

20

Learning to relearn givens

Jill Lewis

• The project

Living for Tomorrow is a three-year action/research pilot project at The Nordic Institute for Women's Studies and Gender Research (NIKK). It is working for HIV prevention with a key focus on gender issues affecting sexual beliefs and behaviour. It is actively engaged with people from countries belonging to the former Soviet Union, with its core action collaboration in Estonia, an active 'satellite' link to Lithuania and involvement from St. Petersburg in Russia.

The main efforts of the project are:

- to develop ways of working on sexual risk information and behaviour that radically centre the questioning of gender norms and traditions;
- to help people learn to use interactive/participatory learning methods;
- to mobilise involvement of young people in HIV prevention, since it is the agency of young people themselves that will most effectively stem the epidemic;
- to develop commitment to inclusion and collaboration across differences: whether those be ethnic, national, religious, age, educational or sexual; and,
- to link research on gender and educational strategy to actual HIV prevention education

• Focus on gender

The project approaches HIV by exploring how gendered sexual behaviour, shaped by cultural and social norms, lean people towards risk sexual behaviour. The 'Living for Tomorrow' project argues that beliefs about how men and women 'are assumed to be 'naturally'' or are expected to behave 'as men or as women' form a very important part of what normalises unsafe sexual behaviour that

spreads Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and HIV. Gender is seen as a social and cultural system that has institutionalised problematic inequality between men and women. If the dominant gender system in a culture normalises forms of passivity, complicity, dependence or disempowerment for women, and normalises forms of control, exploitation, access to power or force for men, that very gender system itself needs to be changed in order to support safer behaviour that depends on more democratic sexual relations. Drawing on recent gender and feminist research, and the most challenging of international debates on gender and AIDS, the project explores how a gender-focused approach could work for people in contexts where the discussions of 'gender' have not had wide circulation.

The participatory work aimed to allow participants to explore assumptions that shape masculinity and femininity in their daily lives. The work needed to be constructed in ways that made sense to people locally. The vision also was to root the initiative in Estonian contexts, develop local involvement, resource it with international data, analysis and debate and provide capacity building. From this we hoped to develop a 'core group' who would then continue to design and run workshops with young people to initiate mini-projects on the gender and sexuality theme with them. The project would document its vision, gender focus, methods and the implementation issues it faced to enable possibilities of transferability to other parts of the region, and to encourage stronger gender focus in sexual health education.

Setting things in motion

Core collaboration was established with The AIDS Prevention Centre, Tallinn (the capital

of Estonia) and its director, Nelli Kalikova. Preliminary meetings with people engaged in different dimensions of Women's Studies/Gender Research and sex education in Estonia helped identify how people understood and talked about gender and how the post-Soviet and new national independence contexts influenced the ways people thought about men and women. They began to establish a web of possible links between new Gender Studies work in Estonia, ongoing Nordic and international gender research, international data and debates on HIV prevention/education methods, and the people actually engaged in sex education/HIV prevention initiatives.

Stephen Clift¹ became consultant to the project. It was important for the gender-focused work to centre collaboration of a man and a woman in the active implementation of the work with participants. Women are often over-represented in sex education. To tackle the issues at stake in the spread of HIV, men's active participation is needed.

Recruitment of participants for the core group was slightly nerve-racking. We needed people who showed signs of curiosity and excitement at exploring and creating new approaches, not people who constituted themselves as knowing experts and authorities on HIV. Also financial difficulties, poverty, low wages and limited possibilities in transitional Estonia, meant that it was complex, yet crucial, to find people really interested in working on *this* project, and not just on *any* project where there might be Western funding and links with the West. We also wanted people from diverse backgrounds, to create possibilities for new exchanges. 31 people joined the Capacity Building workshop, from which we would draw the core group; most from Estonia, 4 from Lithuania and 2 from St. Petersburg. Participants ranged from Women's Studies/social work/psychology students, AIDS Centre workers, teachers, gender studies researchers or lecturers, people whose lives were directly affected by HIV, people with medical backgrounds, youth workers etc.. The attempt was made to include men (though not as many as hoped for) and to

have a diversity of people from both Russian and Estonian backgrounds, reflecting the population profile of Estonia today. Five or six people would then be needed from the Capacity Building group to commit themselves to take the project into its next stage of work with teenagers.

