

Julia and her group adopted a mantra of “women supporting women.”

the image project

How comfortable do you feel talking about your body, sexuality, womanhood? For the women in the rural villages of Limpopo, a discussion about any one of these topics was unheard of until a revolutionary new project, led by **JULIA KIM**, turned the spotlight on exactly what they were afraid of.

WE ARE SITTING IN A CIRCLE ON the dusty floor of an empty church, miles from the nearest town, Burgersfort, in Limpopo province. The 40 or so SePedi women gathered are from the poorest families in their village. Some have babies strapped to their backs, many are grandmothers. Tebogo, a normally confident, dignified mother of four, is lying on her back on a large piece of white paper. Her arms and legs are stretched out like a star, and she looks nervous and more than a little vulnerable.

They are drawing maps. Not of the country, not of the cosmos, but of something that feels even scarier and

uncharted: their bodies. As I look on, the women around Tebogo pick up thick marking pens and start tracing the outline of her body on the paper. “Body mapping” is what we call it, and it is the start of a one-hour session that will take us into a lively, sometimes heated, discussion about womanhood, sexuality, HIV and Aids.

The outline of the map complete, Tebogo stands up. Lulu Ndhlovu, who is leading the session, turns to the women. “Now I want you to draw on the paper,” she says. “What happens to your body when you menstruate? Draw everything – what happens, where, how it feels.” There’s a gasp,

then nervous laughter. And then, to my relief, they pick up their markers and get to work. They don’t know it yet, but this group has the easier task. Their neighbours in the next circle have just finished their own maps, and Lulu will ask them to do the same thing – only this time, depicting what happens, and how it feels, when they have sex.

Lulu and I glance at each other, exchanging silent moral support. What do we think we’re doing? And how on earth did we end up here? Although Lulu grew up and studied in cities, she made a conscious choice to come back and work in rural South Africa, where,

she believes, the greatest needs are, and where she can make a difference.

Three years ago, Lulu and I joined the Intervention with Microfinance for Aids and Gender Equity (IMAGE) project, an initiative in response to the realisation that the conventional “ABC” HIV prevention messages – abstain, be faithful and use condoms – were not enough. In South Africa, as in many places around the world, poverty and unequal power relations between men and women shape the nature of sexual relationships. What did it mean for a girl to abstain from sex when her relationship with an older man ensured that there would be food on the table? And for women experiencing domestic violence, how could they suggest using a condom, knowing the suspicion this might provoke?

In sub-Saharan Africa, women make up the majority of those infected with HIV, and young women are at three times the risk as young men. To get to the root of the problem, we had to go deeper: Poverty, women’s unequal status in society and violence against women. The organisation that I work for in South Africa, the Rural Aids and Development Action Research Programme (RADAR) (see box), had experience with HIV training and research, but we needed a partner who could help us tackle some of these economic and social issues. The Small Enterprise Foundation (SEF), in nearby Tzaneen, had been doing this kind of work for years (see box).

Together we came up with a plan. In each village, loan centres of about 40 SEF women were already meeting every fortnight to repay loans, discuss business plans and give each other moral support. Why not piggyback a gender and HIV training programme on this? We had to do more than just talk about the “ABCs.” Instead, we wanted women to start asking difficult questions. As little girls, what were the subtle (or not so subtle) messages they had picked up about how they should behave? And what were the implications of wedding songs that taught a young bride “the road ahead will be rough?” We decided to spend the first half of the 10-part training programme

examining the notion of gender roles and “culture,” before turning to domestic violence, HIV and Aids. Writer

and gender activist Mmatshilo Motsei helped us to develop the training programme, and Lulu and nine other young women – Alinah, Malebo, Kedibone, Frieda, Maria, Gladys, Rebecca, Rachel and Charlotte – were appointed to the first training team. And so the IMAGE project was born.

Despite our serious agenda, the sessions were often fun. Many of the women couldn’t read, so we used games and role-playing to encourage them to open up and participate. Given the fact that the group crossed several generations (the youngest was 18 and the oldest 96), we felt confident we were doing well. That is, until we reached the body-mapping session.

It was clear from the women’s resistance that we had touched a sensitive place. They complained: “It is not our culture to talk about such issues.” We discovered that in the local language, there was no “neutral” or scientific way of talking about women’s intimate parts. “We will write these names but we can’t say them out loud,” said one.

As the women began to open up, what was revealed was a deep sense of confusion and shame. Recalling when they began to menstruate, many confessed that no one had prepared them or explained what was happening to their bodies. Because the words for their intimate parts were considered dirty or ugly, it coloured how they felt about a woman’s body and its basic functions. “We are ashamed of our menstrual blood because it comes from an ugly place,” said one woman. It didn’t help that cultural messages reinforced the images of contamination: going to church while menstruating was forbidden.

The body maps of women’s sexual experiences also charted difficult terrain. Many admitted that their first sexual experience had been confusing and frightening. One grandmother confided: “I was married very young. I was sleeping in the same room as my mother-in-law. My

Body mapping: A simple exercise that becomes a powerful tool.



The Small Enterprise Foundation (SEF)

Who are they?

- SEF gives small-scale loans (microfinance) to women for income-generating projects in order to empower women living in rural areas and give them a foothold out of poverty. They have three focus areas: sustainable income generation, job creation and social empowerment.

How can you contact them?

