



Learning the meaning of HIV and AIDS and Gender - yesterday, today and tomorrow -

Organisation: Gender AIDS Forum (GAF), Durban, South Africa
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JOHAP The Joint Oxfam HIV/AIDS Program in South Africa seeks to strengthen the civil society response to HIV/AIDS through supporting integrated community-based services for HIV prevention and care, including a focus on gender and sexuality and the rights of people living with, and affected by, HIV/AIDS.

What we do is who we are and we are what we do

power within
power with
power to
activist
gender activist
feminist rights
reproductive rights
access to information
know your rights

consciousness raising
collective action
solidarity the personal is political
personal empowerment
sexual rights
transformation

gender justice
putting the political into practice
personal change
change in intimate relations
changes at the household level
women as leaders of change processes

JOHAP OBJECTIVE 3:

Create a more enabling environment for HIV/AIDS programming, with a particular focus on the rights of people living with and affected by HIV and AIDS.

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The opinions of authors or participants in this document do not necessarily reflect those of Oxfam Australia, Oxfam Affiliates, JOHAP or its staff.

This document is one of a number of publications highlighting learning during the second phase of JOHAP (April 2002-March 2005). If you wish to read these please go to the following web address;
http://www.oxfam.org.au/world/africa/south_africa/articles.html

One of the strategies employed by JOHAP to strengthen the quality of the civil society response to HIV and AIDS is to strengthen partner organisation's capacity to document and share their work with other. This case study and others in the series are a result of some of this work.

Photos

Front cover: A group of volunteers meeting at the offices of GAF. It is in these private groups that women find it possible to openly communicate both as facilitators and participants. Matthew Willman/OxfamAUS

Left background image: A view of Durban looking south towards the ocean from the GAF office. Matthew Willman/OxfamAUS

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Case study



The Gender AIDS Forum (GAF) is a Durban based South African Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) committed to enabling a deeper consciousness in women and men about the links between gender and HIV and AIDS. GAF are an activist organisation, which refers to their commitment to transformation from an unequal society towards one which is equal. GAF believe that another world is possible where all are equal regardless of race, sexual orientation,

ethnicity, geographical location, (dis)ability and gender. Whilst they focus on transforming gender relations between women and men, they also stand in solidarity with those confronting inequality based on other characteristics and identities.

GAF is a learning organisation and a knowledge creating organisation. In GAF's words, "We think critically about ourselves; we question ourselves, then we agree to and

actually act... We plan for and enable growth and development – genuine empowerment of the people in the organisation – board, staff, volunteers and strive to contribute as best we can to this kind of growth in the work we do with others".

GAF are committed to applying their belief in equality to the organisation as a functioning institution and as such they work to create a flat structured organisation where they constantly confront power and try to ensure that they do not use 'power over' others. GAF try to create a work environment where workers are eager to come to work – an atmosphere which they love to be in. They try to base relations on warmth, love, empathy and genuineness so that they have a safe and nurturing space for personal change and transformation.

GAF are mainly women – and a few men – who are committed to the freedom, dignity and equality between women and men. They are diverse in terms of race, sexual orientation, geography; they are HIV positive and HIV negative. GAF are learning how to live and work with diversity.

GAF's values are based on respect for all. They keep in mind people, process, participation and power as four fundamental P's and work to ensure that the three action P's - philosophy, policy and practice - reflect these values and principles.

Photo left: Trish Naidoo: Administrative Assistant. Matthew Willman/OxfamAUS



What's the problem?

Key to shaping an agenda and a solution to women's vulnerability to HIV and AIDS is that we need an analysis that goes to the root of the problem.

It's a fact. Women and girls are more vulnerable to HIV infection. They are also feeling and bearing the major part of the impact of HIV and AIDS on communities. We have known this for decades. So, why is women's vulnerability to HIV deepening? And why is this so in the context of greater numbers of individuals - women, men, boys and girls, as well as institutions of all kinds "joining" the "response to" or the "struggle against" HIV and AIDS and the "scaling up" of efforts and the "mainstreaming" of HIV and AIDS "into development work"?

