

The power of participatory video

A participatory video project with Egyptian women is taking on controversial health care issues, with the women filming their own stories.

The women are gaining more presence in the community, and helping defuse potential social conflicts.

Project coordinator **Sara Stuart** reports:

made visible



Self-representation is profoundly linked with **self-determination**. As individuals and communities become self-determining, they gain a greater capacity to obtain social and economic justice. They develop the strength to demand that their governments and other authorities be responsive and responsible in their policies and decision making.

during the last three years Neama Mohamed, mother and housewife, has become a health educator, an outspoken advocate for girls and a leader in her community. Through her work she is helping to change the attitudes and actions of her neighbours with regard to literacy, girls' education, sanitation and female genital mutilation (FGM), a nearly universal practice in her Egyptian community. Once Neama would have hesitated to confront such issues; after gaining communication skills and learning to effectively use media tools, her confidence as a spokesperson has soared. At the same time she has earned the respect of her peers.

Neama lives in Tellal Zenhom, a slum in the southeastern section of Cairo. CEOSS, the Coptic Evangelical Organisation for Social Services, an Egyptian non-governmental organisation, has worked in Tellal Zenhom on a range of local development issues for over seven years. Neama became familiar with the organisation as a young mother; later, she was recruited to serve as a nutrition teacher for groups of women.

Then she agreed to lead New Horizons classes, which promote self-empowerment among adolescent girls through training in life skills, education and health. The classes covered a wide range of sensitive issues – from the basics of reproductive biology to sexually transmitted diseases, from breastfeeding to the harmful traditional practices of FGM and 'the virginity proof'. For many Egyptian girls living in villages and slums, adolescence is a time of increasing restrictions; education beyond the elementary level is deemed unnecessary. So these classes were particularly empowering in that context.

In February 1998, Neama and three other New Horizons leaders from Tellal Zenhom learned to use a home video camcorder and to make simple tapes (edited in-camera) about issues in their communities. The training was provided by Communication for Change as a part of the New Horizons project. This participatory video training was intended to strengthen the voice of women at the local level and to extend the reach of the New Horizons curriculum.

At first, the group was afraid to be seen carrying the camera in the streets and filming in their community. Although the community agreed to the video activity and the trainees were eager to learn, the support of their parents, husbands, fiancés and in-laws had to be reconfirmed on many occasions. As Neama and the others began to gain confidence in operating the camcorder and interviewing, they progressed from recording inside CEOSS's office and people's homes to shooting in the streets.

With each step they overcame fear and the capacity of the team grew. Within ten days they began showing their first tapes to members of the community. These tapes were about the importance of literacy, good nutrition and a local

woman who is doing exemplary service as a teacher of disabled children. These screenings allowed the team members to facilitate and lead discussions about the issues the tapes present. Various audiences included friends and family members, girls in the New Horizons classes, the project committee and groups that were more intimidating to the team members such as men and community leaders.

The team feels that its greatest achievement has been making a programme on female excision. It is significant that the team took up this issue only after honing their production abilities and gaining general community approbation for their work. Careful planning preceded shooting. There was consensus among team members that the perspective of a religious leader was absolutely necessary, as well as that of a doctor, so that religious views would complement the 'scientific' arguments against the practice.

The Zenhom team members were anxious about the first showing of the tape, which was held among community women. Although some members of the audience expressed continued support for the practice, most recognised its detrimental effects; a few women indeed announced their intention to discontinue the practice. The tape has since been shown to diverse groups, including young girls, a wide range of men and local leaders. Both video team members and community members have expressed the feeling that the programme has helped to break the silence that once surrounded this topic.

In the 18 months following Neama's training, levels of participation in the Zenhom project have remained high. With a new visibility, team members have helped to break down stereotypical concepts of what women can and cannot do. Community members, the local council and officials are expressing support for the team's work, often suggesting ideas for video programmes. The video team's tapes are being used to spark discussion and promote the search for local solutions.

This experience demonstrates the power of media that is not 'mediated' by outside forces, but rather conceived and produced by individuals determined to depict their own reality and effect change. Self-representation is profoundly linked with self-determination. As individuals and communities become self-determining, they gain a greater capacity to obtain social and economic justice. They develop the strength to demand that their governments and other authorities be responsive and responsible in their policies and decision making. Clearly, participatory communication approaches can be powerful assets in achieving peaceful social change and participatory democracy.

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