



EMPOWERING ADOLESCENT GIRLS THROUGH SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH EDUCATION IN TANZANIA

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These reflections on the Context Matters research grant program, report on a multi-stage qualitative research project – Empowering Adolescent Girls through Sexual and Reproductive Health Education in Tanzania - which was conducted in Kahama, Shinyanga region in Tanzania. Through the concept of intergenerational literacy, the research sought to explore the intersections between literacy, sexuality and gender to understand and document how SRHL subjectivities are connected to the lives of adolescent girls living in GBV context in rural community in Kahama district Tanzania. The project also had an intervention aspect, where, with the help of teachers, we created a youth club and a centre for intergenerational SRHL in the same school. The goal of intervention was to provide education to adolescent girls and their parents on sexual and reproductive health rights, create a safe space for girls and boys to interact, minimize teenage pregnancies and promote girls' completion of basic education.

The project focused on adolescents (ages 6-12) and on how they experienced it. SRHL at home and in school. We found that both parents and school were silent on sexual and reproductive health issues, and these silences prompted that developed in girls to secretly access SRHL from somewhere else, especially from their older siblings, friends and peers, leading many to practice unsafe sex with the consequence of unwanted pregnancies, exposure to STIs and other related infections such as HIV Aids and expulsion from school.

During the research process, we encountered some challenges that led to some delays. The first challenge was related to the recruitment of participants. Initially we had extensive discussions with influential community members, who had agreed to help in identifying the research participants and we were able to recruit 90 participants. In the midst of filling the initial questionnaire the

project was brought into question due to misunderstanding of the concept of ‘sexual and reproductive rights for adolescent girls, which was perceived as a ‘hidden agenda’ and ‘alien idea’. Subsequently, the research was halted until rectifications could be made. Once the adjustments were made and we were ready to continue, the initial group no longer wanted to be involved, so we were forced to recruit other research participants, which took some time. Again, in the middle of collecting filling the questionnaires there was a threat of the return of a second variant of COVID 19 in the community. Although this was only a rumor that had spread after the demise of an influential community member, it nearly made us fail to convince the participants to continue but many were too fearful and not ready. I decided to approach a pastor (Lutheran church) to discuss the project and the challenges we were facing with respect to the participants’ reluctance to complete the questionnaires. With his help eventually, it was possible to get 75 people to complete the questionnaire. The process was not that smooth as some were doubtful about the goal of the project and were uncomfortable with the topic of sexual and reproductive issues and the social taboo around it.

Despite the above challenges, CODE grant and the research project have allowed me to explore the real-life context of adolescents in one rural community in Kahama district and provide insights into the contextual factors influencing the phenomenon of high teenage pregnancies and school truancy among adolescent girls in Tanzania.

As an academic and a researcher, this project has opened many doors for me that I had not thought existed. It helped me to realize that SRHL as a social phenomenon shape everybody’s life, and thus, it is an important component in formal education curriculum and an essential area for research

focus. Second, SRHL is a field that reaches beyond formal education, and we should consider it as an important aspect in the provision of quality education at all levels and in multiple contexts.

This project helped me to challenge the discourses of quality and inclusive education which focus on gender balance in education to demonstrate that women and girls are marginalized by their gendered position and are not supported to become empowered to transcend those positions and change their life trajectories. As a result, I have proposed an integration of SRHL in teacher education programs. Second, I have initiated the integration of sexual and reproductive health literacy in the review of teacher education curricular in the faculty of Education.

The empirical data of the lives of adolescent girls in Kahama allows the production of articles, books and memoirs for dissemination of knowledge and information that might not otherwise be published. To promote the results of this research, I have an action plan in place that includes several activities. First, I am in the process of finalizing a paper titled, *Empowering Adolescent Girls Through Sexual and Reproductive Health Education (SRHE) in Tanzania*, which will be presented to stakeholders meeting in June 2023. From this meeting, policy briefs will be developed with a goal to scale up the project to the national level. Third, I am in the process of developing a program on Family Literacy. This program will be offered to undergraduate students in the Department of Educational Foundation and Adult Education (EFADE) starting from 2024 academic year. Fourth, I am in the process of writing a book titled: Sexual and Reproductive Health Literacy in Africa: Intergenerational Perspective. Fifth, I am planning to convene a conference in September 2023 on Sexual and Reproductive Health Literacy. The papers that will be presented will be peer reviewed to be published wide, and few will be published as a special issue in the

Open University of Tanzania journal titled: Journal of Issues and Practice in Education (JIPE) that is housed in the Faculty of Education.

In future, I plan to start an academic Association of Sexual and Reproductive Health Literacy, as a representative focus for Sexual and Reproductive Health Literacy research and teaching in universities in Tanzania and Africa in general. All these writings and initiatives will trigger discussions on how to overcome the impasse of normative girls and women's education discourses that continue to disadvantage them and instead toward a more empowering frame that includes SRHL.

The intergenerational aspect of the project is a reminder of the importance of inclusion of the community perspective in higher learning curricula. This also may involve the creation of higher education-community empowerment programs.

In this project we received very constructive, positive and supportive feedback from CODE and the review committee. The feedback we received was always timely and very important in shaping our thinking and encouraging us to focus on the project. We cannot think of any different way that CODE and the review committee could change in the way they will support the researchers in the future.

There were no challenges that we faced in the application process. The only problem that the research team faced was during the recruitment of participants as well as the delays due to COVID 19. At times when we thought we should abandon the whole project, CODE and the review

committee were always encouraging and agreed to extend the deadlines. We are very thankful to them and without their support, we would not have completed the project.

In order to monitor the implementation of the youth club and literacy centre, we have informally talked to the Kahama District Education officer who agreed to conduct regular meetings to encourage and motivate the teachers who are volunteering in running these two units in their school. He promised to consider them as doing a special duty and thus, lessen their teaching workload. Second, I plan to support two of my graduate students to do research on assessing the effectiveness of the youth club and literacy centre on community and youth empowerment.

Empowering adolescent girls through sexual and reproductive health education in Tanzania is my life career goal and I have many plans for future extension and expansion of this project. First, even though Tanzania is led by a female president, GBV and teenage pregnancies (TPs) are on the rise. My plan is to expand this project to a wider coverage Tabora, Dodoma and Shinyanga, the regions that are currently leading in GBV. As for the extension of the project, the key result that came out of this research was the silences on SRHL. This conspicuous silence needs to be further interrogated to find out which parent-child communication approaches are effective in promoting SRHL.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the Context Matters research grant has opened many doors for me as a researcher and an academic. I am very excited about the chance it has given me in terms of experience. I am very thankful to CODE for believing in me and giving me a chance to do this research. This experience has allowed me to reflect on who I am and what contribution I can make to my country that I had not thought of before.

The unexpected challenges in the field are what I believed would be useful in learning more about how to work better with the community members as researchers and an academic.