Whilst the answer is complex and layered, GAF see at the root, men's power over and domination of women – or patriarchy. A woman's limited lack of autonomy over their own bodies, health, and lives means that health is, more often than not, not in their own hands. This translates, amongst other things, to a lack of access to reproductive and sexual health and rights by women and girls. If this is the problem, then we must work to transform the way power is distributed in society between women and men, between girls and boys.

This means that if we work with men and boys, we must enable them to see, confront and resist their own *power over* women and girls. They can then be supported to replace destructive, hegemonic and dominant power with power within, power with and power to.

Anything else may "help" but it is simply not good enough to make the problem go away! Anything else will entrench men's domination and women's oppression. The problem so defined does not call for men to simply communicate with their women partners about sex, sexuality and sexual health issues. It calls for men to become willing partners, activists in relinquishing their power over women.

Again, if we work with women, we must:

- Confront women's oppression or lack of autonomy and inequality;
- Work with men and women;
- Target and impact on all spheres and levels of society: personal, intimate relationships, household, community, workplace, and political, economic and social/cultural institutions.

The Gender AIDS Forum works at addressing the core of the problem and works together with others who are committed to the ideal of "*Another World is Possible*, where women and men are truly equal and where women are free and have their dignity respected. GAF choose to do this through demonstrating that work with women can be empowering and transforming and place the bulk of its resources into this, testing, learning and demonstrating this process.

Photo above: Dawn Cavanagh (Advocacy Project Coordinator) taking a break from her work schedule. Matthew Willman/OxfamAUS

Yesterday

Approach and strategies then

When we started in December 1998, the approach of the Gender AIDS Forum was based on outcomes of the audit which indicated a high level of understanding amongst NGOs and unions that HIV and AIDS and gender were linked but many were lacking in hard skills to address these links in concrete ways.

What we thought it would take...

The response that was called for then was a Skills Building process targeting NGOs and community based organisations (CBOs) as well as trade unions. The assumption was that if people had firstly the understanding of gender inequality, and secondly the skills to analyse and plan to address gender inequality, then they would implement their AIDS responses in gendered ways.

We recognised that at least some of the women and men participating in the skills building processes would have to be from management and leadership levels to gain and sustain organisational commitment and action.

The strategies we used were based on gender analysis and planning models developed by gender mainstreaming thinkers and writers. This meant that we introduced participants to frameworks and tools created elsewhere and for purposes other than HIV and AIDS.

These frameworks and tools were focused on the technical and conceptual. There was an assumption that those participating would be ready for these concepts and tools and would be willing and able to use them in their organisations and programmes.

Some of the milestones achieved included...

1998

- A Working Group was set up at the AGENDA¹ Launch of the special edition on AIDS is a Crisis for Women (01 December 1998)
- Working Group meets to plan next steps

1999 - 2000

- Conducted an audit on what AIDS organisations were doing about gender, and what gender and women's organisations were doing about AIDS
- Publicised the findings of the audit
- Established an independent Steering Committee
- Working Committee became Gender AIDS Forum with six busy and committed founding members – Vicci Tallis, Sheldon Magardie, Ann Strode, Gethwana Makhaye, Quarraisha Abdool Karim, and Gladys Ryan

- Identified a Capacity Building Organisation

- Hosted special issue Forums to examine HIV and AIDS and links to special issues such as treatment, microbicides and care

- Launched a Newsletter, Phambili², to highlight key issues related to gender and HIV and AIDS

- Developed and tested an HIV and AIDS Mainstreaming Workshop for gender and women's organisations

- Developed and tested a gender Mainstreaming Workshop for AIDS organisations

2000 - 2001

- Developed and tested a Trainers Guide on Gender and HIV and AIDS
- Developed a Video on Gender and HIV and AIDS to support trainers in their facilitation
- Developed and tested a three day Trainers Workshop using the Video and Guide

2001 - 2002

- Went into a state of flux where we battled to find suitable program staff
- Went into a low level of functioning depending on consultants and Board members for the operation of key functions
- Conducted a review of all capacity building to date
- Conducted a strategic planning workshop with members and GAF friends

Photo right: Rosemary Mbamlo: A volunteer working at the front desk at the GAF offices. Matthew Willmani/OxfamAUS

How we became a learning organisation...

