

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT CASE STUDY

THE GOMBE GIRLS FOR MATERNAL & NEWBORN HEALTH

Project coordinator: Nasir Umar, IDEAS Project



Overview and context

The Gombe Girls for Maternal and Newborn Health was a collaborative project in Nigeria designed to raise awareness of issues around maternal health within the local community. During the project, teenage girls visited local healthcare facilities, and engaged with healthcare workers and new mothers to explore the factors that contribute to a safe and happy birth. Using creative activities such as PhotoVoice and dramatisation, the students illustrated their findings and communicated the importance of maternal health to a wider community audience.

Project aims

- To stimulate the interest of female students in current issues and challenges in maternal & newborn health systems, nursing and midwifery professions, and the study of science (biology, chemistry and medicine).
- To demonstrate to young female students that further education or professional development will not impair their ability to be a wife or mother.
- Allow female students to ascertain the level of awareness among their male peers on these critical issues.
- Engage important stakeholders including public officials, community and religious leaders on girls' empowerment and issues of maternal health.
- Promote sustained collaboration between LSHTM and partner institutions and communities in Nigeria.

The audience

The primary audience for this project was young female students aged 14-18 living in Gombe state, Nigeria. The students invited to participate in the project were sourced via existing research contacts and through the Government Girls Secondary School Doma.

The project's secondary audience was the wider community, with a particularly focus on fathers, brothers, teachers and other public officials. These audiences were reached through the public presentations of the students' work at the end of the project.

The basics

Who: Young female students

What: Raise awareness of maternal health

When: June – September 2016

Where: Gombe state, Nigeria

How: School workshop, PhotoVoice & dramas

Funder: LSHTM Small Grants Scheme

The project

The project involved a series of workshops and a mini research project with female secondary school students. The first workshops were attended by students and government health workers (nurses and midwives), who acted as mentors. Topics discussed included:

- The challenges in maternal & newborn health, including facility and home deliveries.
- Scientific concepts on why and how to assess the status of maternal & newborn health in Nigeria.
- Nigerian women in higher education.
- Social awareness of issues in maternal & newborn health and gender equality.

By the numbers

Development time: 2 months

Project duration: 2 weeks

No. of participants: 10-15 students

LSHTM staff involved: 2

Other professional staff: 3

No. of volunteers: N/A

Project budget: £1000

The students undertook a research project in small groups, to answer the question: What makes a happy birth? During the project, students followed maternal & newborn health workers around their daily working life. They met with pregnant women and mothers in four different health facilities to discuss their experiences of pregnancy and their interaction with the healthcare system. The students used cameras to document the experiences.

After the conclusion of the project, each group developed their findings into dramatised narratives, to illustrate what makes a happy birth. They presented their image slideshows (PhotoVoice) and plays to an audience that included fathers, brothers, and other community leaders such as teachers and public officials.

Collaboration and external partners

- Gombe State Primary Healthcare Development Agency
- Gombe State Ministry for Education
- Data Research Mapping Consult
- Gombe Girls College Doma

Before the project

Major planning and development tasks

Seeking stakeholder support/approval: The project involved participation from schools, healthcare facilities and their staff, so government and school cooperation was essential. Approval was required from Gombe State Ministry of Education, Gombe State Primary Health Care Development Agency, and the health facilities that were visited. Developing these partnerships took a great deal of time and effort, as the team needed to obtain approvals from each agency, identify key personnel to work with and secure commitment to the project.

Parental consent and school support: Parental consent was required for the students' participation. This was arranged with the assistance of the authorities at the Government Girls College, Doma.

Sourcing and developing project resources: The creation and development of resources for the project took time. This included the design and production of flyers, posters and t-shirts. The project also required educational tools and resources including cameras, anatomical models etc., which had to be sourced before the project began.

Main challenges

Project politics: Each government agency wanted to take a lead role in execution of the project, and often wished to take sole credit for project outcomes. The project was heavily dependent upon cooperation from all agencies involved, so although this was an unexpected challenge, it had to be navigated with care.

SOLUTION: Work was done early on to develop clear roles and responsibilities for each organisation. An event agenda was also developed to give each agency the appropriate exposure and credit.

