

BOOK REVIEW

The Book of WOMB

Jane Quin

Introduction

For many years in the past two decades, an organisation called Justice and Women (JAW) ran a programme on sexual rights and reproductive health with women in the deep rural area of the Mthonjaneni Local Municipality surrounding Melmoth, in the King Cetshwayo District of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. In 2017, women involved in this programme produced a book entitled The Book of WOMB that documents their work. 'WOMB' is an acronym for 'who owns my body'.

The Book of WOMB reports on a collective self-reflexive research project commissioned by the Joint Gender Fund of HIVOS and seeking to 'increase the knowledge base of what makes community-based locally developed gender-based violence programmes in South Africa work'. The main work of the project was based on the existing WOMB programme of JAW.

Although written primarily for themselves, the producers of the book also wanted to share what they learnt so that others could benefit from it. The construction of the book aims to support both these functions.

The Book of WOMB is a rainbow book, meaning that the sections or chapters are presented in different colours, each with its own particular purpose. The 'green chapter' was written by the WOMB project coordinator. It focuses on the work of the WOMB programme and responds to the question, 'What has the WOMB project been doing (in response to GBV)?' The project coordinator explains as follows:

The work of the WOMB Programme is about planning activities to be run in the community and the debriefing of the Community-Based Facilitators (CBFs) after running each of the activities about Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights ... that directly intersect[] with GBV. Through this project, JAW sought to disrupt cultural beliefs and practices internalised by

rural women which perpetuate their vulnerability to sexual abuse. These beliefs and practices also disconnect women from their own bodies in such a way that they do not timeously access health services when they are ill.

The chapter provides detail on the programme's process, purpose and topics, and reflects on interactive mutual learning:

We have become aware of the deep levels of mistrust amongst women as this is a community which still practices polygamy. Where women have internalised oppression and become complicit in perpetrating it. Distrust of each other deepens women's vulnerability as they cannot access sufficient support from one another to challenge issues which impact on all.

Where women have internalised oppression and become complicit in perpetrating it.

The 'yellow chapter' was produced by the WOMB project facilitators. The introduction of this illustrated chapter gives a clear picture of the nature of the work:

Community-based facilitators (CBFs) mobilise women in different areas with support of JAW staff. They are running modules to the community. The modules were about 'who owns my body' (WOMB) as women, and gender-based violence (GBV). They run the process in deep rural areas. Most people are uneducated and believe cultural practices and some of them are in polygamy marriages. They are under traditional leadership.

Also JAW staff are based in the community and we have almost 10 years work with them about different projects. That makes it easy for the community to work with us and introduce our CBFs to them. We and the CBFs know some experiences and cultural practices that women faced.

The stories of the community-based facilitators in the 'orange chapter' provide detail on the work and learning in practice. The chapter responds to the question, 'How do we see community members' experience of GBV through the WOMB programme?' The wide range of topics deal with issues of health and sexuality from menstruation to menopause, the raising of boys and girls, gender-based violence, traditional affairs, protests, and more.

The stories are written and presented in their original language and handwriting. They are reproduced in typed text in the alternative language of English or isiZulu. They speak from the heart of the experience, as seen in these excerpts:

The community does not believe modern health prevention methods, but they believe traditional prevention such as that if you are not ready to have a child, you must take a snail's shell and then you put what you used while you were on period and then you bury it where you will be able to find it when you are ready to have a child. What I learned here is that this community needs education.

I was able to talk with women and they also listened and I see myself as a person who can be listened. If I speak more, I will be more powerful because I used to be shy and now I am not. The women were trying to prevent pregnancy but

some of the methods were dangerous and not effective.

When we facilitated, people heard us well and they received the message. For some, this incited sadness, one woman mentioned that she was even chased away because she would not bear children and when she had left, she met another man and they had a baby. After several years, they brought her back to the wedded household, they told her to pay a fine (culturally), and she went back. This act shows that a woman is treated as a tool that makes children and if she does not do this, she is charged, or blamed. What is painful for this woman is that her husband married another woman after she was chased away [...]

The 'blue chapter' is about the research methodology and shares the thinking behind some of the mechanisms used in the processes. There are also white- and pink-paged 'book ends' on either side of the book. While the white pages introduce the book, the pink pages contain some inspiring final reflections – for instance, 'we all own the research process, we are motivated; and I'm pleased that this documentary could be seen by my grand-grandchildren'. The pink pages also contain analytical conclusions, including the maxim that informed this project: 'Trust; Opening; Taking risks carefully'. There was also an emphasis on the 'need to keep practising this culture in the community' – pun intended.

JAW itself no longer exists in the same form as it did at the time of the making of *The Book of WOMB*. A new iteration emerged, though, a fully community-based organisation called Kwehlukile. Kwehlukile continues to offer support to women in the area, including through developing food sovereignty.

The Book of WOMB may be ordered from Ntombi Ngobese at the email address Ntombi.sanec@gmail.com on a gift-economy basis (in other words, you pay what you can and feel). All contributions of any amount help to fund Kwehlukile.

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