

Empowering Rural Women: An Investment for the Future

Student Participants: Neha Reddy and Matthew Zhou

Country: Ethiopia

Participating Institution: ActionAid Ethiopia (<http://www.actionaidusa.org/ethiopia>)

Dates of Project: July 1st- August 5th

Background

The nation of Ethiopia is filled with rich cultures and traditions that remain deeply rooted in rural communities today, surviving the tests of time, modernization, and foreign influence. On the global order, some of these customs, such as female circumcision and early marriage, are criticized and labeled as harmful traditional practices, or HTPs, known to disproportionately affect women and children. Resultantly, women represent a group that is often subordinated and undeveloped in rural communities, despite the fact that they play an integral role in agricultural communities, handling 43% of agricultural work, and in the household. Educating a rural woman is one of the most profitable investments in terms of expected return to her family, community, and national economy, and in documented cases of prioritized female development, this education often begins in the realm of health.

In Ethiopia, a large obstacle to a woman's health lies in hegemonic practices such as female circumcision, early marriage, and male preference that relegate women into passive possessions with little autonomy. According to an official at the Ministry of Women, Youth, and Children Affairs, prevalence rates of female circumcision in Ethiopia have reduced from roughly 73% nationally in 1997, but only to 56% in 2008, while prevalence rates today are thought to be similar. Early marriage relegates a woman to the home and exposes her to many difficulties that arise from childbirth at a young age, such as obstetric fistula; Ethiopia, in particular, has one of the highest early marriage rates for women, with almost half of all women married before their 15th birthday. The state of maternal care provides insight into the traditional norms and values that predominate the country, even pertaining to access to healthcare. The survey reports, for example, that 89.5% of women in Ethiopia deliver at home, indicating the lack of awareness and availability of prenatal and antenatal care.

Similar previous programs in Ethiopia, where participants were given a goat upon graduation, have reported success, and the women were almost three times more likely to be in school compared to an area without the program, suggesting the importance of economic investment in the lives of rural girls.

¹Project Overview

Our goal is to train pre-organized groups of rural women about reproductive health and economic self-sufficiency so they may educate members of their local community to spread educational awareness and business investment amongst themselves. Our program extends from the research that Neha conducted surrounding harmful cultural practices such as females in Ethiopia in 2013. While on-site, she connected with ActionAid Ethiopia, an organization that has been working on female empowerment and poverty reduction programs in Ethiopia since 1989. Our project aligns with the mission of ActionAid through a shared vision of peace by promoting violence reduction and economic self-sufficiency amongst rural women. ActionAid Ethiopia has agreed to connect us with four local Self-Help Groups (SHGs), female volunteers in local communities who act as self-selected agents of change for their villages, in the northern Janamora Woreda (district), with each group consisting of ten women.¹ The trainings will consist of interactive lessons with activities and

¹ SHG volunteers serve as conversation facilitators within their own villages, educating women within a wide inter-village support network, and will be pre-selected by ActionAid from the area directly surrounding the Janamora district office. These training sessions will last about 3 days each in order to ensure that the women do not spend an extended period of time away from their homes.

audience participation, sampled from the open source material *Tuko Pamoja: Adolescent Reproductive Health and Life Skills Curriculum*, which has been used extensively in teaching reproductive health to rural Kenyan women, amongst other countries. It will cover the following topics:

Reproductive Health: A comprehensive overview of male and female anatomy and biological processes, the physical and mental changes that accompany puberty, pregnancy, and STDs. Culturally sensitive subject matter that is gender specific will be overseen by Neha so as to avoid infringing on local social norms. Local medical practitioners will also be recruited to provide professional knowledge.

Cultural Practices: A discussion of the harmful effects of socially influential and traditional practices such as female circumcision and early marriage/pregnancies. This curriculum will specifically be structured with the aid of ActionAid Ethiopia in order to avoid cultural insensitivities, and in order to best understand their cultural significance.

Economic Investment: Discussion of the vital role of women in improving a family's salary and health conditions, as well as facilitating talks on how to best manage funds to invest in the future. The program's end will consist of a donation from the Peace Project funds allocated to purchase sheep for retreat attendees to raise as investment capital.

Timeline

Week 1-2: We will stay in the capital city of Addis Ababa in order to finalize our curriculum and edit our lessons with input from ActionAid Ethiopia personnel at the national office, obtain materials necessary for the economic self sufficiency plan (i.e. sheep), and network to bring local speakers and medical professionals from the community to the training retreats.

Week 3-4: The next two weeks will be spent in Janamora Woreda, based in ActionAid's district office, focused on training the four SHGs to be able to spread this knowledge amongst their communities through the curriculum we have prepared

Week 5: The last week will be an evaluation/buffer period to account for any unanticipated delays or problems. We will conduct a survey to understand what the women have gained from our lessons.

Expected Outcomes and Future Impact

Our expected outcomes include to efficiently educate the women in the self-help groups so that they may spread knowledge about reproductive health throughout their respective communities and create a sustainable and effective network through the aid of ActionAid Ethiopia. Ideally, our curriculum can be taught to women of all ages but will prove most relevant and helpful to older adolescent girls aged 15-25. Additionally, the opportunity to raise purchased sheep aims to allow for a means of sustainable, self-sufficient economic empowerment for the rural women.

Qualifications

Matthew is a current junior in Weinberg majoring in Anthropology with a concentration in human biology. He has done maternal health research in Ho, Ghana consisting of interviews with mothers and community leaders, as well as conducting a general health needs assessment in Namugoga, Uganda through the IPD Group Fellowship Grant. His work abroad has repeatedly emphasized the importance of community-driven growth in education and economy.

Neha is a Sophomore Anthropology major and Global Health minor. She is an exec board member of GlobeMed, and is currently participating in the IPD Public Health Mentorship Program. Neha traveled to Harare, Ethiopia this past summer on a Weinberg Summer Research Grant to conduct research on the cultural perceptions of female circumcision as a human rights issue. She interviewed members of ActionAid Ethiopia and visited their Kombalcha office, which is when the relationship was initially built. From her experiences, she realized the critical need for women's development in rural environments, beginning with exposure to health realities at the community level.