

## **Shield Our Watoto (Shield Our Children)**

Tanzania

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[www.Wesanctuary.com](http://www.Wesanctuary.com)

This project aimed to take a dialogue-based educational approach to addressing the ongoing issues of Female Genital Cutting (FGC) and gender-based violence in the Dodoma and Zanzibar regions of Tanzania. I partnered with the University of Dodoma, College of Health Science. The dean and two nursing professors assisted in planning and recruiting participants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to participate in our workshops. We worked with three groups of participants over the course of three weeks, one week for each group, and presented our work at a church in Dodoma.

I created a go-fund campaign to help pay for some of the project related expenses. I mostly shared the link with my mentors, friends, and family members to help me reach my goal. The goal for the fundraiser was \$3000. We raised \$1528.83, after which we stopped the fundraising because we were not certain about how much longer it was going to take us to reach our goal and we were running out of time. However, we managed to complete the workshop with that budget by cutting down the length of the workshops.

In the summer of 2017, I conducted an independent summer research project which explored the physiological and psychological impacts of FGC on women in Guinea and Senegal. As part of the project, I traveled to Senegal to work with [Tostan](#), a human rights nonprofit organization based in Dakar, Senegal; where I learned about their dialogue-based approach. After my research, I knew that I wanted to continue working on the topic. I reached out to TOSTAN for possible collaboration, but they require a six-month intensive training, which I was unable to commit to due to time constraints. I decided to reach out to Shield Our Watoto, a nonprofit organization based in Columbus, OH with a sister organization in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Shield Our Watoto works tirelessly to address the issue of child molestation and gender-based violence. With the help of the founder of Shield Our Watoto, Bhoke P. Mukami, we were able to identify regions in Tanzania where FGC is most prominent. Female Genital Cutting continues to put the lives of many young girls and women at risk as the practice is often regarded in many cultures as a ritual rite of passage that woman should undergo in order to become an important member of their community and increase their marriageability.

According to various research, including my own research from summer 2017, the prominence of FGC in practicing cultures is due to the fact that practicing cultures do not recognize FGC as a form of persecution because of the valuable cultural and traditional ties to the practice. In many cultures, it's considered to be one of the most important rituals that women must undergo to achieve higher social class. It is often carried out as an attempt to control women's attitude towards sex and to ensure virginity is preserved for marriage. Furthermore, families who refuse to circumcise their girls become social pariahs, and their reputations get ruined; also, it becomes harder for these girls to find a suitable partner for marriage because they are automatically regarded as promiscuous. This is part of the reason why it is not uncommon for families who are well informed about the repercussions of FGC to still choose to abide by this cultural ritual for the sake of their reputation in their community.

The decision to complete the work in Tanzania was due to the fact that I worked with the founder of Shield Our Watoto, Bhoke Mokami, who's already doing similar work around women's health and child protection. She is a native of Tanzania and is therefore familiar with the language and culture. Her involvement in the project was very helpful, as she helped with recruitment, translation during facilitation and discussions.

At first, it was extremely challenging to get project participants on board and get across cultural, traditional, and language barriers. The first workshop session was difficult because I felt very anxious being in front of 22 people to talk about difficult topics such as gender-based violence and FGC, but as the sessions went on, it became easier, and participants were more comfortable contributing to the discussions and activities. In order to facilitate the discussion around this topic, I talked about power,

asking participants what their relationship to power was and if they thought power was a negative or positive thing. In the beginning, the women were very reluctant to speak about their relationship with power and how they exercise power in their communities. Most of the vocabulary they related to power was negative, as opposed to men. They talked about the lack of opportunities for women in the community and how violence against women hinders their ability to contribute financially to their households. During the discussion, we did an exercise where I would read a statement, and if it applied to either gender they would move forward or backward. I did this to visualize gender inequality in the space. At the end of the exercise, most women were in the back and the men were all in front of the room. As we reflected upon the exercise, the men in the room became aware of their privilege and their attitude towards women. As we concluded the workshop, both men and women vowed to redefine their relationship to power and continue to foster conversation around violence and abuse against marginalized communities. Lastly, we distributed Shied Our Watoto cards to all participants and gave people resources that were given to us by the Ministry of Health and Gender.

I definitely knew that the project was going to work because more people are becoming aware of the impact of FGC, and more young girls are being sent to school now than a decade ago. However, getting acclimated to the environment and the people in such a short time was definitely challenging. But working with a team of native Tanzanians definitely helped a lot with logistics and getting all of our participants on board. The two volunteer professors from the College of Nursing assisted with making phone calls to participants, ensuring their questions and concerns about their participation were all addressed. During recruitment, many participants asked if the work was research. We assured them it wasn't and that their participation was entirely voluntary, and we gave them the option to step out at any given moment during the workshops. Also, I didn't anticipate that volunteers would anticipate 'getting paid.' We budgeted compensation for facilitators (the dean and the two professors). I thought that people would be willing to dedicate their time to the cause since Dodoma is a known hotspot for FGC.