Managing budget expectations: Because the project had international funding (i.e. The School's grant) there were high expectations with regards to project scope and budget. For example, some suggestions made during planning sessions were well beyond the project's budget.

SOLUTION: The total budgetary allocation for the project had to be made clear from early in development, to ensure all project partners had realistic expectations about the project's potential. The team also kept track of spending and kept all partners updated on the project's outlook.

Key costs

Internal transport: £500

Cameras & equipment: £110

Catering: £100

Stationary: £50

Multimedia production: £250

Project outcomes

The project was a great success; students demonstrated 'what makes a happy birth' through their presentations and the final presentation was well attended and well received by the community. Qualitative interviews with students before and after the project, and informal audience evaluation suggested several key outcomes:

Understanding: Students and audience members gained a better understanding of maternal health, and what 'makes a happy birth', including the role of mothers and health workers, the importance of clean birthing environments and the importance of caring health workers. They also showed an appreciation for the important roles husbands and other male family members have during pregnancy and childbirth.

Attitude: After the project, students voiced an appreciation of the role of health workers, and a desire to continue their education, and become health workers themselves. Students developed a greater insight into and appreciation of health research in the region. There was also more recognition of male roles in maternal health.

Skills: Participating students had the opportunity to expand and improve on the skills in a number of creative areas such as photography, narrative, and drama throughout the project.

What worked?

Partnerships: Putting in the hard work to develop good relationships with government agencies early on was highly beneficial. Once those partnerships were established, everything went smoothly; partners participated in the initial briefings and lectures to the girls, which was massively helpful. The girls also had unfettered access to the health facilities they visited to shadow and interact with health workers, ask questions and take pictures. The Girls College provided both human and material support to the students and the wider project.

PhotoVoice: The girls really enjoyed playing with their cameras, and took amazing pictures that they used later to articulate their experiences visiting different health facilities during the final presentation.

Using drama for communication: This team-based exercise was a lot of work for one day, but generated great enthusiasm as each group tried to 'outperform' the others. The students encouraged and provided feedback to each other, fostering a healthy and positive environment in which they were able to explore their findings. The school's principal was so impressed she planned for the girls to perform again for the whole school.

What didn't work?

Travel disruptions altered plans: Flights from Abuja to Gombe got cancelled, then delayed, forcing planning meetings to be pushed back; the meeting was held at 8.00pm in the hotel lobby instead of 9.00am at the school.

SOLUTION: As with most project implementation one has to learn to roll with uncertainties and changes. Be flexible and always have a contingency plan. Consider the ramifications of flight delays or cancellations and be sure to allow enough time for such unplanned complications.

Feedback from participants

The project received positive feedback from the audience at the final presentation. They found the subject matter extremely relevant for the students, who they recognised as future parents and future leaders. There were calls for public health interventions in maternal & newborn health to increasingly target adolescent girls.

The plays also highlighted the role of men in maternal health, leading to audience calls for similar projects to be done in boys' schools, and calls for public health interventions about maternal health aimed at adolescent boys.

Future potential or plans

Learning resources (such as anatomical models, posters, cameras etc.) were handed over to the Government Girls School, which signed a contract declaring they would use the materials for similar engagement projects in future. A similar project targeting adolescent boys is also being considered in future, due to audience feedback.

The students planned to form a 'MNH club' to pursue other projects. The state Primary Health Care Development Agency and two additional partners committed to inviting the proposed club to attend maternal & newborn health events in Gombe as a way of supporting the project further.

Advice for other researchers

- Establish who your main partner is and where to situate your project. Having multiple partners is good, but means more effort obtaining approvals, managing relationships, and minimising costs.
- Be upfront with the budgetary allocation of the project to manage expectations early on.
- Public engagement is really a rewarding experience; you get to raise the profile of LSHTM and other projects in the communities you work with. I would encourage other staff and students to try it.

Further information

You can find out more about the project at the following links:

- [Engaging young Nigerian girls in the science \(and challenges\) of maternal health](#)
- For images of the project, please visit the [LSHTM IDEAS Flickr account](#)

Contact

For more information about this public engagement project, Nasir Umar can be contacted via email:

Nasir.Umar@lshtm.ac.uk.

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