We commissioned an external review of the mainstreaming workshops. On a technical level, participants clearly learned significant elements of gender inequality. They were able to explain the links between HIV and AIDS. They were able to explain what steps needed to be taken at an organisational and programmatic level.

A really small minority of participants were truly inspired at a personal level and were using the concepts in their personal lives and at work.

Most participants had not applied learning on working with gender. Barriers to application included:

- The frameworks were thought to be more pertinent to address racism in the organisation as there were huge challenges in this regard
- The organisations did not make space for participants to share and apply the learning
- There was a sense of disbelief amongst many about gender equality as a real, realistic and achievable and even desirable goal.

We spent much time and effort internally reflecting and reviewing what we had done, and how and what the findings of the formal internal review meant for the future of our work. These were in Board meetings, which we use as critical review spaces, as well as a series of meetings called specifically for the purpose of review. Much thinking also happened at an informal level, where we were "just chatting about life, love and everything else".



¹Agenda Feminist Media Project was founded in 1987. It began as a journal, the initiative of a small group of women activists and academics working in and around Durban, South Africa. The Journal is now known as Agenda and the project has a range of related activities. See www.agenda.org.za

²An Nguni language word meaning forward/onwards.



We were also influenced strongly by the work and thinking of members of the Board who brought from their personal experiences and from their organisational learning a range of perspectives and analyses on gender and diversity, as well as thinking about learning and knowledge producing organisations. In particular we were introduced by a Board member completing her own thesis on related issues, to a conceptualisation of power which we placed at the core of our thinking and work. Other Board members were bringing their own experiences and bodies of knowledge such as human rights, ethical and legal and personal development.

Furthermore, a consultant and a Board member both worked for another organisation, Project Empower and some

of their thinking on HIV and AIDS mainstreaming was applicable here. This also helped to shape our emerging change framework.

Finally, we were influenced by the thinking, analysis and positions taken by women living with HIV and AIDS and other marginal and vulnerable groups through processes such as our Summit on Marginalisation in the Context of HIV and AIDS; through direct participation of women living with HIV and AIDS in all our processes and projects; and through working in partnership with organisations of women living with HIV and AIDS. Listening to the voices of women living with HIV and AIDS has become central in our reflection, review and evaluation processes.

Key concepts that emerged as core and central to our thinking were:

- The indivisibility of the organism/organisation to what it does and seeks to achieve – therefore the need to develop a flat structured organisation that both tests and reflects the feasibility of ridding society of destructive forms of power (power over)
- Access to information, consciousness raising and collective action as three core processes in transformation work
- The need for gender justice as a critical goal, rather than just “dealing with gender”
- The need to perceive of ourselves and the organisation as activist – confronting and resisting power over and facilitating and enabling change
- The need to view our work as building and developing gender justice activists rather than trainers and managers and workers who understood gender and could “mainstream it”.

Embracing error

If there is only one lesson that we have to mention, it will be – to be willing to see, recognise and embrace one’s own error. It is the start of quality work and impact...

*Photo above: Susan Thevar (standing) talking to Dawn Cavanagh (sitting) at the offices of GAF in Durban. Matthew Willman/OxfamAUS
Photo right: Vicci Tallis: Knowledge Program Coordinator for GAF working in her office. Matthew Willman/OxfamAUS*

A new purpose emerged in that important meeting of April 2003...

“To raise awareness and consciousness amongst women and men about the issues related to gender and HIV and AIDS so that they would be responsive to these issues.”

Think, question, act

Became our slogan and represented a realisation that we could not simply adopt frameworks and theories and that we had to think, test these and think again.

