When Jean (not her real name) was in Senegal last summer for a research internship funded by the Harvard Global Health Institute (HGHI), she expected to be living in a strict, conservative world that never had any fun. "I knew Senegal was a Muslim country," she said, "so I had certain assumptions. It wasn’t like that at all; I was very surprised!" To prepare herself for another summer abroad, she signed up for the Institute’s new “Young Leaders for Global Health” workshop series. The first session, in late February, was titled "World Health, Human Rights, and Ethical Reasoning in a Global Context."

“We’re trying to create a space where a different dialogue can go on,” said Dr. Sue J. Goldie, the Institute’s Faculty Director, addressing an auditorium packed with undergraduates who hope to make a difference in global health this summer. “We want to alter your perspective about the health of the world’s populations, and give you the opportunity to hang out with people you can share experiences with.” The series includes a workshop March 7 on “Global Cooperation, Principled Partnerships, and Communicating in Unfamiliar Settings”; an April 11 session on "Health and Safety when Traveling Abroad”; and a follow-up session October 9 on "Maximizing on Your Experience: Reflection and Continued Discovery in Global Health."

“This is a continuous learning experience” said Dr. Claudine Mtshali, HGHI Executive Director.

Internship experiences can shock us, said Dr. Jennifer Leaning, Director of the Harvard University François-Xavier Bagnoud (FXB) Center for Health and Human Rights and an expert in humanitarian studies. She illustrated human rights abuses with examples from her experiences in the field, including encounters in Darfur, Kosovo, the former Yugoslavia, Ethiopia, and the Sudan, as well as the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the U.S. Critically, even organizations and people with the best intentions and principles can violate human rights and students should be prepared for such ethical issues, she insisted. Rights violations happen all the time: in war, disaster, forced migration, and climate change. Maternal mortality, for example – the focus of the FXB Center’s Health Rights of Women and Children Program – reflects human rights abuses related to global poverty that have devastating effects on children. “There are ways of being helpful and there are ways of not being helpful,” said Dr. Leaning. “If what you are doing is not helpful, it deadens your own sense of dignity.” Effective humanitarian response must be accountable, transparent, with linguistic sensitivity. “Yes these are just words,” she concluded, “but they can have a big impact.”
So how does a student begin? Let’s start by recognizing our implicit associations, those unconscious ways we see the world as a result of our past experiences. In the third part of the February workshop session, Dr. Brittany Seymour, Instructor at the Harvard School of Dental Medicine and HGHI Education Associate, together with her husband, Michael, a specialist in effective teaching, used questions and brain teasers to get students talking about the tensions such associations may create and how to shape them into constructive and creative change. The implicit association concept is based on the work of Harvard professors Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald, and their Project Implicit. “Implicit associations are not good or bad,” said Dr. Seymour. “When we know how they might affect our encounters with other cultures, we can learn from them.”

“You’re not going to ‘help’ this summer; you’re going to learn,” concluded Dr. Goldie. “Keep this context in mind and hang out with us for a year.”

You might even have fun.

Other workshop sessions in the Young Leaders for Global Health Program:

March 7, 2013: “Global Cooperation, Principled Partnerships, and Communicating in Unfamiliar Settings”

April 11, 2013: “Health and Safety when Traveling Abroad”

October 9, 2013 (tentative date): “Maximizing on Your Experience: Reflection and Continued Discovery in Global Health”

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