The Santander Travel Award and the Irene Marshall Award allowed me the opportunity to carry out Participatory Action Research, in Barut, Kenya to begin to understand the effects of Early and Forced Marriage on a woman’s health, education and economic empowerment.

Development affects women differently to men and changes in the global economy are having a significant impact on gender-based social development in all countries, a key trend being the increased poverty of women, which is enforced by Early and Forced Marriage (EFM) (The Commonwealth 2013). Women suffer disproportionately through the effects of EFM on their education, health and financial situation, but their poverty also manifests in unequal participation in decision-making. It is therefore vital that we use the opportunity to provide an equal voice for women in PAR and the knowledge gained to work with women, civil society and government to make social changes at a local and global level.

The contributing causes of early forced marriage are complex and deep rooted, varying between communities and countries (UNICEF, 2013) and so upon initial design of our research programme, I wanted to work with and to train local facilitators in PAR methods, to gain the most accurate research results possible.

Together, we initiated a research programme that would give the participants the freedom to generate the key concepts on which to base the following stages of our research, dismissing any preconceived ideas we may have had and giving the women and girls the opportunity to carry out the research as co-facilitators, alongside their peers and to develop their own understanding of the issues, whilst developing leadership (Berg Powers and Allaman, 2012).

Through the schools already established debate club the participants were given the topic of marriage, 40 girls debated for and against the notion of marriage. With the majority of girls in the group married by age 15 and although specific to the Barut area, we were able to support the common negative factors that underpin EFM, such as poverty, gender inequality, lack of education, unemployment, cultural expectations and lack of enforced child rights.

With key concepts established, the participants were broken into groups to carry out Venn diagrams, Timelines and Objective Flowers and discussion was encouraged. With feedback to the group and boarder discussion, alongside analysis of the diagrams, we were able to ascertain that the participants viewed the lack of education as the most significant cause of forced marriage, but also highlighted education as a tool for the advocacy of an end to forced marriage, thus creating a basis for our intervention programme.

Through carrying out focus groups trust was gained by the local facilitator, and women and girls opened up about the unspoken taboo of Female Genitalia Mutlilation, for which there is no data (Kirstof and Wudunn, 2009). In doing so, they raised the health implications associated with forced marriage, which not only highlighted this as a development issue that needed to be addressed, but initiated our quantitative data in partnership with local health centres.

With trust gained, the women and girls began to discuss the sensitive role of parents, siblings and men in their decisions. With significant influence stemming from family members, the women encouraged our engagement of these community members in our research. We achieved this through separate focus groups and began to understand the underlying pressures on women. With this, came the basis of a community wide human rights educational programme, championed by key male and elder members of our focus groups that spoke out for the rights of women and girls in light of education and employment.
As a result of our PAR we were able to increase empowerment and gender equality through the research process, which was identified through comparative spider web diagrams before and after the programme and to design an intervention programme for Raise Her Voice, our gender equality initiative. The aim is for this programme to be expanded to all 7 districts in the Barut area, and to achieve the same snowball effect as the Tostan movement in West Africa.

It is said that when the history of African Development is written, a turning point will be the empowerment of women. Empowerment is contagious and is achieved person by person, and spread village to village (Kirstof and Wudunn, 2009), Participatory Action Research presents a tool to do so.

Reading List

Aston, A. (2013). Are bottom-up sustainability initiatives filling gap left by Rio+20?.


