



Lessons Learned

Facilitating Unfiltered Conversations in Safe Spaces,
for Lesbian and Bisexual women in Communities
Across Belize, Central America

SUMMARY

The activity on which this lesson learnt documentation process is focused on, can be summed up in one word, Conversations. The Conversations are intended to provide the target group of identified women with information on a variety of issues which impact their lives as persons who have “come Out” as being openly lesbian or bisexual. The topic of the conversations ranges from issues of sexuality, health care, safety and security, homophobia and discrimination, to the effects on children, families and communities, when women choose to speak candidly and openly about their concerns, as seen from their perspectives as women who have chosen to live outside of the proverbial closet.

The overall intention is to allow women a safe space in which to have these conversations, and for them to be able to express themselves without the fear of being seen as different, or labeled with derogatory words for daring to do so in an open but safe environment.

The lessons learnt were many and varied and ranged from understanding that while some women have found their voices and are not afraid to use it, even under threat of being labeled by the society, other women are still struggling with finding their voices, and finding words to utilize to convey to their families and the society, that this is who they are at their core. Having these conversations with other women whom they identify with, or women who support their choices, in safe spaces provided by PETAL, validates the fact that however they identify, their rights are the same as the Human Rights guaranteed to all citizens under the Constitution. Other lessons learnt include the fact that there are both government and non-government organizations who are willing to participate in these conversations, and willing to speak out on behalf of the cohort of women who are being served by PETAL. One interesting observation was that while the participants in some of the conversations were not afraid to speak out, they were reluctant to have their faces identified on the footage being recorded for documentation purposes, turning away from the cameras. Additionally, more participants appeared to feel less constrained and more inclined to speak up, when they were uninhibited by the presence of structure within the group setting, and participating in smaller work groups and one on one interviews for the documentary.

THE ACTIVITY

This lesson learned documentation process is being focused on the “Conversations” activity which began as a group of women who identified as lesbian and bisexual, coming together to talk about the issues that were of concern to them. This activity was chosen because the Coordinator after engaging various women in discussion, felt that lesbian and bisexual women were crying out for Conversations in which there would be information sharing and awareness creation around such issues, in a format which did not place a lot of emphasis on group structure (making sure that there was balanced representation from women organizations, or even from governmental organizations or non-governmental organizations) or on falling in line with the historical or traditional ways in which discussions are usually held.

It was seen as being much more important to have lesbian and bisexual women feel that they were coming to a “safe space” wherever that space was, and that they could come as they were, bring their children along with them if that is what their circumstance required (lack of a babysitter) and come in clothing that they felt was comfortable be it stiletto heels or a pair of flip flops, business suits or comfortable trousers or shorts and t-shirt, hair all done or not done and pulled together under a cap. How the women came was not important, the focus was and still is on having the Conversations and doing so in a safe space.

The Conversations were identified and selected based on the fact that the Coordinator and her Team saw the absence of any such space for lesbian and bisexual women to be open to be who they are at their core, and to feel free to express their concerns in a manner and in a space with other women who were respectful and non-judgmental. At the time when the Conversations started, there was no known activities whether in the form of traditional lectures or training taking place for lesbian and bisexual women, as far as the Team could tell from there on the ground research.

The primary objective of the Conversations was to provide these women with a non-traditional forum in a non-traditional safe space, where they could come together and gain a better understanding of ways in which the laws of the country of Belize, either negatively impacted their lives, or provided no protection for them, given the fact that the women identified specifically as being lesbian and bisexual.

Women from across the country were targeted for this activity and the Conversations continue to be held in communities across the country. PETAL anticipates that through the process of these conversations lesbian and bisexual women who participate, would come into an understanding of their own worth and entitlement, in the process of exploring issues such as economic power, social justice, politics, along with the power of being informed and educated.

The topics of the Conversations range from domestic violence in same sex relationships, Cancer awareness, parent child socialization, how to build healthy relationships, sexually transmitted infections and legal literacy.

The Conversations began in 2012 as non-structured, unconventional gatherings where women could bring their children and brown bag lunches, or potluck offerings to share with other women. The Conversations generally take place in the afternoons on the weekends, mostly on Saturdays as that was when the women indicated that they would be most likely to attend. For the most part the Conversations started as two-hour sessions, but have evolved to extra hours as women stayed behind even after the two hours expired, to talk and share their stories amongst themselves. The first Conversations were marketed through word of mouth information sharing, and at that first session some fifteen women who identified as lesbian and bisexual, showed up to the session which was funded by UNIBAM along with monies donated by the initial Team members.

How Was it Done and What was Achieved

In 2016 PETAL carried out a needs assessment to identify what women were really concerned about and what they wanted to be the focus of the Conversations. Some 50 respondents who identify as lesbian or bisexual were interviewed. The process of putting the Conversations together also involved the inclusion of the office of the Special Envoy for women and children, the Women’s Department, the National Women Commission, POWA, UNIBAM, EYBM, Our Circle, TIA Belize and Emergent Corp.

The team felt that it was important for them to reach out to all women regardless of how they identified, and this was done through phone calls, information sharing, and by identifying a liaison person in each district, who would serve as peer empowerment persons keeping the information flow to women in the districts. A significant strategy employed by the team was that the Conversations had to be open to women who had children and that these women could bring their

children along with them. Additionally, the concept of a formal organization with an established executive was not a primary concern as the impetus was primarily to get someone or some people to do something to address the issues identified by women, as being important to them.