Another world is possible

Became our commitment as a response to the idea that we need to think global and act local and in this, see ourselves as not having all the answers but as contributing toward a growing global movement for social justice. And to do this working with ordinary people where we are.



Consolidating our thinking and questioning with action learning processes

GAF has continued to think about how learning and change happens; how knowledge is created. We reflect critically on those using our collective learning as activists engaged in a variety of organisations and formations.

Since then, we have designed, tested and are developing a model of change for gender justice and transformation which includes three phases:

Phase 1 Personal is political

We explore our personal experiences of being women and of being men, how women’s experiences mirror issues facing many women in our communities, nationally and globally in both developed and developing countries. The diversity of women is examined and the realities of oppression as a common experience of all women is analysed. Men’s role within this is also examined and imperatives for change identified.

Phase 2 Personal power

This is a phase where finding one’s power within is a focus as readiness for confronting power over.

Phase 3 Putting the political into practice

We explore different approaches and strategies to address some of the issues facing women particularly, but also men who are committed to gender justice and being part of the solution. We think about ways to take concrete action so that we collectively confront these issues. We learn about ways to take our learning about dealing with women’s oppression



and unequal position in society into our organisations and other institutions and spaces in society to create gender change, promote gender justice and better deal with HIV and ADS.

This three part process is the basis for all work whether it is with women, men, both women and men; whether it is part of our various Programs – Advocacy, Empowerment, Knowledge – or our internal organisational and institutional development work.

Already we believe that the approach is showing favourable results through our Women in Leadership Project and mini workshops. Indications of this success come from the women and men who participate in our projects through:

- community experts meetings
- mini workshops
- talks
- advocacy processes such as summits, round table discussions and meetings

This feedback has also come from others in the organisations from which these participants come.

Still learning, still much to learn...

This is still early in the process of our emerging model. Our emerging model is being used in various processes and projects. We want to stay vigilant and reflective and keep building on our learning.

Today

The sharpening statement of purpose

The Gender AIDS Forum exists to ensure that women and men access their sexual and reproductive health and rights in a society where they are equal in all respects and at all levels including in intimate relationships, household, community and institutional.

We achieve this purpose through three major programs:

- Empowerment program
- Advocacy program
- Knowledge program

Empowerment program

This is done amongst women leaders; amongst women and men in strategic organisations; and in the broader stakeholder group engaged in HIV and AIDS in particular. The approach used here has been developed from lessons learned over the last five years and is based on feminist principles.

*Photo Left: Rosemary Mbamlo: A volunteer working at the front desk at the GAF offices. Matthew Willman/OxfamAUS
Photo Right: GAF team and activists Matthew Willman/OxfamAUS*

The Advocacy program

The GAF advocacy focus for the next three years is on a campaign – Claim Back the Right geared towards ensuring that the full prevention-treatment continuum works for women and marginal people. Work is to be done at the policy level and monitoring access at the grassroots. Two key issues here are access to women controlled HIV prevention methods (quality sexually transmitted infections (STI) treatment and other sexual and reproductive health and rights services, female condoms and microbicides); and lobbying for quality gendered care, counselling, treatment and support. An additional emerging area is ensuring the democratisation of the research agenda. This project also works in solidarity with strategic partners, especially those who are marginalised in society. An emerging area of focus within this is the imperatives around youth led, as opposed

to youth targeted, sexual rights campaign linking with the International Conference on Population and Development Cairo Platform of Action of 1994.

The Knowledge program

This work is newer insofar as it is an extension of the Access to Information objective of GAF. Access to Information works through Community Experts Meetings (previously Forums) where grassroots women and men are able to come together and be informed, discuss, debate and engage with issues of HIV and AIDS and power, sexual and reproductive health and rights. This function is complemented through the Resource Centre, which we hope to develop fully.