Capacity building

Capacity building work aimed to open up what we called 'critical literacy' about gender issues, in dialogue with sexual health/safety concerns and information about HIV and AIDS.

The concept 'gender' was new for most participants. In Estonia 'emancipation of women' or 'equality for men and women' have echoes in ideological impositions of a totalitarian Soviet past, a Soviet-stereotyped Western feminist hysteria or uninteresting Nordic neutering. Participatory processes are very foreign in post-Soviet contexts, where education had been disciplined and hierarchical, delivering expert knowledge to compliant students. An Estonian saying is that 'children may talk when chickens pee' (which means never). We hoped participants could experience the *feelings* of interactive learning and the energy it releases. Stephen and I also wanted to make evident the *processes* of running the capacity building, and model flexible collaboration involving good listening and support, criticism and humour.

The capacity building sessions ran over 6 days over 2 weekend workshops. We made a particular effort to link the 'importing' of the gender focus, unfamiliar to most Estonians, to real issues and conditions in daily life in Estonia; to find ways to let people themselves identify and discuss gender-related issues. We juxtaposed open-ended, interactive sessions, with input from Estonian research and international discussions, shifting methods and reflecting on how sessions were structured as we went along. We wanted people to access gender issues and interactive learning methods by experiencing them for themselves in the workshop, and to begin to reflect critically on the implications of these identified experiences. We also wanted people to be challenged and energised and for some of

¹ Centre for Health Education and Research at Christ Church University College, Canterbury, England.

them to be inspired to work further with the project. Each individual session had specific written evaluation feedback, and longer

evaluation comments were sought at the end. Each day was organised under a thematic heading (see Table 1).

Table 1. Organisation of the workshops

Weekend Workshop 1	
Day 1: Setting the stage for collaborative work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome by Nordic Information Office, Tallinn • Ice breakers. Introductions: facilitators & participants • HIV/AIDS situation in Estonia & regionally • Project concerns, aims & possibilities • Where are we starting from? (1) • Taking stock of what is known (2) • The gendered scenario of sexual risk (3)
Day 2: So what's all this about gender?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why gender matters (4) • Current imaging of gender in Estonia (5) • Gender issues in Estonia today (6) • Gender assumptions in Estonian media (7) • Stories young people see (8)
Day 3: Where gender really matters: men, women, bodies, beliefs and behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Male in Our Heads? (9) • So what happens ? What people say and tell.(10) • The gendering of sexual behaviour (11)
Weekend Workshop 2	
Day 4: Not just words and ideas: but a gendered, embodied self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconnections & feedback from week • Working with young people: interactive strategies (12) • Embodiments of gender I (drama methods) (13) • Making a difference: what is known about changing behaviour (14) • Life in Estonia with HIV and AIDS (15)
Day 5: ' Doing IT': young people and sex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From theory into practice: taking sex seriously (participatory method sample activities) (16) • Lessons learned (17) • Embodiments of gender II: loosening the borders from inside out (drama methods) (18) • Gendered sex and young people (19) • Embodiments of gender III: staging power (drama methods) (20)
Day 6: So where do we go from here?	<p>Action agenda for Living for Tomorrow 1999: next stages of the project, processes of co-ordination; resourcing ideas; practical signposts -where to go next</p> <p>Concrete plans</p> <p>Winding up, taking stock: concerns, reflections, what people are taking away, and commitment to ongoing work</p> <p>Evaluation time</p> <p>Saying farewell</p>

- **The first workshop weekend**

The opening welcome set the initiative within Nordic governmental priorities. The session on HIV/AIDS by the director of the Tallinn AIDS Prevention Centre anchored the project within national concerns with local support. The first workshop was on feedback collected in advance from participants about differences in problems and expectations young men and women face in Estonia today. This brought personal visions of gender into discussion, through small group debate and larger group discussions. It began reflection on the wider social and sexual implications that the problems identified raised (e.g. men and risk taking; women and fear).

