

**Memo on Phase 1 of Year 2 of the WITS Training Institute on
Women's Rights, Citizenship and Governance in Sub Saharan Africa**

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Project Title:

Training Institute: Women's Rights, Citizenship and Governance in Sub-Saharan
Africa – Evaluation (Project No. 104909-002) Contract No. 111626

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1. Background

This short evaluative memo¹ provides interim reflections on phase 1 of year 2 of the WITS Training Institute. This phase involved selected researchers in a programme of seminars and skills training between the 22 June and 3 July 2009, aimed at developing their abilities to conceptualise and plan research projects in the field of women's rights, citizenship and governance.

2. Methodology

The key evaluation question is whether and to what extent the institute is meeting its objectives of supporting researchers to conceptualise and plan research projects in the field of women's rights, citizenship and governance, to build capacity for theory building, to mentor younger researchers and enable the emergence of new voices in gender research.

In order to provide ongoing feedback the evaluator undertook the following:

- Reviewed the Institute's advertisement and its dissemination
- Attended the Advisory Committee Meeting held on 1 April 2009 to select the research teams and to engage in preliminary discussion on the syllabus
- Prepared a brief memo for consideration by the meeting held to design the syllabus
- Attended selected portions of the institute held between the 22 June and 3 July 2009
- Interviewed each of the participating teams during the course of the institute
- Engaged in ongoing discussions with the project leaders during the course of the institute
- Reviewed course materials
- Engaged in ongoing conversation with the course leader and interviewed her on 30 July 2009

¹ As set out in the terms of reference, this evaluation is intended to be a reflective process, accompanying the project as it unfolds, and providing evaluative comments aimed at improvements over its duration. The evaluator is expected to:

- intervene strategically in the process of course design and development, providing an independent voice and commentary at key moments over the project's duration
- provide feedback to the project leader in face to face meetings
- provide three short memos as well as a written post course summary evaluation document.

In the longer term the evaluation is expected to feed into WRC's continued programming in the region.

3. Interim Reflections

3.1. The Call for applications

The advertisement calling for applications was more widely distributed than in the previous year via email lists, institutions and strategically targeted individuals. This elicited positive response, with a larger number of requests for information (145), as compared with the previous year, and with a larger number of applications – 45 as compared with the previous year's 25. The project leaders shortlisted 16 applications and the Advisory Committee was thus tasked with selecting 5 of these.

3.2. The Selection Process

A well organised selection process with sound and appropriate criteria facilitated the selection of five teams. The Advisory Committee scored the 16 shortlisted applications along the following criteria:

- The research idea
- Research Plan
- Expertise and Feasibility
- Team composition
- Potential for growth

More detailed scrutiny focused on the gender and age composition of teams. Some attempt was made to consider the criteria of feminism, but this was difficult since very few applications made specific mention of feminist research or ideas.

By age the majority – that is with the exception of one researcher – fit the profile of younger researchers. By gender three men were included in the selected teams – two teams (Mauritius and Zimbabwe) were male led and one team (Malawi) had a junior male member. However by the time of the institute in June the Mauritius team were encouraged to appoint a woman team member as leader, and the Zimbabwe team leader was no longer involved in the institute. This meant in effect that there were two males involved in the institute in June, neither being team leaders. Added to this, the non dominating personalities of the specific male members, made for a situation where, unlike the previous year's institute, there was no experience of male dominance.

The selected teams included:

Women's rights and citizenship in Mauritius

Structural Dynamics of Gender and Sexuality in Post Reconstruction – a team from Kenya

Women's space and citizenship in local governance in Malawi

The relationship between the state and women's organisations in the process of legal reform in Sierra Leone

Women as Human Rights Defenders in Zimbabwe

3.3. Problems with attendance of team members

However there were a number of challenges faced regarding the non attendance of team members at the first institute and this led to the non participation of the Malawi team, and to the reconstitution of the Zimbabwe team as a Zimbabwe/ South Africa team.

The Malawi team leader did not arrive at the institute as expected, as she was attending a conference in Laos. She had not given prior notice of her non arrival to the institute or to her team members. On the first day of the Institute a solution to this situation had to be sought and it was agreed that the two Malawi team members present would constitute a team led by the senior team member who inspired confidence as very capable to lead the process. However on the second day of the Institute the senior team member was notified of her father's death and had to leave suddenly on account of this, and was thus unable to attend the institute. Given this turn of events it was agreed that the remaining Malawi participant would attend the institute as an individual.

The Zimbabwe team leader had left the employment of the Human Rights NGO at which the participating team was based, in the period between the selection of teams and the beginning of the institute. The institute was notified of this and the Zimbabwe team was to be made up of two women lawyers based at the Human Rights NGO. However one of the two team members was not able to attend the institute, presumably for health reasons, but she had not given advance warning of this to the institute or to her fellow team member. Faced with the arrival of only one Zimbabwe team member at the institute, the course leader had to find a solution to yet another team break down. After lengthy consultation a solution was found by teaming up the Zimbabwe participant with a South African based NGO undertaking similar work and interested in similar questions. The South African participant joined her fellow team member on the third day of the institute and this meant that she had much catching up to do with a process she suddenly found herself in.

In addition to these problems of team breakdown a further difficulty was the late arrival of one member of the three person Kenya team – she arrived three days into the institute as she had to attend a court hearing in the UK. These difficulties increased the logistical load on the course leader and organisers, and had time and cost implications.

