

Connecting the dots

Stories of change: Young Women in Local Government

More access to menstrual items for girls in Mpongwe

Summary

Tina Zulu, human resources officer, Luanshya, Zambia

Project involvement: Young Women in Local Government network and workshops

Meeting with like-minded people through the Connecting the Dots project, and hearing about British MP Jo Cox's fight for women's rights, has inspired human resources officer Tina Zulu to found an NGO to make menstrual products more accessible for women in Zambia, especially for girls in rural communities who often miss school because of lack of menstrual products.

Background and aims

Tina Zulu works for Metal Fabricators of Zambia (ZAMEFA) as a Human Resource officer at its main branch in Luanshya. Interested in promoting women's equity and equality in the region, Tina joined the Connecting the Dots project to look at ways in which she could get involved and promote women's rights in the community.

How the CtD project has helped

Having joined the Young Women in Local Government network, Tina became more aware of how she could get involved and some of the things she could do to fight for women's rights in Luanshya.

An important issue that Tina wanted to address was access to menstrual hygiene products, a major challenge for women and girls in Zambia which particularly affects older girls in school who often miss a lot of teaching due to lack of products. Attending the Connecting the Dots training, gave Tina the impetus to take the initiative to found an NGO, Equal Privileges for All, a voluntary community programme where Tina is Director.

Equal Privileges for All is aimed at young women who are interested in promoting equity and equality in Luanshya, focussing on a programme of Sanitary Pads in Rural Areas, targeting Mpongwe where the organisation is distributing sanitary pads in schools. The programme is Improving menstrual hygiene by making sanitary pads available to every schoolgirl so that no girl will be absent from school due to her periods. It also teaches older women how to make sanitary pads so that they can be made available when needed.

"I came up with this organisation when I joined the Young Women in Local Government network. Seeing how Jo Cox fought for women's rights made me

realise that I too can fight for a great cause,” explains Tina.

“Lack of access to menstrual hygiene products can often mean that women and girls have considerable difficulty in going about their lives during menstruation, being almost entirely restricted to home, both for practical reasons and because of the stigma frequently attached. Girls in low-income settings miss or struggle at school during menstruation if they cannot effectively manage their menstrual hygiene.

“Washable, reusable pads are a preferable alternative as they are sustainable, low cost and easily accepted by women and girls,” she added.

Through the Connecting the Dots project, Tina was able to identify people with the same goal. She worked with them to come up with a campaign strategy in urban area colleges and universities to encourage people to contribute, whether just a sanitary pad, or a small amount of money.

Impact

Tina’s project is reducing girls’ absenteeism from school. The sanitary pads in rural areas and communities programme has had a positive impact, with at least 10% of girls in school in Mpongwe having access to sanitary pads. The programme has brought further improvements in the rural community by not only distributing sanitary pads but also teaching the girls how to make the pads, and teaching them about the importance of good hygiene such as how often they should change pads and how to discard used pad properly.

Though financial and human resources have been an issue, the overwhelming response and support from the community, from both men and women, has provided a boost for the project.

“Helping underprivileged people has been my passion and finding women who have the same interest has really helped me to make this dream a reality,” says Tina. “Getting involved in community work and helping young women and schoolgirls to acquire the knowledge of using and making sanitary pads has given me a great sense of fulfilment and joy. Their willingness to learn has changed the mindset of people about menstrual hygiene.

“The overwhelming response is a big motivation for us to work even harder and reach as many communities as we can. Even with the small amount of resources we have, we have reached many women with a great outcome.”

Looking ahead

Tina says that the main way to improve menstrual hygiene is to improve the availability and affordability of menstrual products, and improve understanding of this topic in the community. The number of young women who turn up for support shows that there is a big demand and work needs to continue, particularly to reach more schoolgirls.