Part 3

Tomorrow

An emerging identity

- Deepening our commitment and competence as an activist organisation
- Developing passionate, competent and articulate women as gender activists and feminists
- Working with the goal of gender justice and consequent impacts on HIV and AIDS
- Working in much stronger solidarity with organisations of or focusing on men on the margins
- Increasingly using and applying our understanding of sexual and reproductive health and rights as a key point of entry to addressing both HIV and AIDS and gender inequality and making inroads to women's vulnerability.

Think, question

- Greater consciousness in all those we meet and work with of women and men in the Global South as thinkers and knowledge creators
- More structured reflection, review, documentation, sharing and exchange through our Knowledge Program

Embracing "Feel"

- Find ways of supporting women activists who are often pressured and in crisis and not taking care of ourselves through the Healthy Women project
- Find new ways of working with feelings and emotions that go with activism in a context where people die as a result of failed policy and practice.

Act

- Develop and refine our advocacy thinking, planning and work
- Link more strongly with the women's movement, CEDAW³ and Cairo Platform of Action
- Facilitate the linkages between the women's movement and the HIV and AIDS sector
- Articulate fearlessly the realities of women's lives, women's condition and position and confront the lie that work with women cannot produce the change we need in HIV and AIDS as women are powerless – mobilise ordinary women and grassroots women leaders to lead and shape the agenda – prove we are organic intellectual capable of thinking, questioning and creating both the conditions for and actual change.

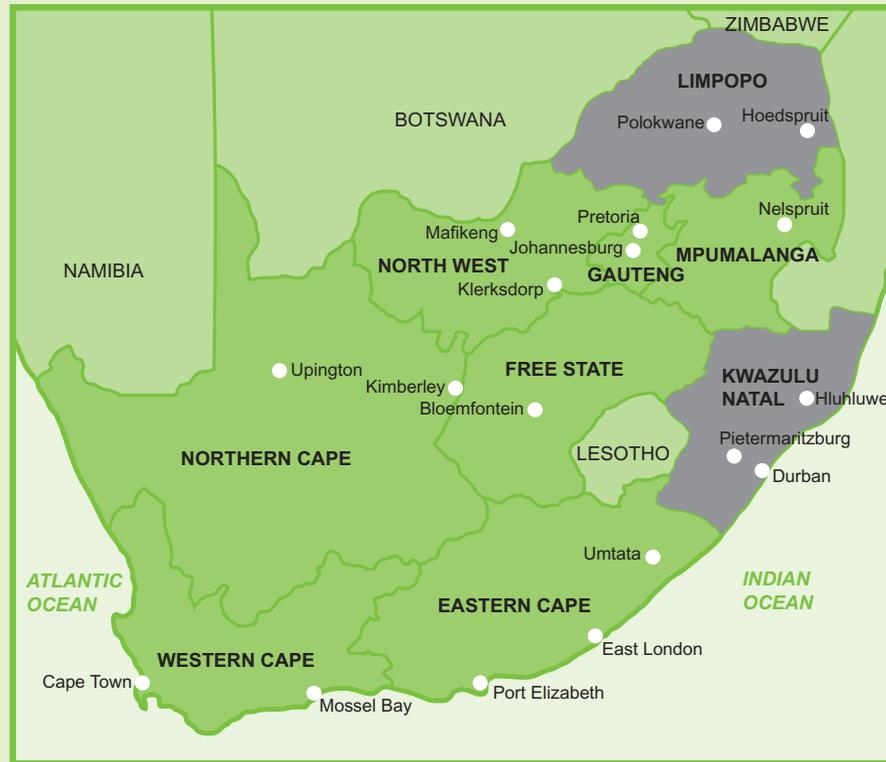


Photo: The GAF team working together in the common room where GAF hold their meetings with members of partner organisations. Matthew Willman/OxfamAUS

³ United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

References / contact details

The JOHAP program currently operates in two provinces; Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal.



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Photos

Right: A group of volunteers meeting at the offices of GAF. Matthew Willman/OxfamAUS
Back cover: A view of Durban looking north inland from the GAF office. Matthew Willman/OxfamAUS.

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