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“The Power of Public Health: The Girls’ Room Project and its Impact on Girls’ Gendered Experiences in Rwandan Secondary Schools”

Returning to Rwanda for a second summer of research was both exciting and nerve-racking. Unlike my previous summer of teaching and researching, this time all of my efforts were focused on interviews, focus groups, and observational conversations with a variety of individuals. While I had previous experience researching in Rwanda, I was nervous for the challenges that I would face, as Rwanda is a country of silence and hidden truths. So much is said and understood behind closed doors, unapproachable to those who are unaware of the sociopolitical atmosphere in the country, which many argue is following the trajectory toward full dictatorship, especially with the most recent amendment of the constitution to allow the current president to remain in power for up to 30 more years. When I approached this topic with close friends, they would all say the same thing: “We’d rather have one president for 100 years than another genocide.”

This idea of silence and secret collective understanding proved to be extremely culturally pervasive in my research. The girls that I worked with often cited their periods and teen pregnancy as more embarrassing than HIV, explaining that while HIV/AIDS is deadly, “at least you can’t see it.” Throughout all of my focus groups this sentiment was echoed, concluding with an overwhelming majority of girls deciding that the threat of beginning menstruation in public or the possibility for teen pregnancy was far worse than any sexually transmitted infection that they could contract. The only group that was more concerned about HIV than pregnancy was the girls from Muhanga, a village in the Southern Province. This is most likely because these students

lived in a village heavily affected by HIV, with over fifty percent of its members suffering from the disease.

Prior to traveling to Rwanda, I spoke with Professor Bolten about the issue of this silent secrecy, as I often struggled to get adults to communicate their true thoughts and feelings last summer. In one interview in particular, a close friend of mine left out key information about teen pregnancy and rape in schools, which she had previously told me about in informal conversations (she also left all of this information out of her dissertation that I later edited for her, although it would have proved invaluable in her argument). Surprisingly, though, I did not face this same challenge this summer. All of the girls and adults that I spoke with were open to my questions, only sometimes appearing slightly uncomfortable about the nature of the topic because culturally it is something that is not talked about publically, and especially not with an American stranger. I chose to use a research assistant after my original coordination of schools fell through, which I believe was the most important component to my success. Having a Rwandan accompany me and coordinate the focus groups provided me with a sense of authority and legitimacy, indicating that there was a Rwandan who trusted me as an individual, which in turn encouraged my interviewees to trust me. This helped me overcome the barrier of secrecy and silence with all of my interviewees.

As is inevitable and natural in anthropological fieldwork, my project changed quite a bit. My original focus was placed on reproductive health for adolescents and how it pertains to advancements in public health policy, however I quickly realized that this topic was mostly a dead-end. Because the program was government sponsored, the students unanimously claimed that their schools had “Girls’ Rooms,” which were decently supplied and frequently used. The politics of silence forced this project to be a non-discussion, even though my research assistant

told me that there are definitely varying degrees of efficacy in the implementation of the Girls' Room. He also encouraged me to start asking questions about other causes of school dropouts, especially teen pregnancy, which all of my interviewees cited as a major factor. They began to explain that many of their classmates were complicit in "transactional sex" which is essentially the use of sexual favors for money or other goods in return. Many girls used sex as a means by which their school fees and cell phone bills could be paid. This phenomenon is pervasive across cultures, but in Rwanda reflects a sense of secret sexual liberation, as these girls are able to use their sexuality to assert independence from their families. Many interviewees cited that they felt the need to engage in transactional sex because they felt the need to relieve their family of the financial burden that they posed. They often indicated that they felt they were much more financially expensive for their families than their brothers, which often caused them to choose not to attend university but instead begin work immediately so that their families no longer had to support them.

Beyond the discussion of teen pregnancy and transactional sex, many conversations also led to the discussion of genital manipulation. In a conversation with Professor Bolten midway through my research, she suggested I add a question about reproductive rituals that may have existed or still do exist. Teachers and students alike cited "pulling" as an important cultural component, in which the labia minora are elongated for aesthetic purposes and increased male pleasure. When asked if they wanted to participate in this ritual, most of the girls felt they had no choice, as they were told that they would be undesirable and embarrass their families if their husband discovered they had not "pulled" and chose to leave them for another wife who could better please him. Furthermore, many girls cited that the actions were painful and undesirable,

indicating that its classification as female genital manipulation (not mutilation) might not be as accurate as many medical scholars suggest.

Through my research, I also discovered that all discussions of menstruation, reproduction, and genital manipulation are kept very quiet and hidden from the social sphere. Additionally, I noted that conversations about periods and elongation were carried out not by the mothers of these girls, but rather their older sisters, aunts, or neighbors. There appeared to be a specific social stigma surrounding the mother-daughter conversations of reproduction that are a cornerstone of puberty and adolescence in the United States. When I inquired why the mother was socially unable to address these topics with her daughter, the response was unanimously “it’s just our culture.” This discovery helped me to identify a different social structure in which the entire community plays active roles in puberty and reproduction, rather than a two-person dynamic of mother-daughter, which exists in many other cultures including my own.

Another interesting yet unexpected discovery I came across was a widespread dislike for the use of contraceptive methods. There were a few primary reasons that students and adults used to support their point of view. First, students often claimed that they thought the presence of condoms in secondary schools would encourage their peers to be sexually active, as their primary fear was pregnancy. Second, they explained that they were taught birth control was physically harmful and would lead to infertility, which would have been incredibly socially unacceptable, as fertility and motherhood are the cornerstones of femininity in Rwanda. Finally, adults also explained that within marriage condoms are not used, as an important cultural component of sexual intercourse is the exchange of bodily fluids as a bonding tool. This complicates the problem of sexually transmitted infections, whose transmission is usually prevented by the use of condoms.

Throughout the entirety of this research process, I was focused on understanding adolescent reproduction as it pertains to Rwandan culture and secondary education. By asking questions about STIs, HIV/AIDS, pregnancy, contraception, and menstruation, I was able to paint a cohesive picture of the contributing factors to secondary school dropouts in the arena of female reproduction. With the interviews and field notes that I have, I plan to complete my senior thesis in anthropology, which I hope to publish in the *Journal of Undergraduate Ethnography*. This experience played an integral role in my overall academic development and helped me to grow as an anthropologist.