

Community Consultation Workshop KZN

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Rania Jordan, the HIV/AIDS Programme Officer at Gender Dynamix, recently facilitated a community consultation workshop in Pietermaritzburg. The workshop took place at the Nolumbo community centre; it was done in partnership with the Gay and Lesbian Network which services the Pietermaritzburg and Durban areas. This workshop forms part of a broader AFSA (AIDS Foundation of South Africa) funded project, that focuses on HIV prevention and education, creating awareness of sexual and reproductive health rights across the transgender community in South Africa, especially in the rural and isolated areas.

The community consultation workshop is our first of two visits to the area. At this workshop we concentrated on introducing Gender Dynamix and its services and highlighting gender identity and sexual orientation, its significance in the transgender context. Constituents were also engaged in discussions on sexual and reproductive health rights and asked if they felt that the existing HCT and sexual health service providers adequately capacitated people to deal with transgender specific issues? Is there enough access to condoms, dental dams, lubrication and other forms of prevention methods? What are individual experiences like when consulting with health care practitioners? How do transgender individuals envision sexual health providers and services to be like? These are just some of the questions that were discussed and debated.

Through these extensive discussions Rania observed some interesting issues.

1. No one at the beginning of the workshop identified as transgender or even knew what it meant. (After the workshop the majority identified as transgender)
2. One person commented that intersex people do not exist.
3. There are no social spaces catered for L.G.B.T.I. people in PMB or DBN.
4. Demographically it wasn't a diverse group in terms of ethnicity, all nine participants were Zulu, which consisted of 4 transgender men, 3 transgender women, 1 intersex person, 1 Lesbian.
5. All the participants were between the ages of 18 and 26.

The workshop also used this opportunity to pilot a research study that the organisation is conducting. The purpose of the study is to inform a greater understanding of sexual behaviour amongst transgender people in South Africa, in the context of the current HIV/AIDS pandemic. In her interviews with workshop participants Rania found that the participants were open about their sexual practices and HIV knowledge. The research study will be completed early next year and published widely.

At the end of the workshop the participants had to complete evaluation forms.

"Now I know more about myself and I am glad that I am transgender. I was ashamed of myself because I did not understand myself";
 "I learned how to identify myself and the difference between sexual orientation and gender";
 "I always thought that I'm gay but in this workshop I have realised that I am transgender, this made me realise who I am exactly";

In general, the experience in Pietermaritzburg was a positive one, everybody was so friendly and helpful, and the staff at the Gay and Lesbian Network were wonderful, many thanks to Anthony and Londi.

Later in July we will be having a 3 day workshop in Pietermaritzburg, for more information on that or if you would like to attend then please forward me an email on raniaj@genderdynamix.org.za or alternatively contact our offices on 021 633 5287.