The next workshop was based on findings by Estonian researchers about sexual knowledge and behaviour of Estonian youth (2). Instead of presenting the findings, we designed a questionnaire asking people, in pairs, to think what findings they would expect concerning boys and girls. These were then discussed in a group of everyone together in relation to the actual findings of the research where the discrepancies between participants' expectations and the findings were considered. Finally we watched an explicit but careful Danish sex education video made for young people, some key extracts from the film 'Kids'² (3) and discussed informally 'cultural framings' (i.e. images of sexual behaviour that circulate through education and the media) of images of sexual behaviour and information.

The next day began by placing concerns of the project within international research and debate on sexual health and the AIDS epidemic (4). Then a 'doing' workshop session followed which was based on magazines and newspapers obtained from that morning's newspaper kiosks (5). In small groups, participants took this material, which included subjects ranging from sports, porn, food and teenage magazines to home decoration etc., from Estonia, Russia and other countries, and made separate collages of

images of men and images of women. These were then mounted on a wall for 'men' and one for 'women' and participants guided a partner round the images, explaining to them what a man is and what a woman is, based *only* on the images. A huge amount of humour and argument and surprise was generated from this.

Two 'formal' presentations from Estonian Women's/Gender Studies lecturers, followed. It was important, given the general unfamiliarity, and indeed, some scepticism, concerning the use of participatory practices, to include formal, more familiar formats as well. This generated discussion of different responses and receptiveness to these sessions in contrast to other interactive ones. The talks highlighted how differences between men and women are historical, social and political. The first brought into discussion recent findings on how the situation was changing since the collapse of the Soviet Union (6). A general belief that 'men and women are equal in Estonia' co-existing with the sentiment 'we are now free not to be the distorted 'working' women of soviet ideology, but real, free, feminine women' was set alongside new data on the impoverishment of women, lower pay, the increased tensions in domestic life and generated very intense discussions of information and personal experience.

A talk by an Estonian journalist/researcher analysed how women are represented in 'political' coverage in a popular Estonian newspaper (7): how men's authority and influence is stabilised in how their activities are reported, while women in politics are trivialised. An evening session (8) showed the video *Dreamworlds II* which critically examines how sexuality is exploited in MTV rock videos to normalise men's and women's sexuality within certain assumptions of violence and abuse. The discussion and beers, with people, all sitting round on the floor in a close cluster, lasted long into the evening. The shift from Soviet censorship to free-flow Western media and its commercial usage of sexuality was discussed in relation to youth culture and sex in Estonia today.

A workshop session, inspired by findings of the Women Risk AIDS Project research (9), had small groups agreeing or disagreeing

² *Kids* is powerful film from the US, filmed from the perspective of inner city teenagers, which focuses on the type of boy-girl behaviour that leads to the spread of HIV.

about women's and men's sexual behaviours. Statements had to be allocated to true, false or unsure categories, such as:

- 'Women's priorities in sex are to please men';
- 'Women have difficulty telling men about their sexual desires' etc.

Participants circulated amongst the groups in order to see how groups had allocated the statements, and people explained why and how they had taken decisions, and also, where disagreements lay. Huge discussion was generated by this, both between and within men and women. A relaxed meeting, with very active discussion followed with an Estonian director who had produced a play from 'sexual biographies' collected by researchers in Estonia and taken the production into discussion with audiences (10). Gender issues were featuring more and more in the participants' discussion. A lecture, and question/answer/comment session ended the first 3-day session (11). It brought into critical focus the gendered sexuality issues that sexual health interventions need to address, incorporating issues raised during the first 3 days.

People were asked to keep notes and cuttings about conversations or issues observed during the process that related to our discussions and bring them to the following weekend session. Care was taken in the warm-up and 'saying goodbye' processes to strengthen connections within the group.

• The second workshop

A week later, after starting proceedings with group activities to set adrenaline going again, and reporting back on the week's observations, we set up activities modelled on participatory learning work from Health Wise³. We used 'problem letters' written to a youth publication by young people in Estonia to set up a concentric circle carousel, where participants seated in the inner ring presented problems to those rotating in the outer circle and listened to

their 'constructive advice' (12) concerning how to resolve the issues identified in the problem letters. Then there was discussion about the diversity of available advice, the complexity of dealing with specific problems in specific lives and the difficulties faced in communicating effectively.

