

## International House NY

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*Ending Gangster-ism in Lesotho*

Lesotho

Gangster-ism in Lesotho has existed since the early 1900s. However, these gangs also known as *Marashea* were prominent in the mines of South Africa, where most Basotho men worked. Violence, dispute and wars over illegal mining rights only existed between rival gangs and rarely involved civilians. Although their culture has toppled over to the music industry and in some villages in the country, the ability to control and manage their wars remains commendable. Unfortunately, there is a new wave of “numbersgang/*manomoro*” in the country; a group of boys aged roughly between thirteen and twenty five, who terrorize communities and are responsible for numerous murders of innocent civilians. Numbers gangs originate from South Africa. An elaborated history of their origin can be found here <https://thenumbersgang.weebly.com/history-of-the-numbers-gang.html>

Lesotho’s geographical set up makes it impossible not to absorb South Africa’s habits and lifestyle, both the good and the bad; in this context, numbers gangs. While the primary causes of gangs across the world have been associated with economic factors such as unemployment and poverty, numbers gangs in Lesotho have proven to be socially and culturally motivated.

In January 2019, teachers associations warned the government of a strike unless their conditions to better pay and improved working conditions were met. When their grievances were not met, teachers went on a series of strikes that resulted in learning being effective only three out of the ten months in the academic calendar. With so much time on their hands, the boys began to hang out at bars, smoke dagga and drink alcohol. They started pick pocketing in the streets and stealing from their families. This was the birth of the gangs. Since then, their crimes have escalated to break-ins, assault and murder. Between July 1, 2021 and December 1, 2021, seven people, in Maseru alone, have lost their lives at the hands of *Manomoro*.

The situation escalated when COVID19 hit in 2020, just three months after the schools re-opened. Schools had to close again and remained so for the rest of the year. It is during this time that cases of organized robberies and murders began to rise again. These gangs pride themselves in using just knives as a weapon. They have traditions that include spilling blood to subscribe for membership and killing someone to be promoted to a higher rank in the gang. The higher the body count, the higher the rank. This means innocent people will continue to be killed senselessly.

Societies also failed. Not enough attention is paid to the mental health and wellbeing of the boy child and Basotho culture has normalized this. When COVID19 started, domestic violence and teenage pregnancy were skyrocketing and all resources were invested in curbing these. The result was addressed but the cause not confronted. Barely any focus was shed on men and boys; their mental state and how the pandemic was affecting them. This blunder weighs heavily on our cultural norms that showing frustration and panic, being vulnerable as a man is a sign of weakness. Boys felt misplaced and wanted to belong. These “numbers gangs” in Lesotho are a result of a failing society and poor education system.

### Proposed Solutions.

While law enforcement and the military continue to address the current gang members, my strategy is to solve the problem where it starts; the recruitment of new members.

I am the Founder and Director of a women’s rights organization called Barali Foundation (translated daughters). Among other projects, we have school clubs which are aimed at motivating school girls to

take part in leadership activities and STEM subjects. It is through this project that I got to visit schools and interact with boys and engage in meaningful projects with them. During these conversations, I learned that most boys enter puberty with very little guidance and emotional support. At just twelve, some are already being coaxed into joining these gangs. These gang leaders target mostly boys from single led and financially challenged families. Most of these boys do not even talk to their teachers and parents about this challenge because they do not know how to.

**Bobo**, common pet name given to baby boys in Lesotho and a fitting title to give to the event that celebrates baby boys. We will conduct a three day camp for 100 boys aged between twelve and fifteen. While we already have in our database, children from under privileged homes, we are going to open applications to participate in the camp to every boy around those ages around Hlotse. Priority will be given to those most vulnerable to gangster-ism. Only boys whose parents have provided both signed and verbal communication can participate.

On the first day, we will have welcome speeches and the breakdown of the weekend. Before sleeping, we'll have Story telling around the fire by a former South African gang member and author of "Blood, blades and Bullets." The idea is to have him share his experiences and use his story to educate and discourage boys from joining gangs.

Second day we will visit Teboho Seboka's organization, a youth led organization that harbors many small businesses to encourage boys and show them alternative ways to make a living through entrepreneurship. They will get an opportunity to interact, ask questions with the business owners and staff. This is to spark ambition, to show them that their dreams are valid and achievable.

On the last day, we have motivational talks and words of affirmations. This is to boost the boys' esteem and for them to know they matter. They will also write letters to self and then get closing remarks. These letters will be anonymous but a reflection of their feelings, fears and dream; an opportunity to express themselves, something culture never allows them.

From these letters, we are going to document all the letters and include their general content in the final report. The long term plan is to have this camp annually and these letters will help us plan better and to identify relevant approaches to end gangster-ism and to generally create awareness about men's mental health.

#### School Principals meeting.

The invitation will be forwarded to all the 11 schools around Hlotse, Leribe's high gangster-ism spot. I am going to share feedback from the camp with the principals. Collectively, we are going to brainstorm and forge a way forward to prevent the spread of gangster-ism in their schools. We are going to strategize on how to involve parents and law enforcement for more sustainable results. The general idea is to have them share the contents of the meeting with their staff and school boards and at an agreed time, meet again, share feedback and create unit solutions.

#### Indicators

- Attendance lists
- Questionnaires before and after the BOBO camp.
- signed commitment to change form

**N.B. Lesotho schools have winter break starting from the end of May through early August. All project activities will happen during this time to avoid interfering with learning.**