- For more information, e-mail info@sef.co.za or visit www.sef.co.za

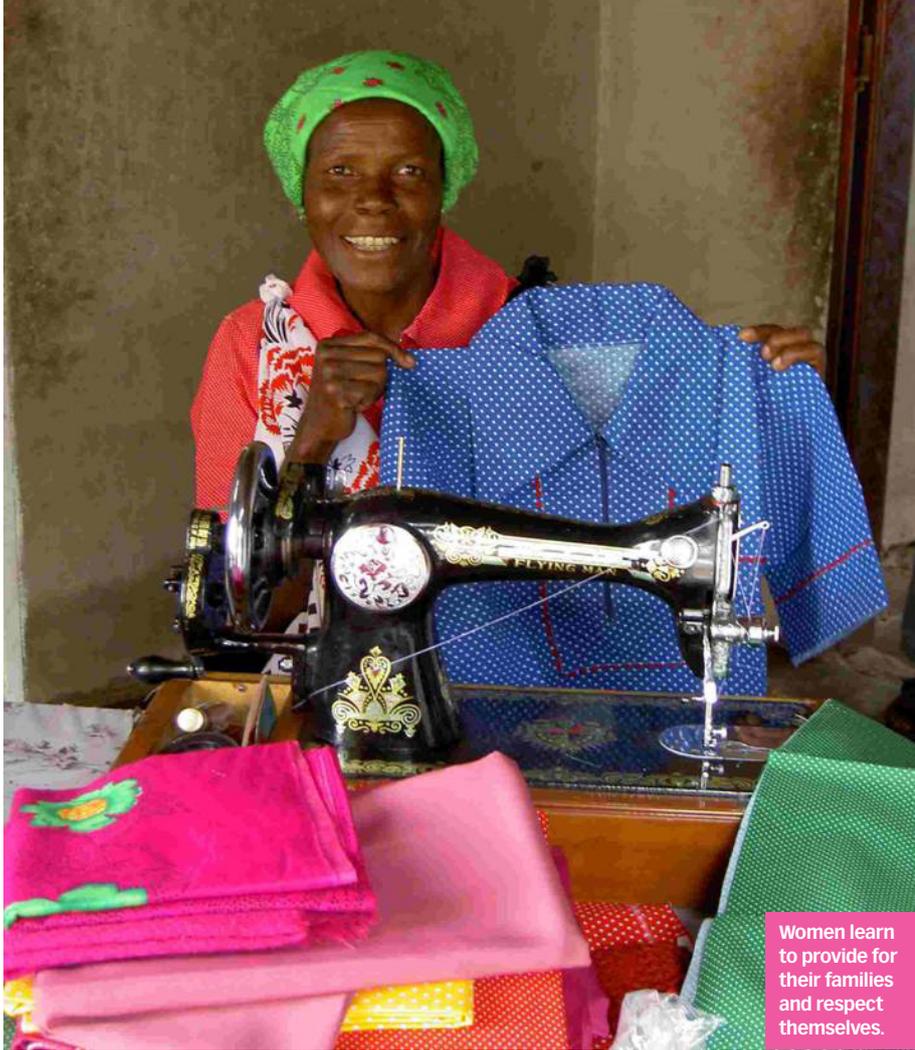
Rural Aids and Development Action Research (RADAR) Programme

Who are they?

- RADAR comprises clinical and social intervention research on HIV and Aids with an emphasis on developing model approaches that are appropriate and relevant to the rural African context. RADAR is based in Limpopo province and is a collaboration between the School of Public Health at the University of the Witwatersrand and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

How can you contact them?

- For more information, e-mail jkim@soft.co.za or visit www.wits.ac.za/radar



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husband came and called me: 'You, girl,' he said, 'you are going to sleep with me.' The way he introduced me to sex was very painful." This lack of ownership over their body, very often, became an integral part of marriage, where pleasure, and even consent, was not part of the sexual landscape.

So we had arrived. We had set out to dig at the hidden roots of the HIV epidemic. And from what the women were telling us, we had touched a visceral place. The project continued to gain momentum and it seemed that by sharing these personal stories, bringing them into the light of day without ridicule or judgment, it had opened up the possibility of asking deeper questions.

Looking back, this session was a watershed. When we asked each other who used the derogatory names, we realised it was not just men. Women had found ways to put each other down, internalising the destructive messages and using them as weapons that lashed

"Because many of the women couldn't read, we used games and role-playing to encourage them to open up."

inwards as well as outwards. Could this thing called "culture" be changed? "Women supporting women" became a mantra as the group made silent vows not to be the ones to give these words any more power.

On completion of the 10 training sessions, we held a festive graduation ceremony. We asked the women to single out those in their loan centres whom they regarded as "natural leaders." In the next phase of the project, these

leaders would help them take what they had learnt into their homes and villages. Among the hundreds of women who graduated, 37 were elected to lead the community mobilisation.

Gradually, the microfinance loans from SEF began to offer hope and new opportunities. Starting with loans as small as R500, the women were becoming entrepreneurs. Being able to provide for themselves and their families brought a new self-confidence.

But talking about sex was still not easy. The women began to share creative strategies during meetings. One woman told her group that, not knowing how to initiate a conversation with her teenage son, she had decided to place a bunch of condoms under his pillow after he went to school one day. That evening, he had initiated the conversation. Another group came up with the idea of swapping children. If they felt uncomfortable talking about sex with their own kids, why not bring them all together and then exchange them? The ideas just kept flowing.

The next challenge was to go public. They started small: A few women's groups, their local church. Then they organised an HIV workshop for the local football club. The principal of a nearby school heard about the initiative and asked them to address some of the school children. People started hearing about the "SEF women" who had information about HIV and were not afraid to share it. Eventually, they gained the confidence to organise public marches, making headlines in the local newspaper.

We have since given the body-mapping session a name: Our Bodies, Ourselves. Recognising its kinship with the book of the same title has encouraged women to claim back their bodies and their lives. They can now see how beautiful and powerful they are and that they can shape a better future for their children because they hold their "culture" in their own hands. Power begins with owning and loving your body. ●

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