There were three drama workshops focused on gender and sexuality run by two actors from the Split Britches Company⁴ (13, 18, and 20). Their own productions focus with humour, critical insight and generosity on the tensions of masculinity and femininity. They drew on forum theatre methods, and got participants moving, miming, acting embodiments of noises and power, gesturing large and small, throwing imaginary body parts into the circle etc. People in pairs made safer sex slogans and produced, with their bodies, an image for them, which was photographed with an instant camera and mounted onto a wall display. Objects from pockets formed a basis for recounting half-memory/half fiction stories of love, sex or romance, told in the first person, then passed on and retold in conjunction with the object. The circulated, altered stories were told to the full group, who then picked ones where gender and power were at stake and staged the story with members of the group. The final act was to change the body language of one person in the story to see what different story could then be read from its embodiment.

We discussed how research on sex education shows only limited behaviour change, when people are just told what to do. We considered how evaluation and research could help inform more effective engagement with young people's awareness and behaviour change and how actual education is crucial (14). Evenings of informal discussion with people living with HIV and AIDS provided the participants more private time spent in small groups with no large group feedback (15).

We sampled ways of conducting gender-focused warm-up/icebreaker exercises (16), and circulated examples of exercises that could be adapted for workshops. We discussed preparing and facilitating participatory methods in the next workshop, telling people

³ Cohen, J. and Wilson, P. *Taking sex seriously: practical sex education activities for young people*, Health Wise, Mersey Regional Health Authority, Liverpool, UK.

⁴ A feminist theatre company whose performances challenge gender norms and which teaches about drama and gender

how we prepared sessions and how we processed what has happened together, providing critical feedback, identify what the theories behind the practice were etc.(17). People reflected on their own responses to the experiences of the participatory workshops. They discussed their feelings of ambivalence, their feelings of being 'enabled' and empowered, as well as their moments of resistance at certain points during the workshop sessions, in the context of their other 'non-participatory' educational experiences.

The final day focused, by way of small group discussions, on taking forward an action agenda for the project, looking at what the next stages might look like. 11 people volunteered to join the 'Core Group' that would be central in carrying the project forward in Tallinn.

Next steps

Following the capacity building, the Core Group met regularly, independently and through e-mail dialogue with NIKK project co-ordinator and designed and organised eight days of workshops, held at weekends over 2 months at the National Library, for a group of 25 Estonian and Russian 15-16 year olds. The teenagers, recruited from Estonian and Russian schools in Tallinn, were contracted into the project, and were given certificates recording their participation. All parents were informed about the project and were given opportunities to learn more about its work. The Ministry of Education and School Principals gave support for time off from school for some of the youth workshops. Some young people conducted video-interviewing projects on attitudes to sex and gender; some of them are now finalising a 84 page booklet called 'How To Bridge The Gaps Between Us?' on gender and sexual relations and safer sex, including a ten page 'vocabulary' in Estonian, Russian and English, of words relating to sex and gender. In August 1999, the majority of the Core Group established themselves as an NGO and drew up 3-year action plans in order to take their work further across Estonia, for which they are now trying to seek funding. Activities to date have included presentations at various national and international fora and dissemination of

materials through articles and on the world wide web.

• Conclusion

HIV and AIDS is partly an epidemic of poverty and social vulnerability, where resources for education and health are too limited, where despair about changes and survival permeates peoples lives, but it is also an epidemic moving along very nerves of life and diverse interpersonal relationships in negative ways. The focus on critical literacy about gender and power in people's lives and the often problematic terms of men and women's sexual relations, along with the engagement with collaborative learning and education processes, appears to have opened up an interest and energy in people to acknowledge the problems and become an active part of creating some part of the solution. There is now an urgent need for the multiplication of energies to engage in the participatory and gender-focused work of more effective prevention processes, in every country in the world, in the face of the relentless spread of HIV and its dire human consequences.

- **Jill Lewis** (Living for Tomorrow NIKK), Nordic Institute for Women's Studies and Gender Research (NIKK), P.O. Box 1156 Blindern, 0317 Oslo, NORWAY. Tel: + 47 22 85 89 31; Fax: + 47 22 85 89 50; e-mail: jill.lewis@nikk.uio.no Website: www.nikk.uio.no

NOTES

For further information about the project see: www.nikk.uio.no/Instituttet/Verksamhet/Lft/LfTE.html