

pDuring my second year I led a soy demonstration in which, due to miscommunication, we had nearly 6 kilograms of beans to transform into milk and tofu. This was double the amount I normally work with during a presentation, so it was twice as time consuming. Per usual, I discussed the numerous advantages of the underutilized leguminous plants – agriculturally, nutritionally, and economically. Nevertheless, there was still a lot of downtime while the milk was boiling, and finally, one woman spoke on behalf of the group to tell me about another pressing issue. After a year and a half in village, I felt like I had a pretty good grasp on a lot of the major problems – but also recognized that there’s always something new to learn as the “outsider.”

What was their concern?

They were upset with the condition of their breasts.

Yup... As it turns out, saggy boobs (or, breasts that fall - *seins qui tombent*) are really worrisome to women (and men). She continued by explaining that women often terminate breastfeeding early because their boobs begin to droop even after the first child. The women said that their fallen breasts not only make them feel less attractive, but have larger cultural implications as a result. Their perceived diminishing beauty increases the likelihood that their husbands will stray and search for additional relationships, and the men nodded in agreement matter-of-factly with this sentiment.

This was shocking to me since, after seeing breasts day in and day out in public during breastfeeding, I hadn’t assumed they were a body part that is as sexualized as they are in America. However, I felt an “Aha” moment along with the slight elation that the women felt comfortable enough sharing this sensitive and intimate information. Breastfeeding seems like such simple advice that we as volunteers reiterate time and again. Who among us hasn’t given a presentation on child health and nutrition lauding immediate and exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months and continuing the practice as long as possible thereafter, simplistically saying – “It’s free!”? Here was insider information about why women *really* abandon the practice.

Searching the recesses of my mind, I countered with the reasons why sagging breasts (ptosis of the breast/*ptose mammaire*, for those interested in the technical terms) occur. I started with the fact that changing muscle tone and loss of the skin’s elasticity are inevitable parts of the aging process. I also mentioned that particular exercises help strengthen the muscle sheath that runs along the chest under the breast. (I couldn’t help but smile at recalling those ridiculous Shake Weight® infomercials.) We then chatted about the *number* of children that women typically have, and I again pointed out that better spacing of these births allows the body a much-needed rest in between. Further racking my brain and thinking on my feet, we had a conversation about the lack of proper support. Despite what they thought (“*Chez vous, les seins ne tombent pas comme ici*”), I countered that women in America also suffer with the fact that, as they age, their “ladies” aren’t so perky. I shared that we’re often able to hide it, concealing the fact by using quality bras that lift our boobs into place. The women latched on to this point, sharing that yes, many women in Cameroon don’t even wear bras and those that do usually have to purchase them as *frippe* finds in the market.

I walked away from the presentation happy with the information exchange that had occurred, but unsure how to do anything in a meaningful and sustainable way. Several months later, a woman in the U.S. came across my blog entry discussing this issue and reached out to me. She asked if I would be interested in providing free bras to these women if she organized a collection among her friends, neighbors, and co-workers. I spent a month reflecting on the offer, knowing that the gesture was generous but that becoming the Oprah of Bras (“YOU get a bra! And YOU get a bra!! EVERYONE gets a

BRA!!!”) didn’t exactly fit into the Peace Corps model of development. Eventually though, I conceded with the justification that it met a community need and, as my post was not being replaced, I had no personal responsibility of ensuring that my successor didn’t walk into a situation where they’d be confronted for two years by people asking where their *soutien-gorge* was.

Once she had the go ahead from me, the woman got to work collecting and shipping 170 new and gently used bras. On my end, I organized a Women’s Health Day, advertising that this would include a bra distribution campaign. (Want to get people interested in attending one of your events? Mention that there will be something free and hang up posters all around your village with hand-drawn pictures of bras... )

One Sunday afternoon just after church let out, we opened up the health center for this day, including a discussion and proper fitting where women were measured and informed what their true band and cup size was. We touched on the causes of sagging breasts and a few other health lessons and also had shea butter made by a Bangangté women’s cooperative for sale - highlighting its use in minimizing the appearance of stretch marks and softening skin.

The day wasn’t as organized as I had hoped (always to be expected, for sure, but not helped by my involvement in a moto accident en route to the event, counterparts not showing up, and a general lack of time to prepare due to it occurring in my final weeks at post). However, I envision that a similar project could be carried out using the opportunity to thoroughly talk about women’s health issues, including numerous topics surrounding the theme of breast health such as: breastfeeding, breast cancer detection screenings, and the traditional practice of breast ironing/massage.

In the end, the lesson I learned was that what at first seems to be a vanity issue - a matter of simple aesthetics and concern with appearances - has deeper implications. Understanding the true obstacles and consequences to this particular behavior (that we assume should be relatively easy to change) showed itself to be quite complicated the more I probed. It is an unfortunate reality that women in Cameroon must typically rely on men financially – not only for themselves but to ensure their children’s health, education, and other expenses are covered. Thus, their concern with how they look is a direct link to economic insecurity. It’s a complex and nuanced problem, but a fascinating reminder of gender inequality and how we must bridge the gap and involve both parties in taking ownership of the health of their families.

*Bonne chance et du courage* with work at your respective posts and remember to keep an open-mind and be willing to improvise and approach problems (even those that seem silly or superficial at first) with creative solutions!