

JASS Southern Africa in Malawi Reflections from Hope Chigudu

Wednesday, November 11, 2009

I Am My Sister's Keeper!

Our lives are written on our bodies.

Sisters!

Women living with HIV who are leaders in the AIDS movement in their communities in Malawi came together for the start of a four-day workshop organized by JASS. They started by creating startling and beautiful body maps. They did it without any artists to help. In groups of five, the women started by outlining their bodies on large sheets of paper. Each woman was drawn by the other women in the group. People stayed in their small groups to do this, sharing magic markers and other art materials. Through a series of imaginative exercises they added parts to the outline of their bodies. Then they added words, symbols, and pictures relating to their health, their history, their points of personal power, and their life goals. In this way, each woman recorded and shared her unique story of living with HIV or just of being. This was both a serious and playful process. (The Maps were taped up on the wall and enabled us to claim the workshop space as our own.)



"This picture and this project tell the story of my life: the hurts, pains, burns and the various opportunistic diseases are all written on my body. But it also tells the story of victory," said Doreen.

Body mapping helped the women to make visible that which ordinarily is invisible to others and, sometimes, invisible to themselves. The process created a safe space where each woman spoke openly about her journey with HIV and other struggles. Women were also offered support from those who best understand their situation: other women living with HIV. We wove movement building into this artistic process by offering opportunities for the women to discuss their health in the context of the stories told in their body maps, and the need to organize and mobilize to form a bigger movement to demand, fight back and claim their citizenship. It's difficult to fight back without hope. Through the mapping process and the discussions, one could see nuggets of hope surface. Although it brought up some bad memories and fears, the process was therapeutic and beautiful.

This morning, the collective organizing, mutual responsibility, and principle of sisterhood were reinforced by each participant taking on the responsibility of being another participant's 'guardian angel' throughout the workshop. Standing in a circle, with no front or back, with no leader or follower, with no distinction between the participant and workshop facilitator but as women, we realized that however different our journeys, experiences, or possibilities in life, we are united in our common experiences as women who have vaginas.

We reminded each other today that this is a meeting where every woman has the right to life, protection, safety, dignity, and respect, irrespective of class, educational background, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or preference, and any other distinction. It was therefore hoped that each participant would leave with an awareness of their basic human rights and how to assert these rights, having shared an opportunity to learn about, claim and contribute to the women's movement.

Since trust and confidentiality are critical at this meeting, participants were asked to reflect on and answer this question, "If you had a secret that you wanted to share, what kind of person would you share it with?" Some said that they would never share a secret but we agreed that life involves risk taking and we have to learn to take risks and to trust if we are to build a movement. At the end of the discussion, it was agreed that in order to share a secret, a person should be trustworthy, honest, non-judgmental, patient, caring, respectful, and understanding. We were all asked to embrace these qualities, and be the kind of person we would confide in.

During our discussion, sex workers were accused of being 'bad women' because they do not behave the way society expects 'good women' to. We paused and engaged in a conversation on what it really means to be a 'good' woman? (This happened in the last meeting too.) How easy is it for any woman to live up to society's expectations? Who has the power to set these expectations? Should women strive to meet these expectations, even when they are oppressive and limit them from realizing their full potential? How do sex workers perceive themselves? These are some of the questions that the participants sought to answer. We discussed the dangers of labeling, self perception, and self empowerment. As participants explored the societal and internalized perceptions of what 'good' and 'bad' women are, they were able to identify the impact these have on them, as well as the ways they use these perceptions to discriminate against others. We made it clear that if we continue to divide women into good and bad, we shall not move together as women fighting for the same thing. A movement can't be built on stereotypes.



As I am writing the participants are sharing their experiences regarding how they used the knowledge they acquired during in the last workshop and how they are building movements from where they are. The experiences are amazing, and powerful...a moment for JASS to be proud.

Thursday, November 12, 2009

Malawian women's stories may surprise you!

Some of us wore expressions of a most unprofessional glee as Victoria, one of the women at the workshop, a teacher by profession, made us smile by sharing a story of how she has been using also the training acquired in the last JASS workshop to 'disorganize' her church. She demanded to talk about HIV and AIDS, thus ending the culture of silence and stigma regarding the subject. We used her story to invite the other participants to share their own experiences.

We heard how petite Doreen used the leadership skills she acquired in the Blantyre workshop to lobby the company, for which she now works, to provide seeds to women living with HIV and AIDS.

Asnat went to the District Commissioner's office, bypassing 'hidden powers' and using the power within to demand to see the DC; she did. She demanded that seed coupons be given to HIV+ women.

