about using personal narratives to change hearts and minds and to persuade people about the impact of non-representation in the research field (i.e., through blog or social media posts, opinion pieces, public awareness raising and advocacy events, etc.). They can also engage in research projects and topics that explicitly address issues of representation and assess what is already done at different levels (following the 3-I model) to overcome the problem.

On an interpersonal level, we urge all WACP members to lobby their respective members of parliament and professional organizations about visa inequities. The more members speak up, the more awareness about the issue will be created. Additionally, we urge WACP to continue the stepped registration fee model, based on the country's gross national income per capita, despite potential pushback from local or commercial partners with diverting political or economic interests. To improve representation, we suggest that WACP members from high-income countries (HIC) contribute additionally to a scholarship fund for researchers from LMICs. The fund's set-up can start now, giving the WACP more than one year to raise funds. Suppose everyone who clapped at the last WACP conference contributes about 15 USD/month (in total, approximately 180 USD between now and the next conference at the end of September 2025). In that case, the travel costs for 40 participants from LMICs could be covered.

On an institutional level, the board of WACP could support individual membership contributions by matching them with additional funding, potentially even from the host countries of the WACP congresses; the local organizing committee can spearhead the implementation of the matching donation idea. We applaud the WACP for providing travel awards to ten presenting WACP members from LMICs. However, we recommend making the application accessible independent of WACP membership status. Rather than having every applicant pay the WACP membership fee regardless of the application outcome, only successful travel award winners could spend part of

their award on paying WACP membership fees. Additionally, the travel award winners should be announced as early as possible, as proof of funding is required for visa applications. Given that the WACP congress only takes place every three years, WACP may benefit from additional formats to discuss issues around participation and representation. One idea is to establish monthly webinars, which a special interest group consisting of members from within the WACP could lead. Potential conference donors could also be reached through these webinars. In terms of content, the webinars could focus on topics around representation in the Global Mental Health field generally and, more specifically, around concrete goals and action steps for organizing the next WACP Congress. Regarding the organization of the congress, the local organizing committee could be joined by representatives of the special interest group that could help identify actions to improve equitable participation and select the conference theme, key sessions, symposia, and workshops. This can help to address the common issue of funding and research priorities being defined externally, as well as to diversify conference activities to be more inclusive, i.e., in the form of shorter, 'bite-size' sessions, for example, which may be more accessible for people with attention difficulties or speakers of other languages ("Considerations when working and engaging with persons with lived experience", 2023). We suggest that the WACP and the organizing committee of the next World Congress commit to inviting keynote speakers who represent an authentic diversity of voices, including scholars from LMICs. In case certain keynote speakers from LMIC cannot come due to financial or visa challenges, WACP should have an alternative plan, including a diverse set of speakers that could step in on short notice (i.e., participants from LMICs that do not require a visa for the host country of the conference). Logistically, the organizers should hold future conferences in locations that offer more equitable and responsive access to international participants from across the globe. From our experience, it is not sufficient to just consider organizing conferences in any LMIC (instead of HIC), as many of these countries have visa restrictions, too. The authors of this paper witnessed on multiple occasions how participants from HIC were able to successfully apply for a visa in LMICs while participants from other LMICs were not able to get a visa. Additionally, to lower the participation cost, conferences could be held in more affordable venues such as university campuses; this could also strengthen connections with local academic institutions, enable staff and students to benefit from conference sessions, and provide opportunities to co-organize local meetings. Despite the challenges of digital inequities and potential additional costs, conferences should also include an option for participants to present and attend online ("hybrid conference") or at least allow for pre-recorded sessions. We learned a great deal about best practices for online teaching and presentation during the COVID-19 pandemic, including how to use technology to improve participation for people with disabilities and diverse languages, such as closed captioning and audio transcription. Such hybrid options benefit not only participants who cannot travel but also participants with

disabilities, people who speak another language than English, and people with caring responsibilities.

In conclusion, numerous articles have been published about the representation challenges at global mental health conferences, and some of the barriers, such as visa challenges and financial constraints, as well as action steps to overcome them, have been discussed. However, while a one-size-fits-all approach and general proposals can enrich the discussion, more tailored suggestions are needed to make a change. Based on our observations regarding participation opportunities from Global South stakeholders during the last WACP Congress in Rotterdam in 2022, we propose specific action steps grounded in a socioecological model that have the potential to improve equity and inclusion during the next World Congress of the WACP in Tokyo in 2025. In our submission, we discuss potential intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional level interventions.

The Japanese government has stated that it is committed to creating a society that embraces inclusiveness, diversity, and flexibility ("Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion", 2023); it remains to be seen if this extends to enabling equitable participation in international conferences held on its soil. Now is the time - and we regard this as urgent - for the WACP organizing committee to start the conversation on how this will be achieved and to identify concrete actions towards this aim. This will ensure that the next World Congress of the WACP will be truly global and members, researchers, and activists from across the world can learn from each other and enjoy the sound of applause rather than endure the silence of exclusion.

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