

Gender and Power

The Picture is Only Half the Story

Our internship at the Reproductive Health and Research Unit (RHRU) involved weekly “photo voice” workshops with learners (ages 13-16) from different schools around Johannesburg. Photo Voice is reflective photography aimed at assisting children to express their views.

The theme for our project, chosen jointly by both the interns and learners, was “gender and power.” Topics mainly focused on what affects the learners at their homes and schools, and made linkages to the roles they play in the society as the new generation and particularly in a country that has many and varied cultures.

Weekly workshops were held at RHRU premises in Hillbrow. The workshops were run by three interns from the IHRE program – Lydia (South Africa), Sasha (U.S.) and Rutendo (Zimbabwe) – and Clive (a professional photographer). The first week was dedicated to getting to know the learners and explaining the project to them. We asked them to define “gender” and other gender-related concepts in their own words to assess their existing knowledge of the topic. Learners were briefed by Clive about how photography can be used as a tool, not only to educate them, but to enable them to openly express their personal perceptions around gender and power. They were each given a disposable camera and instructed to take pictures in their community that respectively represented a female in power and a man in power and to further explain to fellow learners why they chose to use those pictures.

In other weeks we talked about gender- and power-related issues. The topics ranged from discussing gender roles and stereotypes to issues of equality and norms. Learners participated in weekly life orientation games and dramatic arts. Activities such as true or false games were aimed at building leadership and thinking skills, communication, and conflict resolution skills. The most exciting exercise for the learners was debating gender identities amongst each other. On the fourth week, learners were given a questionnaire to assess their development and further improve their understanding of the themes and of photography. The questionnaire consisted of different questions based on what had been discussed in previous workshop. It also reviewed personal information, achievements they were proud of and future goals. Learners were able to open up to the interns and truly share their experiences and life stories with us, largely because we established trust in our workshops. Even outside of the workshops learned approached interns for personal advice as they trusted everything they shared was told in confidence.

The Reproductive Health and Research Unit (RHRU) is an internationally renowned South African academic institution respected for its contribution to the field of sexual & reproductive health and HIV, bridging gaps between policy, research, and service delivery.

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