A further cause for concern is that one member of the Sierra Leone team is taking up a fellowship in Canada during the duration of the institute this year. This issue needs to be addressed by the course leader and the team mentor, in order to ensure that this does not limit the teams participation in the institute.

More broadly, these difficulties indicate problems of commitment which need perhaps to be raised both at the point of notifying successful teams that they have been selected; and in ongoing contact by mentors

3.4. Designing the Syllabus

As in the previous year a high standard was maintained in the designing of the syllabus. A well designed syllabus encompassed analytical and methodological skills, the application of concepts to experience, and a specific focus on proposal writing.

In considering the syllabus design the following lessons from the previous year were considered:

- Participants had little background in political theory and even in basic concepts and this meant there was a huge gap to fill
- Participants struggled with arriving at a focused research question
- While all participants greatly appreciated the content of the seminars, they felt that the programme was packed and they felt overstretched
- Participants were not very enthusiastic about field trips

- Team dynamics were problematic in two cases – in part this was to do with male domination,

The evaluator prepared a brief memo for consideration in designing the syllabus. The memo drew on the discussion at the selection meeting and on the evaluative memo on phase 1 of year 1. Issues raised included the need to consider the mix of backgrounds of the 14 researchers in preparing the content and approach – of significance was that 6 were NGO based and 8 were University based, 5 were lawyers, 6 were in the social sciences (3 Sociology and 3 Political Studies); that following the experience of the previous year prior conceptual understandings on gender, citizenship and feminism should not be taken for granted; that a brief programme outline be sent out before the workshop to help researchers get a better sense of what to expect at the institute; an introductory session should include eliciting expectations of researchers; a session on team conduct, and what teams could expect from mentors and faculty over the duration of the project should be included in the first institute; sessions should end at 4.30, Saturday should be a half day and Sunday should be free; and provision be made during the institute for each team to spend a morning or afternoon with their mentor.

The syllabus design took much of the above into consideration. In addition to conceptual and theoretical grounding, participants received support in proposal writing through feedback sessions and sessions designed to elaborate the key elements of a good proposal. A session where each team met with their mentors further enabled the teasing out of the key research question.

3.5. Implementing the Syllabus

As in the previous year the syllabus design enabled meaningful learning in relation to the development of research proposals, in conceptual grounding in key concepts of citizenship and governance, and in comparative learning across countries.

Excellent faculty with considerable experience and knowledge were drawn on and excellent reading materials were provided, serving as a resource beyond the institute's duration.

Interviews with participants, and their comments at the end of the institute highlighted the many positives. All participants agreed that the content and delivery of the lectures were good, the materials were good, the discussions enriching, and the sessions on proposal writing most useful. The vast majority were happy with the venue and other logistical arrangements.

Comments included:

'It has been an amazing opportunity. We have been exposed to so many minds, interesting discussions and different perspectives.'

'It was an interesting feminist space.'

'We were pushed to be more academic and this is good.'

'The quality is great'

'I was excited at meeting the brilliant people I had read, who had had an influence over me. The material we have been given is very useful. I am glad I came, very glad'

However there were also challenges which affected the learning objectives. First the cold weather destabilised all participants.

Second the majority struggled with theory and this included those participants based at universities. Participants seemed not to have expected to encounter theoretical discussion. As one participant based at a university noted: 'I did not expect it to be so theoretical'. A participant based in an NGO noted: 'I thought it would be more practical'. This was so despite having received a reading list and an outline of the previous year's agenda – sent by the organisers of the institute in order to prepare participants for what to expect; and despite attempts to link the conceptual and theoretical readings and inputs to the areas of research in participants original proposals.

Third participants found the programme too packed. They would have liked sessions to end at 4pm instead of 5 pm, shorter breaks, and more free time to enable them to digest the input. Changes in the programme (as compared with the previous year's programme) to ensure a longer lunch break and only one evening session were thus not sufficient measures to enable a pace participants felt comfortable with.

Challenges with theory seem to be linked and challenges of pace and need to be considered in planning the November institute. With regard to theory building mentors would need to play a specific role in this in their ongoing contact with the research teams.

Each team had at least half a day with their mentor and this enabled teams to tease out their research question with the mentors assistance; as well as to begin a relationship with their mentor.

By the end of the first institute two teams – Sierra Leone and Kenya – had made good progress with developing their research questions, while two teams -- Mauritius and Zimbabwe/ South African had not yet developed their research question.

The syllabus design included a half day session on team building. However two days before the session the person who was to have conducted the session notified the project leader that she was unable to attend due to a family death. In place of the original plan research teams were taken through a one hour reflective exercise on what constitutes a powerful team. This enabled research teams to make a start on thinking on how to ensure their teams would operate to their optimum as they work on developing their research proposals. Given that a more in depth session on team building did not take place mentors would need to be sensitive to picking up on team dynamics and to support team functioning where necessary in their ongoing contact with their teams. The Zimbabwe/ South Africa team is most likely most in need of such assistance, given the nature of the formation of this team.

4. Concluding Comments

Phase One of the Institute supported researchers to conceptualise and plan research projects in the field of women's rights, citizenship and governance, has made a start in building capacity for theory building, although there are challenges to overcome on this count, and is playing a role in mentoring younger researchers who are being supported to emerge as new voices in gender research. Ongoing sessions with mentors and the November Institute need to address the key challenges in theory building, in individual motivation and commitment and in team functioning.