

3rd Annual Young Women's Leadership Conference

“Step Up and Speak Out!”

October 27th-29th 2008, Hlotse, Leribe

Since 2006, Help Lesotho (HL) hosts Young Women's Leadership Conferences to address issues of gender equity and health in an intimate, all-female group setting. This three-day event deals with such optics as: gender equality, relationships, self-image, death and grieving, rape and sexual abuse, sexual health and anatomy, and HIV and AIDS. Attendees were selected by HL staff, principals, and twinned school orphan leads on their leadership potential, academic success, and perceived potential to benefit from the conference. Food, transportation, and accommodations costs were covered for all participants.

Attendees

Experience from previous conferences demonstrated that thirty attendees was an ideal number to facilitate active participation and to stimulate discussion. This year, twenty-nine young women from Thaba-Tseka, Maseru, Buthe-Buthe, Pitseng, and Hlotse participated, including eighteen sponsored girls and two members from the *Help Lesotho Youth Corps* (HLYC). For most participants, this was their first opportunity to partake in discussions of such critical and often painful issues.

Events and Speakers

All of HLs Women's Conferences are structured around the theme “**Step Up and Speak Out!**” to encourage young women to think for themselves and say what they think. In building self-confidence, we use the slogan “We are wonderful!” Modules are provide information and the message of empowerment, self-actualization, and confidence. HL staff and interns facilitate modules on identity, death and grieving, healthy relationships, the female body and safer sex, rape and sexual abuse, and stigma and discrimination. A female speaker from a local support group, *Phelisanang Bohepelong*, came and spoke to the group about her life as an HIV positive woman. She addressed issues such as fear of testing, telling her loved ones, and life after knowing her status. On the final day of the conference, a local organization, *Population Services International/New Start* (PSI), provided voluntary HIV testing and counselling for all attendees.

The module on death and grieving included a grief work booklet to take home and complete as a support in dealing with death or the loss of a loved one by recording their own emotions and feelings. The girls were also given time for journaling to record their thoughts and to reflect on what they were learning at the conference. This was encouraged not only during the scheduled time slots, but in the evenings and in their spare time as well. Journaling is a useful tool for recording everyday thoughts and feelings. The girls were also encouraged to continue journaling after the duration of conference as a form of self-therapy. Time and guidance was allotted for speech-writing. HL's annual speech writing contest on Gender and/or Leadership is judged by a Canadian panel, with winners receiving a scholarship prize and an invitation our annual Leadership Camp in January. The winners read their

speech at the Leadership Camp and have it published on the HL website. Many girls used their free time to draft speeches, to seek assistance and advice from conference facilitators.

Impact and Results

In a society where gender discrimination is common and open discussion on the topic is often discouraged, the need for these conferences is evident. The enthusiastic participation of the young women from the very beginning of the conference highlights their desire and interest in learning about these issues. They love to learn and ask questions.

At the end of the conference, girls evaluated each module based on effectiveness, relevance, and usefulness. There was also a series of questions such as: “give examples of three ideas/facts that you learned from this conference” and “give examples on how your behaviours/actions will change after the conference”. In addition to these evaluations, the girls were asked to cite a topic that they were able to identify with the most. These evaluations are a useful guide to future planning and content relevance.

The evaluations indicated that many individuals gained a more enhanced understanding of HIV/AIDS, anatomy, and condom use. Concepts such as death and grieving, rape and sexual abuse, and healthy relationships were well-received. Their eagerness to engage in these often forbidden topics was clear throughout and expressed so often by their verbal and written comments:

- “I am not to blame for someone’s death”
- “ I have to stand up for my own rights”
- “I’ve learned how important we are as girls”
- “To know my status”
- “I know abuse is wrong”
- “To be proud”
- “We need to respect people with HIV”
- “We have been taught how to be a good friend”
- “I know we have to abstain because condoms are not 100%”
- “I will try and pass the things I have learned here to my friends”
- “If a person is HIV positive it is not the end of their life”
- “How to use a condom”
- “I am very glad I tested”

On the last day of the conference, PSI provided voluntary HIV counselling and testing for all associated with the conference. Sixteen girls chose to test, one of whom tested positive. The low number of girls who tested can be explained by the fact that many had already been tested within the past three months. It is encouraging to note that these girls understood the importance of knowing their status and voluntarily had re-tested.

Throughout the conference, the slogan “We are Wonderful!” was shouted many times to reiterate to these girls that they are special and that they deserve respect not only from others, but from themselves as well. They were frequently reminded that they were selected to attend by people who believe in them and that they have the potential to be leaders. This was a very important part of the

conference, as the girls were there to learn and simultaneously build self-confidence. The conference also provides young women and HL facilitators a new and different way to relate to each other. Participants are given encouragement, support, and love in an environment where they feel safe, protected, and free from judgement. This invaluable opportunity has everlasting effects on these young women.

Survey Analysis

Each participant completed a pre and post conference HL survey on HIV/AIDS knowledge and gender attitudes. The surveys, written in Sesotho, score comprehension levels before the camp and again after as a means to measure the shift in knowledge due to the modules and training. HL uses these surveys at every event for data collection and analyses of various variables pertaining to knowledge and attitudes toward HIV/AIDS and gender equity. Surveys from the camp are entered into the data processing system and analyzed.

Summary and Recommendations

Needless to say, the 2008 Women's Conference was a successful event. Not only did these young women leave with life transforming information, but they flourished in self-awareness and confidence. They spent three days sharing ideas, personal thoughts and experiences, and asking numerous questions. They gained a better understanding of difficult issues such as death, sexual abuse, and HIV/AIDS. The appreciation shown by the young women at the end of the conference also speaks for itself in terms of success, as many girls identified themselves as having been "lucky" to attend. The conference gave these young women the opportunity to laugh together, cry together, and to realize that they are not alone in the world. The value of these conferences is immeasurable.

In terms of future recommendations, it was decided to provide these participants with a second re-iterative conference in six months to delve deeper into the issues while still fresh in their minds. By doing so, modules on basic anatomy and condoms could be omitted, devoting more time to topics that require further analysis and consideration. Further investigation of concepts such as gender equity and self-confidence would have a greater impact, would provide the opportunity to foster their critical thinking skills, and would build upon the knowledge that was acquired during the first conference.

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