Furthermore, I was under-budgeted for the cost of living in Tanzania. The cost of living was way higher than I anticipated. We also had to travel a lot to reach our targeted regions because it was difficult trying to get participants all in one region. Lastly, it was very easy to determine what meals we needed for the workshops. We offered traditional meals and vegetarian options. We also had coffee and tea available throughout the sessions.

Language barrier was definitely a challenge that I faced during the sessions. English and Kiswahili are the two common languages spoken in Tanzania. However, due to inaccessibility to education, many older generation and some young people do not speak or write English. However, volunteer professors from the College of Health Sciences offered to translate and write discussion questions in Kiswahili and notes on the flip-paper. At first this made me very uncomfortable because I wasn't able to communicate with most of our second and third groups of participants. But, Bhoke was readily translating in English during discussions to ensure that I was taking accurate notes. Also, we asked our participants their permission to record some of the sessions for translation. Furthermore, I was afraid that people would feel uncomfortable and refuse to partake in the discussions, which did not happen. The participants were very active, were eager to contribute to the discussions, and were willing to carry the conversation about gender-based violence forward in their community. Generally, people do not talk about these issues because it is taboo. As for women in abusive relationships, they do not talk about their abuse because they do not want to call attention to themselves. Some women even admitted that they are afraid to talk about their marital issues because people will choose not to believe them. Silencing victims is what continues to normalize most of the gender-based violence, which is why this work is so important and the reason why we had women of all ages to participate in our workshops.

I understand peace as having the ability to fully enjoy your inherent human rights and have autonomy over your life and anything concerning your well-being. My project fostered conversation around a difficult topic that people often avoid addressing. During the workshop, we noticed that many people in the audience were eager to take the conversation outside of the room, which is exactly what this project was working towards. We will continue to stay in touch with participants and assist them in any way we can in order for them to continue to carry the dialogue forward and mobilize the community to become aware of the prevalence of gender-based violence. We advised people to leave their contact with us at the end of

each session if they were interested in hosting similar workshops in their communities. Bhoke and I will be reaching out to some of our participants who are working with other NGOs or government funded organizations to address these issues. We will assist them with logistics and putting together guides for the workshops whenever they are ready. I will start collecting testimonies from participants to publish on the website I created for the project. In addition, the dean of the College of Health Science vowed to continue incorporating aspects of the workshops and trainings in their curriculums. They will make their classes a safe place for their students of all levels (undergraduate, masters, and post-doctoral) and will provide resources to students in need.

My project has definitely shifted my perspective about the world and my surroundings. Going into the field, I was fully aware that I was going to encounter people with very different views; however, I wasn't prepared to actually face these different views. But just like anything in life, open-mindedness and the willingness to learn and reciprocate respect definitely helped me navigate through the project. It most certainly changed me and has improved my outlook on the world and my surroundings. For instance, during the first week of training, we worked with the 'professionals' group; 22 participants who all had at least a bachelor's degree. Therefore, I assumed that they would be more informed about the topic of the workshop or look at gender issues in Tanzania and globally on a different perspective. But, that wasn't the case necessarily. I would say about 75% of the participants in this group knew about the prominence of FGC in their community or knew about an organization that is working to address the issue. However, they were not willing to acknowledge the disadvantage that these issues have on women. I was very surprised to hear someone in the group say that women mobilizing and speaking up against violence was taking them away from their traditional roles as mothers and nurturers. Each group had at least someone who made comments about women and traditional roles, but it was also moving to see women in the group explaining how they are constantly playing traditional gender roles at home, but still manage to contribute financially in the household while enduring domestic violence at home.

Furthermore, each group had a religious leader, a pastor and an imam who were very determined to continue to empower women in the community and inform them about their rights. It was a very powerful moment for me during the project because typically in religious communities people tend to listen to religious leaders, especially when it comes to deconstructing social norms and addressing cultural rituals.

"Oftentimes, we focus on fixing the 'problem' on a surface level, when it would be better to focus on the source of the problem and create a space that allows both sides to be in the same room and have difficult conversations that emphasize collective healing. This project enabled me to be a part of a change that is bigger than myself." Fatoumata N Kaba

"Knowledge shapes behavior." Pastor

"Believe children and let them know you will protect and ensure their safety." Participant

