

Strengthening the Conversation on Menstrual Hygiene and Reproductive Health Right among adolescent girls at St Joseph's Junior Secondary School, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Country of project implementation: Sierra Leone

Sponsoring College: Skidmore College

Participating Students:

1. Haja Isatu Bah (Designated Project Leader)
Home Country: Sierra Leone
Skidmore College, UWC Red Cross Nordic (Norway)
 2. Elizabeth K. Gimba
Home Country: Kenya/South Sudan
Skidmore College, UWC Robert Bosch College (Germany)
 3. Victoria Thorpe
Home Country: Sierra Leone
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Our project sought to holistically address menstrual, sexual, and reproductive health as well as period poverty amongst adolescent girls in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Our goal was to not only be keen on creating awareness on the latter issues but to also make sustainable, healthy and alternative menstrual products accessible to the girls in one of Freetown's secondary schools.

Haja and Victoria are natives of Sierra Leone, and Elizabeth is from Kenya. However, one passion we all share is addressing issues affecting girls, especially in the African continent. With our background in menstrual, and Peer Health Education, we decided to collaborate on this project to address the issue of period poverty. This project was born in our college apartment in the Fall of 2020. Haja was planning on applying for the grant for the third time. After sharing her thoughts with Elizabeth and Victoria, we decided that we were all passionate about the topic and would love to work together. We worked together to draft a budget, develop a curriculum and timeline, and build a menstrual hygiene toolkit - a pack of reusable Uman4Uman sanitary pad which lasts for a minimum of 2 years, a bar of soap, a menstrual hygiene journal, and informative posters to put up around the school.

Period poverty is the lack of access to sustainable sanitary period products and knowledge, and this is something many girls experience during adolescence. Based on our personal experiences, we thought it fit to address it as part of the project while also addressing personal hygiene and sexual education. We chose these topics because they are barely taught in schools due to religious, cultural, and societal beliefs. We believe that shedding light on these topics aligns with our definition of Peace - a global stability and equality irrespective of one's gender, culture, economic status, race or religion. To us, Peace is priceless. However, going beyond societal norms, and challenging the status quo through a collaborative project is a great start to achieving peace.

Our project this summer, in line with the aim of achieving gender equality and female empowerment, focused on teaching girls about empowerment through the lens of menstrual hygiene and reproductive health rights. We were able to create safe spaces for girls to share their experiences and learn from each other, while gaining a significant amount of knowledge about their bodies. At the end of the project, we established a club for the girls to continue learning and pass on this knowledge to younger girls. With this model, not only are we creating short term impact, but also creating a sustainable circle for girls to learn about their bodies, what decisions to make, and how they can pass on this information to empower a younger generation of girls.

Our host site - St Joseph's Convent Secondary School is one of our alma maters and charity as they say begins at home. Hence it was a form of giving back to our community. Moreover, it is an all-girls school and it had our targeted audience. Our team in conjunction with Skidmore College's Peer Health Educators (PHEs) used a fundraising platform to cover extra costs that could not be covered by the Davis Grant. Funds acquired from our GoFundMe Campaign were used to cater for travel-related costs, COVID-19 protocols, housing, and personal allowances.

As with all projects, there were certainly some instances that disrupted our initial project execution goals. One of our major challenges was communication with the school administration. It was difficult to settle logistical concerns such as the number of students we would be working with, the school calendar and a fitting structure that would work for all parties in the given timeline. Consequently, we ended up having a miscalculation of supplies and the project was cut short from 3 weeks to 2 weeks, since most of the students we were working with had to sit for the national exams. This setting forced us to reevaluate our curriculum plans and how we essentially carried out the whole project. However, after the exams, we returned to establish the school club.

We faced several obstacles when it came to communicating with third parties within Freetown. Before executing the project, we envisioned a collaboration with a Sierra Leonean-based organization which shared similar visions as us. As a result, we held different meetings precisely on the curriculum we would use to educate the girls. Nonetheless, the party did not show up as the project took pace and hence a diversion in the curation of our project syllabus. Conflicts of interest in different dynamics assuredly affected the project. Moreover, having our project take place in a Christian school dictated to some extent what could and/or could not be communicated to the girls. This strained the efficacy of our goals.

Sierra Leone is currently facing the third wave of Covid-19 and many restrictions were being put into place. However, the pandemic did not affect us as much. The school worked with us to ensure that safety measures were being implemented. We urged the girls to wear masks often, and worked with them in different sessions to avoid overcrowding. To future PfP grantees, make sure you communicate with every stakeholder involved in your project. If communication among all parties is clear, you might not even need to be there in person. If our project was to be implemented remotely, we would have faced a lot of challenges with communication and achieving our goals. Being there in person to communicate with the school administration and girls made it very easy for us especially with last minute changes and executing the project with a flexible timeline. To conclude our project, we organized a quiz and debate competition where every class had to send a representative. This event was honored by the Mayor of Freetown and other key players in the field of women's empowerment in Sierra Leone. We had media coverage, and the event was aired by one of the most popular TV channels, African Young Voices Television in Sierra Leone.

This project was an eye opener. Interacting the girls made us learn and appreciate how unique of everyone's experiences can be. We were challenged mentally and intellectually. During the sessions, we had amazing questions thrown at us. Some of the questions, we did not have the answer to. This pushed us to educate ourselves more on the topic by doing extra research. By the end of the project, we were exposed to so much knowledge about our bodies, their functions, and how to take care of ourselves. This project has enabled us to listen, learn, and create impact by listening to one girl at a time. In addition, this project has helped us challenge the existing cultural norm, by breaking the silence around the topic of menstruation. It was an amazing opportunity to be in a space where over 1000 girls felt comfortable to share their unique stories, and feel supported by their peers.

"When I started seeing my period at the age of 11, my mum was the only person I was comfortable with to talk about it. A decade later, I was more than enthralled to see young girls sharing their experiences willingly among themselves" - Haja Isatu Bah, Skidmore College '21, hajaisatubah2015@gmail.com

"Stigmatization because of a natural need should be unheard of. We're rewriting stories one pad at a time." -Elizabeth K. Gimba, Skidmore College '23, elizabethggimba@gmail.com

"With the right product, proper hygiene and quality sex education every girl/woman can work into the world more confident and elegant ready to change the game". - Victoria M. Thorpe, Skidmore College '23, thorpevictoria08@gmail.com

