

Empowering Rural Women: An Investment for the Future
Ethiopia
Northwestern University
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Section I: Project Implementation

The objective of our project was to empower rural, impoverished women in the district of Janamora, Amhara, Ethiopia through a series of reproductive health workshops that would serve to counter harmful, prevalent local practices such as early marriage, sexual violence, and unsafe sex. Additionally, each participating woman would receive two sheep in a micro-investment scheme in the hopes that they would return to their own communities with a means of economic self-sufficiency and to act as reproductive health educators and change-makers in their own right.

We received an additional \$2000 from the Northwestern University African Research Leadership Award to help support the micro-investment component of our project.

Our project proved to be a fruitful and rewarding experience, despite encountering a few difficulties that we did not anticipate. Prior to meeting with members of our supporting NGO, ActionAid Ethiopia, upon arrival in Addis Ababa, we were concerned about the logistics of our program because communication with ActionAid had decreased in the months leading up to our trip. When we arrived in Addis Ababa, we called the ActionAid office and made an appointment to speak with our contacts; the meeting went very well, and we were able to plan out the dates of our program, details about the women we would recruit, and the logistics of the sheep we would purchase. We confirmed that in-person conversations were much more productive than ones held over email. Language constraints also proved to be a barrier during our program, as most of the women who participated in our trainings did not speak or understand any English, and the few who did had a very basic level of understanding. Therefore, we recruited the services of a local female translator who had served as an English teacher for several years. There were times when she seemed a bit confused and potentially made some errors in her translations. However, our planned activities were mostly successful and the post-lesson evaluations generally reported information retention, indicating that the important points of our lesson plans were still effectively communicated. These post-lesson evaluations included a true-false activity that sought to highlight important points of the lesson and correct remaining misconceptions.

Originally, we intended to host four three-day workshops with ten women participating in each one, but at the advice of ActionAid, we changed plans and hosted two three-day workshops with twenty women each. Therefore, the overall length of our project was cut shorter than we had planned, but each workshop still remained the same length. This was important because we were still able to cover all components of our lesson plan. We still reached our goal of forty participating women total, and the larger workshops turned out well; with more women present, there was increased participation that made for more fruitful discussions than we otherwise would likely have had. We were very satisfied with how the trainings went and asked for honest feedback from the women each day; they expressed gratitude to have a safe space to talk about these issues, many of which are considered taboo to discuss in their own communities, such as the pleasures associated with sexual intercourse and open commentary about traditional practices like early marriage. The main critique that they provided was that at times the room got very noisy, as some of the women needed to bring their young children because there was nobody else to care for them. We tried our best to overcome the obstacle of crying children, but at times we had to take breaks to allow for the room to quiet down.

All of the women who attended the workshops live in the district of Janamora, Amhara, Ethiopia. Requirements for participation were as follows: they needed to be literate and have studied up to at least grade five, they needed to be from one of five selected nearby villages, they needed to agree to actively participate, they needed to be married, and they needed to be considered impoverished by ActionAid's standards. At the end of both three-day trainings, every participating woman received two sheep to take home as a means of economic micro-investment, and a certificate that would attest to her participation in the program. Fortunately, we had no budget constraints during the project, and were able to fund all aspects, including per diem for the women so they could spend nights near the compound and purchase food, light tea and soft drinks during the day, and sheep for the women.

We believe our program is sustainable because we encouraged a continuation of dialogue where each woman agreed to share what she learned with others in her community about female health rights and gender-based practices like early marriage. Additionally, now that the women have participated in a

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program supported by ActionAid, they can be called upon to serve in women's watch groups and other related efforts in the area as liaisons and representatives for their own communities. We hope that the micro-investment component is also sustainable, and that the women can use the two sheep as a long-term means to generate income. The Janamora local government has promised its assistance in advising and tracking the success of the micro-investment program as a basic means of monitoring and evaluation.

