

# Community Life Project: Helping husbands become better lovers

The Community Life Project (CLP) offers educational programmes on a wide range of issues to families, couples, trade associations, churches, mosques, hospitals, and schools. According to Project Director Ngozi Iwere, several of its projects involve working on issues of pleasure in marriage with communities and with Catholic organizations.

CLP works with couples by focusing on why men seek sex outside marriage, and engaging the men in dialogue and learning. “In this process of exploring fidelity we’ve learned that impotence is a huge issue for men. It’s something they want to know more about, and it’s also one of the factors encouraging them to start sexual relationships outside their marriages, in particular with younger women.”

CLP teaches men about sexual pleasure in the context of marriage. “With couples, it wasn’t that the men didn’t want to be faithful to their wives; it was that the sex wasn’t fulfilling for them,” said Iwere. CLP’s couples project helps men to become better at meeting their wives’ needs and increasing their wives’ pleasure. This can then increase the likelihood of fidelity and, therefore, lower risk behaviour.

Iwere said that to engage men in this process, “You couldn’t just talk about HIV.” The men wanted to know about sex and about drug use, and this dialogue led them to discussions about sexual fulfilment and the options that are available. “...We do talk about what turns people on,” explained Iwere, “not by way of giving a list of turn-ons, but we talk about the fact that different people are turned on by different things, and different parts of the body excite people differently. We let them appreciate the fact that it wouldn’t help to compare their spouses to previous sexual partners and assume that a particular type of foreplay or touch or part of the body which turned on a previous lover will necessarily have a similar or the same effect on the spouse. There is a need to understand the uniqueness and individuality of everyone and take time to understand each other’s body and what gives pleasure.”

She said CLP also teaches that communication about pleasure does not necessarily have to be verbal – body language is important. “They need to pay attention to how a spouse responds to touch; we call it listening with the body and the heart ... they can learn a lot about what excites and what puts off the other ... We talk about orgasm and how to achieve it together as much as possible or how to ensure that the woman achieves orgasm no matter what phase of her reproductive life she is in – pregnancy, breastfeeding, pre- or post-menopausal.”

CLP found women, as well as men, wanted a more fulfilling sexual life, “But the men expected the women to be more open to pleasure, while the women thought the men didn’t want them to know about pleasure,” explained Iwere. So CLP helped the couples to communicate. “We were working with the men, and then we asked them to bring their spouses. We organized parties, rather than a workshop or meeting, with the aim of sensitizing more people to these issues.”

They also provided basic education. For example, some of the women didn’t know what orgasm was, so CLP developed a training module about women’s orgasm, but which still had its focus on how to improve the marriage. In its work with Churches, CLP created a training module based on Catholic principles and beliefs. They put in information about human sexuality, violence and sexual pleasure in terms of its connection to other marital issues, for example, by pointing out that women often weren’t interested in sex when they were over-worked with domestic chores. As far as safer sex is concerned, Iwere says they reached agreement with a priest to tell couples about all methods of family planning, but to inform them that the Catholic Church only supports natural family planning. This allows the couples to make informed decisions. “There has been no resistance within the Churches because,” she explained, “you can find a lot of things within the Church to support pleasure in marriage ... The success of this work is the whole package – it succeeds because it is in the broader framework of relationships.” According to Iwere, many of the 4000 couples CLP has worked with so far find the programme beneficial because, they say, they did not learn this stuff at school or anywhere else.

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