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**At the 8<sup>th</sup> Multilateral Initiative on Malaria (MIM) conference in Rwanda in April, Dr. Rinki Deb, Lead Scientist at Vestergaard, shared valuable insights into her professional journey and the cultural challenges she has faced during a panel discussion on Celebrating Women in the Malaria Response. Dr. Deb emphasised the vital role of women in the global effort to eradicate malaria and the importance of highlighting entomology as a career path for the next generation.**

When people think of an entomologist or someone working in remote communities collecting mosquitoes, Dr Rinki Deb is pretty sure they envisage a man.

“I’m sure, if I closed my eyes, I’d see a man too,” she said.

The Lead Scientist for public health products at Vestergaard believes gender norms need to be debunked because women are needed on the frontline of malaria elimination, in laboratories and remote communities.

She said, “The idea that being away from home overnight and working with team members who are not your family is unladylike or inappropriate must be broken down.”

Women also possess a better understanding of communities, Dr Deb added.

“There is a misconception that indoor residual spraying is traditionally seen as a job for men. However, in my experience, women are more likely to be trusted to respectfully spray a prayer room or a bedroom.”

Within these communities, women are seen as having less decision-making power, but Dr Deb believes the opposite is true.

“They are the ones who attend antenatal care, who put their children first, and want to access insecticide-treated nets. I believe the woman’s drive to ensure good health for her children will drive malaria prevention.”

## **‘We need workplaces that support women’**

Dr Deb wants children to believe there isn't a profession that women can't do, that it's possible to be a mother and do meaningful work.

She serves as a shining example.

With over 15 years of expertise in research and product development for eliminating neglected tropical diseases across Africa and Asia, she has spent much of her career travelling. But in late 2023, when Vestergaard offered her an incredible opportunity, she hesitated.

“I had a good discussion about my responsibilities as a parent and that I was looking for a job that could provide me with a happy balance between what the company needs and what I need. Thankfully, Vestergaard agreed.”

Dr Deb is a huge advocate for bringing the whole self to work and creating an environment that welcomes diverse opinions and perspectives.

“We need workplaces that support women, treat them fairly and pay them equally,” she said.

## **‘Women aren't participants, they're pioneers’**

Dr. Deb participated in the Women in the Malaria Response conference during MIM, alongside prominent all-female speakers including Dr. Corine Karema, Jennifer Gardy, Dr. Dorothy Achu, Professor Sheetal Silal, Ségolene Moussala, and Olivia Ngou.



Dr. Deb participated in the Women in the Malaria Response panel during MIM, alongside prominent all-female speakers, including Dr. Corine Karema and Jennifer Gardy.

She said: ‘The conference and its extraordinary panel of speakers serve as a reminder of the exceptional women who have shaped the field and continue to inspire future generations.

The panel was headed by Emeritus Professor of Immunology and Parasitology Rose Leke, who was honoured with the organiser’s first ‘Outstanding Women Leader in Malaria Science Award’. During her speech, Professor Leke highlighted that vector control is not just about

science but also about social justice, equality, and human rights.

“The role of women in this sector cannot be understated,” said Professor Leke.

“They are not participants. They are pioneers. These brilliant minds are balancing an understanding of communities and ensuring cultural sensitivity with gender-inclusive interventions.

“I want all women with a passion for science and the desire to make a difference to consider a career in malaria research. You bring unique perspectives and invaluable insights in tackling this global health challenge.”

From the laboratory to the field, whether at the community level or in international stakeholder positions, Dr Deb believes having women in roles gives girls something to aspire to.

“We must help our children understand that there are no limits to how far they can go.”

Men also play a vital part in gender equality, she added.

“It’s not just about empowering women and motivating them to be involved in malaria programmes. It’s also about helping both men and women understand why everyone contributes to achieving malaria elimination.”

Throughout history, women have made significant contributions to the field of entomology. Their efforts have spanned various regions and fields, including vector control, activism, protection and conservation. Their efforts have significantly impacted the study of insects, raised awareness about their importance, and advanced our knowledge of insects. Their perspectives, often influenced by their gender and societal role, allow them to see beyond mere control and recognise the intricate relationships between insects and the environment.

**Other panellists on the Celebrating Women in Malaria Response at MIM:**

- Dr Corine Karema, Director of Malaria & NTDS, Global Health
- Jennifer Gardy, Deputy Director Surveillance, Data, Epidemiology, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- Dr Dorothy Achu, Regional Malaria Advisor WHO Africa-Region
- Professor Sheetal Silal, Director of the Modelling and Simulation Hub, Africa (MASHA),
- Ségolène Moussala, Senior Communications Officer, Impact Sante Afrique
- Olivia Ngou, CEO and Founder Impact Sante Afrique

Learn more about [Rinki on her LinkedIn page](#).