Section II: Contributions to Peace

It is difficult to define peace as an absolute or singular idea, simply because it is a holistic concept that is contingent on the interplay of multiple players. For there to be peace there must be harmony, a sense of freedom from fear, disorder, or disturbance. In our world today, absolute peace is all but impossible to come across, but it is through the aspirations to reach peace in small yet powerful ways that society make strides towards a more egalitarian and amicable existence for all.

We believe that our project contributes to peace because, through open discourse about female reproductive health and support network building for rural women, it aims to open up the dialogue on how to counter harmful local practices in the district of Janamora, Amhara, Ethiopia, such as early marriage, unsafe sex, and domestic violence, that disrupt peaceful lifestyles for women and their families. Educating women about their bodies and health rights is one of the most fundamentally powerful ways to empower them to become advocates for wellbeing in their own communities, a local and sustainable approach rather than one that relies on foreign intervention or oversight. We hope that by providing these forty women with some tools, knowledge, and resources to discuss these issues, many of which are still considered taboo in their communities, they may be able push for change and encourage safer and more opportunistic conditions for other women over time. Additionally, we hope that the distribution of sheep may serve to encourage entrepreneurial spirit and economic self-sufficiency for these women and their families. It is generally very expensive to purchase sheep in the community; if the sheep can play a role in the generation of income for the families, then it is our hope that the women might ease their own family's financial burdens and open up opportunities for education or business ventures.

Our project has made us realize that despite language barriers, poverty lines, or cultural obstacles, the desire for justice and equity really is a universal notion that people all over the world strive for. All forty women who participated in our trainings were ready to discuss, question, and critique the norms of their own communities and the ways that a woman's health is not always prioritized, a notion that we did not expect to openly hear. Many people, including some of our contacts at ActionAid, told us that some of the material in our curriculum might be too culturally sensitive. Ultimately, however, not only were the women open to discussing taboo topics like proper condom usage techniques and strategies to discuss sexual health with partners, but they did so enthusiastically and passionately after overcoming initial shyness. These women have been told their entire lives how a woman should or should not speak or behave. By creating a judgment-free zone, the women shared their thoughts and we could hear the passion in their voices as they spoke of how to strengthen resources and support systems for young girls in the future as well as how to educate them about reproductive health. It was inspiring to hear 18 year-old girls ask what they could do to help combat early-marriage in their own communities as they breastfed a baby in one hand and held a pen in the other, ready to take notes. Their genuine appreciation and gratitude towards us, which the women expressed at the end of each training day through kind words and joyous cultural dancing, was a heartwarming gesture for us two college students interested in public health and international development, but unsure about the realities of that career path. At the end of the day, we learned just as much from the forty women in our trainings as we hope they learned from us, as their own life experiences and struggles have contributed to an understanding of female health and its repercussions in an important way despite their lack of formal education or training. It is by empowering these local voices, and building off of the platforms of knowledge and understanding that already exist in these communities, that even impoverished women can become advocates for peace in their own small yet impactful ways.

"This experience was extremely powerful because it was the first time I got the opportunity to plan and carry out a project related to public health and international development work, particularly one addressing obstacles to female

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reproductive health care, which has always been my interest. It was extremely humbling to see the gratitude and happiness the women expressed at the end of each workshop day, and the passion with which they discussed their own life experiences- a genuine reminder that the desire for adequate health care and justice endures worldwide, but that there must be opportunities to propel this desire into action for change.” –Neha Reddy

“International partnership work has been a particularly instructive experience for me through its emphasis on cooperation across cultural barriers, languages, poverty lines, and individual egos. It is becoming increasingly apparent to me that individual resumes and top-tier college degrees are insufficient alone, and defer to the efforts of sincere hearts and determined spirits working in unison to effect change – the more I let go of my own presumptions and relied on the talents and experiences of others, the more easily the pieces of the puzzle came together to bring forth joy, empathy, and learning throughout these workshops.” –Matthew Zhou



Distributing sheep to the women at the end of workshop 1



A layout of the classroom, with the women listening closely to a lesson



Women participating in a true-false post lesson evaluation