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## **Gender Sensitive Research: An ethical imperative Policy and Practice at MLCU**

In terms of Section 22, sub section (2) of the Martin Luther Christian University Act 2005, read with Statute 6.3.1 of the Martin Luther Christian University Statutes and Rules 2016, and as recommended and approved by the Academic Council meetings held on July 18, 2022 and Board of Governors meeting held on November 24, 2022, the Gender Sensitive Research policy is, hereby, notified:

Gender-sensitive perspectives contribute to global efforts to recognize women's rights to equality. In a call for gender-sensitive research, Callamard (1999) states that the "definitions of gender and the roles ascribed to women and men (and family) are largely determined by economic structures, the nature of the state and its social projects, religion, culture, and the changing interrelationships between all these elements. Women's and men's daily work, access to resources, political participation, experiences of violence, ability to exercise their rights, and indeed, right to life, differ because of their gender." It is these and other gender-unique factors that make it imperative to have a gender-sensitive strategy for research studies.

### **What is a gender sensitive research?**

"Gender sensitive research is not research on women or on gender relationships; it is research that takes into account gender as a significant variable...the power relations between men and women can greatly influence the perspective of men and women...Thus, gender sensitive research pays attention to the similarities and the differences between men and women's experiences and viewpoints, and gives equal value to each" (Leduc, 2009).

Clearly, researchers bring their perceptual lenses, cognitive biases, and personal beliefs to the choice of research design and methods (Creswell, 2009) that, no doubt, affect any study's design. According to Plowman and Smith (2011), "They also bring their gender, perhaps gender also influences choices about research design and methods." Their study concluded that gendering occurs in research methods, women researchers may approach research differently than men. This

study observed that more women authors chose qualitative methods compared to men authors. This association was significant.

In a recent editorial, Nature journals have announced that henceforth all authors will have to provide details on how sex and gender were considered in study design and to provide data disaggregated by sex and gender where this information has been collected. If no sex and gender analyses were carried out, authors will have to clarify why. These “changes apply to studies with human participants, on other vertebrates or on cell lines, in which sex and gender is an appropriate consideration. (Nature, 2022). The editorial cited a study of a new drug which actually had more severe effects on women, but the data was not disaggregated for sex.

The information processing literature includes a number of empirical studies showing significant differences in how males and females process information. Some of these reported findings that show that women tend to be more accurate than men in decoding non-verbal cues, the language of females, reflects an interpretive mode that is more subjective and evaluative compared to the language of males, which reflects a narrow concentration on readily available and objective states. Overall women tend to be more detail sensitive (Plowman & Smith, 2011).

It stands to reason, that women participants may respond differently to researchers than men participants. If gender is a factor in choice of a research design or in participant response, this has implications for the outcome of the research, that need to be recognized when conceptualizing and planning a research project.

“Gender has only recently been considered a significant variable in research. However, although it is starting to be recognised in social sciences, it is seldom acknowledged and applied in natural sciences or economics. The choice of research topic, conceptual framework and methodology, analysis framework, and language used in scientific articles tends to reflect male biases and patriarchal values” (Leduc, 2009).

### **Benefits**

“Engendering research does not change the scope of the research; it provides new perspectives, raises new questions, and uses new analysis tools to create a more complete picture of the problem. As men and women have different roles and different power, their perspectives on a problem can be quite different. By combining their different experiences and viewpoints, researchers can enhance the comprehension of a problem. . . a gender sensitive participatory approach helps men and

women to understand natural and social factors – beliefs, practices, (and) behaviours” (Leduc 2009).

She goes on to recommend the following strategies:

1. Define a conceptual framework reflecting men’s and women’s experiences in the conceptual framework avoid a male bias and to ensure an inclusive and gender sensitive approach.
2. Ensure gender sensitive formulation of the research question. The formulation of the research question should integrate a gender perspective: i.e., how are men and women currently affected by the issue and how are they involved in the issue?
3. Use and produce gender disaggregated data and conduct a gender analysis
4. Anticipate impacts of new policies or practices on men and women. Who will benefit from these? Who will be disadvantaged?
5. In reporting the findings, highlight the gender dimension. It should make visible gender differences: different roles, different involvements, different experiences, different opinions, and different needs. It should also provide as much visibility to women’s contributions and experiences as men’s.

Leduc’s approach can be adapted into the following checklist:

1. Acknowledge our own bias, i.e. a positionality statement to be submitted with the ethics approval application
2. Identify the human and social components of the research object
3. Define a conceptual framework reflecting men’s and women’s experiences
4. Avoid male bias, prejudices, terminology, and double standards
5. Develop a gender sensitive methodology
6. Build a gender balanced research team
7. Choose a gender balanced sample
8. Give value to both men’s and women’s experiences
9. Use and produce gender disaggregated data
10. Conduct a gender analysis
11. Anticipate impacts of new policies or practices on men and women
12. Use gender sensitive language in the research report

## **Recommendations for the Ethics Committee**

1. Should have at least one gender expert
2. The research design should include gender orientation, context, methods and analysis
3. If an interpreter is to be used to collect data from women, the interpreter must be a woman
4. Apart from informed consent, the woman needs to give permission for taking notes or recording. Photographs of women can only be taken when the project justifies it and when separate consent is given.
5. Privacy to be respected and discretion used
6. Watch for signs for discomfort or reticence
7. Points 2-4 must be documented in the notes and the methods
8. Maintain a neutral disposition, avoid passing judgment, showing skepticism or moral posturing
9. Gender sensitive language should be used avoiding terms like: man, mankind to indicate all humanity and use of male-centric terms like chairman, craftsman and businessman.

For this concept of gender-sensitive research to be implemented, it should be part of the ethics approval process for any research project and there should be a section pertaining to this issue in the application form for ethics approval prior to commencement of the project.



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