Empowering Young Women Through Sexual Reproductive Health Education—Liberia
Liberia
Luther College
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Summary
Our project is built upon the most powerful weapon one can use to change the world. We seek to initiate a knowledge-based system that empowers young women with education about their sexual reproductive health whilst creating a safe space that enhances their growth and development.

Project Description
How did you decide what issue(s) you wanted to address and what approach(es) or strategies you chose to implement in your project? Adolescence is a very critical part of human life as hormones become well-activated, meeting young people with a rapid sense of change both in their bodies and surroundings. It’s no doubt that this new sense of self ought to be met with new responsibilities since it is especially new, surprising, and confusing for many. Given the growing rate of teenage pregnancies, substance abuse, young people lacking a sense of purpose, and sexual reproductive health issues including STIs, date rape, lack of communication and healthy relationships amongst young people, it is evident that young people are struggling to cope and lead successful adolescents’ lives. Our hope has been to fill in this need—to address these developmental challenges so as to develop well-rounded individuals that are confident about facing the future. Over the summer, we were successful in training 65 young women (ages 13 to 23) in a total of 7-day intensive workshops. Through our Life Planning curriculum, we empower these women with education on topics about values, sexuality, teenage pregnancy prevention, STIs prevention, gender roles, equality, relationships building, planning for the future, etc., and successfully collaborated with 30 adult women to run a mentorship program that prevents these young women from getting pregnant and to prioritize education.

Why did you choose your host site? In what ways did local relationships support you or contribute to the project? The project was set in two locations. They included a high school in the city of Montserrado, William Booth High school (WBHS), and a rural community in Bahn Nimba County, which is approximately 300 km away from Montserrado. These locations were places of interest because the problems we spoke to were well evident there. For example, in rural Bahn, 7 of our 30 participants either had 2 children or an infant to care for. In addition, I have a long-lasting relationship with these two areas that made our implementation smooth throughout. I am an alumnus of WBHS and originate from Bahn, Nimba. My roots in these two areas allow for easier partnership and massive support from the leaders and people. WBHS aided massively in our participant recruitment process and provided us with a free venue to carry out the workshop and an office to store our equipment and run our initiative as a non-profit. In rural Bahn, we exceeded twice our success rate due to the support of the townspeople. We solicited 30 additional adult women volunteers who were committed in aiding our mentorship program. Having provided training to them, their key responsibility is now to serve as mentors to the 30 young women participating in the workshop to ensure healthy adolescent lives amongst those young women. We had an overall great time working in these two locations given our relationship with the people.

What changes or adjustments did you make to your original plans, and why? The team adapted the PATH Life Planning Curriculum for Tanzania youth (funded by the Gates Foundation) and partnered with the Dr. Stefania Forte Foundation to receive training on curriculum delivery rather than developing a curriculum from scratch. Even though our focus remained the same throughout the project, working in two separate locations presented us with some challenges that required adjustment. The two locations, one urban and one rural, placed our audience/participants in two different contexts. You would expect that...
problems affecting urban areas in developing countries are always tenfold in rural areas. This created different needs for our audience, forcing us to constantly change the curriculum contents, materials, and style of deliveries throughout the workshops. We encountered other constraints like material resources and transportation causing a hole in our budget. However, the project was overall effective with overall good management.

Did other fundraising efforts contribute to your project? What were they? Yes, we started a GoFundMe campaign to secure additional funding for travel and other personal expenses. With the support of the Luther College community, the Decorah community through the Northeast Iowa Peace and Justice Center, friends, family, and well-wishers, we raised an additional $700 (tax subtracted) that supported our efforts.

Are there opportunities for continuing your work on this issue? If so, please describe. Yes, sustainability is our ultimate goal since this is work we deeply care about. We have been able to register with the government of Liberia as a nonprofit organization under the name, “Educate Women Liberia.” Our 2022-23 action goal is to successfully establish a sexual reproductive health club at WBHS for young women and to continue running our mentorship program in rural Bahn. In addition, since the completion of the project and successful registration as a nonprofit, the “Friends of Liberia” organization (founded by returned Peace Corps volunteers) has pledged funds toward our work in Liberia. We are currently working on a leadership structure that will foster action and help shape our program in Liberia. We believe that as long as our team can get the right support, challenges confronting adolescent girls will not be an issue in Liberia. We are ready to dive into any opportunity and mentorship to get this work going for a better and more resilient society.

Reflection
How do you define peace? Peace to me is when the mind is at ease and when society creates systems that support and promote the growth of young women and adolescents. Without adolescent sexual reproductive health education and life planning skills education, adolescents will never be at peace!

In what ways might your project contribute to peace? What changes occurred? Short-term? Long-term? Empowering young women with education gives them the ability to make sound decisions about their health and bodies. Overall, this leads to a greater sense of awareness, strong self-esteem, purpose orientation, and high achievements. Ultimately, these are the domino effects that will foster “peace,” an “educated woman,” home leaders, strong nation-builders, gender equality, and improved economies. Our participants' learning engagement throughout the workshop and commitment through a “pledge” to avoid engaging in risky sexual practices are indicators that this framework will produce peace both in the short run and long run. The old African proverb is, indeed, true—"when you educate a girl, you educate a nation."

What did you learn about the dilemmas, challenges, or conflicts that underlie the targeted issues or utilized approaches/strategies? This project has pushed me to take a step back and learn about the complexities associated with issues affecting adolescents—how deep-rooted and culturally complex they are, but also in ways that inform our knowledge about the best solutions and approaches we can use to tackle these problems as they are presented.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has the project changed, challenged, or inspired you? To change the world is a difficult task, but this project has left me with hope, hope that there are still plenty of chances to create a better world. This hope is inspired by how hungry and desperate young people are to be given the tools and resources that empower them despite
the many complex challenges they are faced with. Young women in Liberia, whether pregnant, early mothers, or school-going, are willing to learn and immerse themselves in the journey of creating better lives. All that is lacking are the needed resources, and this is where we are continuously seeking effort. This project has taught me how important it is for women to support and empower other women; and how extra-important it is for society to support women.

**Personal Statement**

Empowering young women with education gives them the ability to make sound decisions about their health and bodies. Overall, this leads to a greater sense of awareness, strong self-esteem, purpose orientation, and high achievements.

I am wholeheartedly grateful to Kathryn Wasserman Davis, the entire Projects for Peace team, and Luther College for making this project a reality. Thank you for empowering young women with education to make a difference.

-Junita Sangare