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Tell us about your current role and organisation

I'm a Manager for the Adolescence team at the Children's Investment Fund Foundation's (CIFF) London office. The work we do in the team is focused on empowering girls and boys to control their sexual and reproductive health to avoid unintended pregnancy, unsafe abortion and HIV/AIDS. My particular portfolio consists of youth-centred programming and marketing of sexual reproductive health (SRH) services with a bit of work in SRH product repositioning. Like other Managers, I'm responsible for my own portfolio, help build strategies and develop new proposals, we call investments at CIFF.

How did you move from academia to your current role?

Prior to my graduate programme, I worked in Zambia in the same field for 5 years, so had previous experience. During my dissertation writing period, I was an intern for a small non-for-profit called the Pleasure Project that advocates for incorporating pleasure in sex education. Whilst I was attending an event on behalf of the Pleasure Project, I was introduced to my current boss who invited me to enter into a consultancy for 3 months under his team to develop a landscape analysis and concept note for safe abortion. It ended up being approved by the internal committee that approves concepts and investments, so they kept me on as an Analyst before my recent promotion to a Manager.

What does a normal working day look like for you?

A LOT of emails! To be honest, this is how much of my time is spent. Back and forth on programmes, asks for information from leadership or coordination with potential partners or other funders. The rest of the bulk of time is spent in meetings with partners, other funders, my team members or other sector teams. In between those, I'm working on concepts, proposals or updates on strategies or PowerPoints that will be shared with different stakeholders. Also, I'm reviewing the latest reports or budgets from partners, paying grants, or preparing for meetings. Finally, the regular administration tasks like updating my receipts in our travel and expense reporting system, updating annexes for new contracts with consultants or partner, or updating my weekly dashboard to my managers.

What are the best things about working in your role?

I really enjoy the core of what I do and whom I'm doing it for. Everyday I remember that this is all for adolescents who I believe deserve a better life and one that they have control over. I know that their lives are hard, so in anyway I can make it easy for them to access information and services that they so desperately need (often without knowing how much they need it), I'm happy. They are at the core of what I do, and the reason I do this work.

What are the biggest challenges you face in your work?

The politics. This is true for any position one enters, but it's an aspect of the global health and development field that I could do without. People each enter into this work with their own agenda, viewpoints, and biases. Learning what those are and how to navigate, as well as what to offer and how to ask, when you're trying to accomplish a particular objective from a meeting, at a conference or event is an important skill to learn. It is, in the end, a political skill to navigate and learn how to do this seamlessly. I'm still learning how to do this and to do it well. I've been told I need to work on my poker face, but it's an integral aspect of the work I wish was not as prevalent as it is in this space.

What's the progression like/where do you see yourself going from here?

From here, I want to be a director, then an executive director and keep climbing up the ladder steadily until I become a CEO or President of an organization that focuses on young people's issues, particularly sexual and reproductive health and rights. Whether I achieve this at CIFF, or another organization, I'm unsure, but I am passionate about the work I do and want to be a critical voice and leader in this work. Why? I think I have a unique exposure from my past and current experiences, and continue to hold fast in my belief that we don't really know what works – youths know what works and why it works so we ought to lift their voice up in everything we do to ensure that we're actually being youth-centric in our approaches – whether that be in implementation, advocacy, or policy development. I think the way to ensure that they're heard is for leadership to give them the space, so I want to be in a leadership position to do so. I can do so much as a programme manager.

What top tips would you pass on to researchers interested in this type of work?

Similar to what I said above actually,

1. We don't always know what works – the consumer, end user, human we are trying to reach knows what works. Listen. We just have to ask the right questions to get the answers we seek. There are many exciting types of research that are in vogue now speaks to this as a critical aspect to developing fit-for-purpose programmes – community participatory approaches and human centred design come to mind. This is not say that existing evidence does not remain crucial as a first stepping stone in programme development.
2. Funders are becoming more interested in monitoring data, particularly if it is data that can be compiled in a tech savvy way. If you're keen on research, this is the future, so think of taking an ethics course on the use of biometrics in monitoring and evaluation. Or consider learning about how

tech can be maximised in dashboard development for better course correction during implementation.

3. Sexual reproductive health and its outcomes are closely linked to other sectors like childhood nutrition, under 5 mortality and climate change, so don't study anything in a vacuum. Although the global health community tends to silo itself, the truth is we're all inextricably linked. So learning about other sectors and how that is affiliated to your focus is important and will help you snap up that future position if you pitch this in an interview.