

Using human-centered design (HCD) to address SRH challenges in higher learning settings

Reflections from Heran Birhanu, Youth Advocate and former HCDEXchange Youth Associate



Heran Birhanu is a young professional based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Passionate about gender equality, reproductive health and rights and meaningful youth engagement, Heran has served different organizations and initiatives in these fields. In her most prominent roles, Heran has worked as a Youth Innovation Champion, for PSI Ethiopia's flagship program, Smart Start. Outside PSI, Heran also works as an Operations and Administrative Head for Siqqee Scholars - a student initiative that is working to alleviate SRHR related problems and their effects on young women’s educational journey.

As part of the Youth Leadership Hub at HCDEXchange what was appealing, and did you feel you were able to practice meaningful youth engagement?

I had a background in adolescent and young girl sexual and reproductive health through my time in PSI Ethiopia where we co designed interventions for young adolescent married girls in Ethiopia. But what stood out to me at HCDEXchange is the fact that I was able to interact with other like-minded youth working from other regions such as Southern Asia and other parts of East Africa.

What major lessons did you learn from being an HCDEXchange YLH associate?

I've learned the importance of maintaining strong relationships with not just your coworkers but also organizations that work across your sphere. A lot of learning lives within your network and a lot of information that's beneficial to our work as human-centered design practitioners, we've attained through engaging, active partnership, network and community building.

What are the sexual reproductive health (SRH) challenges that your project focuses on?

I've learned the importance of maintaining strong relationships with not just your coworkers but also organizations that work across your sphere. A lot of learning I realized that SRH is a major challenge at Addis Ababa University, faced by many female students. My individual learning project is about understanding the current SRH challenges and needs of female university students using a HCD approach. I used different research activities to help students and other key involved parties to identify their needs using insights.

What was one big challenge that you faced while doing your project?

One big challenge that we faced early on in the project, especially initially, there were some national security issues in Ethiopia. This means that schools were not open and there were no students to interview. But fortunately enough, the situation changed and schools opened on time. We were then able to go into schools and other institutions.

"HCD is not a top down approach where organizations bring in their solutions without the guidance and involvement of young women themselves."

What is the most exciting thing you learned in your project?

Well, the most exciting thing that I learned is that “insights” can be very rich. We spoke of the needs of university students and found that their awareness on the SRH issues was not as strong. To talk about needs is one thing, but before talking of needs to be found, it was important for students to understand what SRH actually is. Also, I found that some students were not previously aware of existing SRH services within the university, nor the fact that they have the agency and right to demand for these services. So one thing that really came across is the importance of awareness reaching all female students.