The assumptions made were predicated on the fact that there was a need for the Conversations and for a safe space in which to have them, leading to the conclusion that if the Conversations took place and women heard about them they would come and bring their own concerns to the table. Women would come because there was an obvious Gap that PETAL was prepared to fill with the advent of these Conversations. The Team assumed that women would be receptive, that women would welcome the absence of a formal structure, and that there were grassroots women who were in need of this novel form of engagement.

The resource requirements centered around identifying a safe space for the women to gather, having facilitators who were experts in their areas of specialization, e.g.: Sexual and Reproductive Health, assisting mothers by allowing them to bring their children with them, making it a non-judgmental space so women could come as they were, dressed however they feel comfortable, holding the Conversations on days and at a time convenient to the women, providing them with lunch or a snack, and providing financial assistance for transportation so women could attend and return home without being out of pocket because they wanted to be a part of the Conversations.

It should be noted that initially women were asked to participate in a potluck (food was not provided by the Team) nor was their any assistance provided for transportation; these came about as a result of the responses of the women who participated in the Needs Assessment.

ANALYSIS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The activity has fulfilled its objective and even exceeded its original objective. The initial operational assumptions were and continue to be valid, critical to the success of the activity was the identification of what women were looking for. This can be summarized as informative and educational Conversations, facilitated by people with the relevant expertise, held in a safe space.

Key factors to which the success of these Conversations can be attributed are that the women who participate

know that the element of confidentiality is a high priority factor for the team, the space is a non-judgmental space, and there has been support for the conversations both Locally and internationally by government and the NGO Community. To date there has been no public backlash or rejection of PETALS' work across the Country. Women continue to attend the Conversations and to date the results have truly exceeded the expectations set at the inception of the Conversations. One major lesson learnt is that women who identify as lesbian and bisexual who attend the conversation as a couple, tend to both stop attending when they seem to be experiencing challenges in their relationship. The Team understands the need to keep reaching out to both partners individually to ensure that they stay engaged in the Conversations. At this juncture the Team sees no need to amend the format.

THE WAY FORWARD

The way forward for PETAL includes more engagement with other stakeholders to inform and educate them about the work that PETAL does in Belize. Additionally, PETAL is motivated to secure its own physical space along with hiring a paid staff to ensure the sustainability of the work currently being done through writing grant proposals and doing fundraisers.

It was important to tell the story of the evolution of these Conversations as we see it as an avenue for the continued education and empowerment of women. The goal is to document the process and use it to help other women across the region and the globe.

COC Netherlands is to be acknowledged for never dictating to the Team how they felt this process should work at any point in time. PETAL is grateful for the opportunity to document and share this process and would not change anything at this point in time.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

PETAL has also produced a Needs Assessment document and a Legal Gap Document, both available upon request..

Since the inception of the Conversations in 2011, PETAL has been engaging lesbian and bisexual women in Belize in discussions about health, sexual identity, and current local events which impact the lesbian/bisexual community. It became clear that lesbian/bisexual women in Belize had issues and concerns specific to their experiences as women which were not being adequately addressed by existing LGBT+ organizations.

As research on this population in Belize is very sparse, PETAL felt it was important to get a better idea of who

this population is - where they are located in Belize, their ages, occupations, incomes and other demographic information. This fueled the plan for conducting a needs assessment which would highlight information in hopes of using that information to develop supportive events, programs and initiatives. PETAL also felt it was important that these women have a voice and an opportunity to express their particular interests, needs and expectations for PETAL and LGBT+ organizations.

Both documents played an important role in determining whether a change in course was needed to achieve the stated objectives and eventually led to the current trajectory of the activity referred to in this document as Conversations.

ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUND

PETAL is the acronym used by the group and it stands for, Promoting Empowerment Through Awareness for Lesbian and Bisexual women. It was conceptualized in May 2011 and the groups vision is to be the leading women's organization in Belize for Lesbian and Bisexual women to enjoy economic, social and gender justice. It's mission is to achieve social, economic and gender justice for all women in Belize especially Lesbian and Bisexual women through advocacy and empowerment.

PETAL's primary objective is to empower women particularly Lesbian and Bisexual women by increasing their knowledge of a wide cross section of issues that impact them direct /indirectly.

CONTACT DETAILS

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7. Public Incidence Activities: In search of public spaces accessible to teenagers with same sex feelings in the Greater Metropolitan area of Costa Rica. "Specific Case: Incidence with the National Institute for Women - INAMU - Costa Rica"
6. My body, your body, our sex: A Sexual Health Needs Assessment For Lesbians and Women Who Have Sex With Women, Durban, South Africa
5. Working with buddy groups in Zimbabwe
4. 'MAN TO MAN', a joint approach on sexual health of MSM in the Netherlands via the Internet
3. Lessons learned from project "Visual information on sexual health and the exercise of citizenship by the GLBTI beneficiaries of the Organization in Quito, Ecuador".
2. Coffee afternoons: Prevention Project aimed at young gay men from Tegucigalpa (Honduras)
1. Womyn2Womyn (W2W) quarterly open day, for lesbian and bisexual (LB) women at the Prism Lifestyle Centre in Hatfield, Pretoria (South Africa)