

VICE CHANCELLOR'S DISTINGUISHED AWARD
FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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The Siyahluma Project

Siyahluma, situated in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape, brings together researchers and local NGOs in order to address (1) the menstruation-related challenges faced by school-going girls, most notably a lack of access to reliable and hygienic menstrual products and a lack of access to reliable information about menstruation; (2) a gap in the research on this topic in South Africa; and (3) sustainable community development and capacity-building in the Eastern Cape. In late 2013 a partnership between the Critical Studies in Sexualities and Reproduction Research Unit (CSSR), The Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics (AGCLE) and RUCE was formed at Rhodes University in order to conduct a survey of Grade 11 learners in schools in the Eastern Cape to identify the menstruation-related challenges facing school-going girls in the province. In 2014, ongoing research partnerships were formed with 24 schools, and surveys were distributed, collected, coded and captured (for approximately 1100 learners). This process was facilitated by psychology students at both Rhodes University and the University of Fort Hare.

Later in 2014, a group of five foster mothers from Grahamstown Child Welfare Services had come together with the idea of starting a social enterprise to produce re-usable sanitary products. Our research team decided to partner with this initiative given that our findings were showing that there are significant menstruation-related challenges facing school-going girls—and access to modern, reliable and hygienic products at an affordable price is one of these challenges.

In order to address the economic and unemployment needs in Grahamstown, Siyahluma has established an enterprise that brings together the concerns around menstruation as well as addressing the lack of skills in the area and for capacity-building for women. To date, five women have been trained in both sewing and business skills through the ADC and the Days for Girls Program (based in Canada).

In 2015 we also partnered with the ADC and the Rhodes Business school to partner a group of MBA students with the Siyahluma women to establish a mentoring relationship in business skills and social entrepreneurship. One of the members of the MBA class has continued her involvement in the work of Siyahluma and will work with our group to establish a branch of the project under the Days for Girls banner in Botswana in 2016-2017 and will continue to maintain strong ties to our South African group.

In our distribution of kits, we initially worked with FAMSA social workers to distribute kits to girls in high schools who were taking the FAMSA life skills course. What we have done is to identify a champion teacher of the project in the partner schools who takes charge of the kits, works to pass on the information leaflets with the kits and demonstrates the functionality of the kits to the girls as well as recording the details of each girl who takes a kit. This teacher then keeps track of the experiences of using the kit from the girls in the group they are working with. The champion teachers are then able to feed information back to the Siyahluma group. Siyahluma has two major community based health education intervention programmes which have been running in the Grahamstown community in 2015: FAMSA's Life Skills programme and a community theatre initiative.

FAMSA's Life Skills programme

When the Siyahluma project team agreed that an Education Intervention should be one of the major project aims it became clear that in order to achieve this aim we would need to rely on partner organisations particular strengths, skills, assets and local connections. FAMSA suggested that, given their connections with local schools and network of facilitators running Life Skills programmes in the schools, they would work together with the Rhodes research team to design, implement and roll-out a menstruation related health education intervention embedded in their Life Skills programme which would be re-curriculated to this end.

Because the Life Skills programme is run in co-ed classroom environments, the education programme necessarily opens spaces for dialogue about menstruation between male and female learners. However, this meant that we had to make sure that the exercises we designed for the sessions would stimulate productive discussions, rather than promoting environments which fostered stigmatisation, 'Othering' and gendered power relations, binaries and conflict. While the design of the exercises played a crucial role in this, the role of the FAMSA facilitators was central to the success of this intervention. After the sessions were conducted in the first school the FAMSA trainers reported back to our research group that the learners had requested more

information in the form of a hand-out, and so we worked to design one that could be distributed to learners during the Life Skills programme that they could subsequently take home with them.

Community theatre initiative

Victoria Girls High School has recently taken a broadly service-learning approach in their Grade twelve drama class. In 2015 the class partnered with Siyahluma to tackle the issue of social stigma, myths and taboos surrounding menstruation. The FAMSA materials were given to the VG class who used these materials to unpack and explore menstruation-related challenges facing their local community and then workshopped their theatrical production as a group based on their critical engagement with the material and issues and bringing their own lived experiences to bear on these issues. The production, which they entitled '*Siya-Mensa*', focused on the social and economic challenges associated with menstruation, the cultural stigmas, taboos and culture of silence surrounding menstruation, as well as common myths associated with menstruation and menstrual products all within the school environment. The final production was targeted at Grade seven school learners at co-ed schools and was performed at two local schools in Grahamstown.

In 2016, a collaborative partnership was formed with the Young Women's Forum (YWF) of the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM), with the purpose of designing and rolling-out an educational intervention in local schools -Nombulelo High School, Ntsika High School and Mary Waters High School-to raise awareness around gender related issues.

Given that several projects in Grahamstown already focus on awareness-raising around these issues, the decision was made, following this meeting, to contact relevant stakeholders in Grahamstown and hold a meeting where we could decide whether we would form a larger collaborative working group. The following stakeholders agreed to form a partnership moving forward: The Siyahluma Project, YWF, The Gender and Sex Project (GASP; a student-led group from Rhodes University), The Gender Action Forum (GENACT; a senate sub-committee at Rhodes University), and a representative from the Department of Education. Subsequently, the Gender Action Project (GAP), OutRhodes (both Rhodes University student societies) and FAMSA have also come on board.



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