Lillian 'crossed the line' (her words) by fighting for mobile clinics to provide ARVs for adults and children on the same day so that women don't have to travel long distances, many times a week to access ARVs for themselves and their children.

Many women shared how they had used the power to and within to mobilize and make demands.

On advocacy – many of the women boasted that their leadership skills have been transforming their lives and those of fellow women and girls by challenging systemic inequalities (including service delivery, especially of agricultural inputs; resource allocation such as land; laws and policies).

During yesterday's discussion there was some concern that there has been a growth of people and organizations providing 'cheap' counseling services. These often draw on people from the local community (often women) who do tireless work in providing home-based care and community-level counseling and support. Most of these people tend to have minimal training and minimal support. Actually, the majority is affiliated with religious institutions.

There is little oversight concerning the content of counseling advice, which is problematic given that counseling can reinforce rather than challenge prevailing gender norms (for example, in the case of faith-based counseling, women spoke of counseling against condom use in marriage as well as dissuading 'clients' from using ARVs so that they depend on prayer).

In addition there is almost no discussion around creating more empowering counseling and psycho- social frameworks for women and girls. Considering how culture, tradition and religion are still being used to control women's sexuality, perpetuate violence against women, and ensure that women remain subordinate to men, proper counseling is needed.

A case in point: some women confided that they had not had sex because they don't have partners and also don't trust men (so have backaches from lack of sex). The question that we discussed was a delicate one: if one has not had sex for ten years and just wants sex to recover from a backache, is love necessary and important? The aim was not to come to any conclusion but rather to leave it to each one of us to reflect.

The women understood the need to continue to interrogate the linkages between patriarchy, violence against women, denial of resources and service delivery and the feminization of HIV and AIDS, and to find ways of dealing with any of these critical issues in their plans (which they are working on as I am writing).

Inevitably, the discussion touched on sex workers. We concluded that irrespective of the moral and/or other judgments one might have about sex workers and the industry, in so far as human rights are indivisible, the abuse and denial of basic human rights of sex workers must be addressed.

Thursday, November 12, 2009

Crossing the Line in Malawi

Tonight we decided to chill – candles, blankets, drinks, chips; creating the kind of accommodating and comfortable atmosphere that would allow the us to engage effectively with issues that are regarded as very personal, reflective, spiritual – a challenging process indeed.

To address issues of discrimination, especially those related to the politics of sex and sexuality, and sexual rights, we chose to cross the line, by working in the margins, and taking some significant risks. We adopted a diverse range of strategies to bring subjects which are often considered controversial and insignificant from the periphery to the centre of our discussion. LGBTI issues came into the conversation (lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, intersex). The women looked disgusted, and some swore that they had never heard of such wickedness. However, one young woman shared that women had sex with each other in schools. So much so that they did not want to see boys during the holiday.

We continued to provoke this particular discussion until another participant shared that when her husband died, her grandmother advised her to get sexual pleasure from another woman. Slowly the truth emerged. The women spoke about how women pleased each other sexually in the past and how they (some of the 'participants') also did it as they were growing up.

I believe that next time these kinds of discussions will be easier to initiate. It was an interesting conversation and we truly saw people crossing the line.



Friday, November 13, 2009

The Flame that Will Build a Movement

This morning, the women left. We had a great time but also experienced some Oh! Shit moments. A young woman, six months pregnant, fell really sick. The truth is she came to the workshop sick. Most of the women we were with earlier this year look extremely wasted now. Part of the reason is that they are malnourished.

This morning I had breakfast with a young woman in her 20s. She told me how she was married off by her grandparents, at the age of 17, following the death of her parents, who both died of AIDS. She is HIV positive herself. Her husband, who infected her, abandoned her with her now five-year-old baby. She is taking care of her child, her siblings, and her sister's HIV positive baby. She narrated her story and both of us nearly choked on our breakfast.

As women continue to waste, they also continue to cross boundaries. JASS workshops, such as this one, embody the budding connections, and sisterhood among women living with HIV and AIDS, who come from all over Malawi. They symbolize the beginnings of a whisper, a rustle, a flame that will build into a stronger movement of women living with HIV/AIDS, and a strengthened sisterhood.

As the women received their JASS t-shirts yesterday, and as they danced, they were aware that the struggle had begun. But this time, instead of standing alone, they were moving towards change as a collective.

~ Hope Chigudu



*JASS shared Hope's daily emails with our global community by posting them on our blog:
<http://www.justassociates.org/blog/JASS.htm>*