

Title: Ending Gangsterism in Lesotho, Men on the Rise
Country: Lesotho
Institution: International House, New York
Designated Project Leader: Lineo Matlakala

Summary.

Men on the rise is a program under Barali Foundation, designed to offer tailored support for adolescent boys as a way to break the cycle of abuse and violence.

Project Description

Currently, my country, Lesotho ranks number three globally in countries with the highest homicide cases. Between May 2022 to May 2022 alone, there were 144 murders reported, and the numbers kept increasing since then. For a country with a population of roughly 2 million people, this is unacceptable. These brutal murders range between shootings, stabbings, intimate partner violence and mutilation. All have been reported to be committed by males between ages of 14 and 40. Gangsterism is also growing rapidly, thus propelling more violence. I chose this issue because it is scary to be a woman in Lesotho; we are assaulted and murdered everyday. Nothing we do seems to work; protests, prayers, marches, all are failing. I felt that in order to end violence, I need to address it at the source, which is men.

The approach I chose was to work with 12-15 year old boys. The reason I chose this age group is that they are at a very vulnerable age where identity, self worth, belonging and choosing one's path is critical. They are looking at everything the elderly men are doing and will follow suit. I found it more meaningful to intercept at that age by exposing them to positive role models and providing psychological support. I found it important to show them ways to make a living so as to prevent them from being a statistic of murders and sexual offender.

I chose Leribe because it is the second biggest town in the country. Our capital city, Maseru, is already a hot spot of gangs and violence, with Leribe following closely. I wanted to curb it before it got out of control in Leribe by introducing a preventative approach. In the capital city, it has gotten so out of control that even the military is now involved.

The program has received so much support, it is overwhelming. We have former convicts who are looking to better their lives working with us to teach boys consequences of crime and about life in prison as well as after. The Commander of Lesotho Mounted Police Service in Leribe has assigned to the program, three officers who will work with us on sensitizing the boys about sexual assault on how to report them. When we pitched this idea to the schools, they were very positive and supportive. Many boys had dropped out of school during the lockdown due to COVID19 to join gangs, this has deeply affected the education system. When I first wrote this proposal, my request was to pilot with just a 100 boys, however, we currently have 528 boys signed up. When I couldn't afford to host each of the boys for the camp, 3 business owners as well as the 5 schools they came from catered for the rest of the boys by providing food and transport for them.

The initial name of the camp was 'Bobo'(A common pet name for baby boys in Lesotho) but changed to "Men on the Rise". The pushing factor behind this change being that the issues we are now dealing with extend beyond just preventing Gangsterism and adolescent boys. It now involves different generations of men, all, however, working to mold the next generation of men to end the cycle of violence.

The second change was that, initially, we were going to host one all boys camp during the June break where we would have speakers come and motivate and build the boys. Due to the positive reception the program received nationally, we had to include an official launch, so that all the districts of the country can be a part of it, as opposed to the initial plan of piloting in just Leribe.

The last adjustment is that the program has grown beyond just one camp per year to having some activities happen on a monthly basis and others quarterly, running throughout the year.

No other fundraising efforts were made to cater for the camp, principals meetings and the launch. For all the extra people who signed up for the program and attended the launch, schools they came from catered for their meals while three local business owners provided transportation. No funds were ever directed to me or my organization

The military and police forces took great interest and participated in the building of the program, with the boys in the forefront. The young men have taken ownership of the program and my team and I have now designed activities guided by their thoughts. The program now runs throughout the year in schools and communities and we will continue to host a camp each winter break. List of activities include hygiene, sex and Sexuality, alcohol and drugs. Topic will be discussed in a circle to build trust, casually with one moderator to allow freedom and a chance to speak freely. Age appropriation is observed for each topic. We will further have leadership and community engagement engagements such as tree planting, recycling and fundraising for different causes.

Reflection

Peace to me means freedom. The freedom to be true to one's sexuality, dreams, choices and aspirations.

Many of the perpetrators of instability and crime in our communities come from a background of instability as well. Their anger created by lack of emotional support gets reflected in how they treat other people. My project addresses that gap of boys who grow up hurt and unguided, only to become abusers and killers. This is intended to decrease the number of crimes committed in our community, thus promoting peace.

I learned the power of communication and listening. Most of the time, as activists, we make the mistake of listening to respond and are quick to defend and that blocks us from learning.

My views on violence and abuse have indeed changed. I learned that the problems men and boys face are deeper than it meets the eye. I have learned the roles we play as women to create the space for abuse to breed. This program has become an affirmation that this project was necessary.

Personal Statement

We will not achieve world peace if we, as societies, continue to fail ourselves in our family setting and communities. I was a little overwhelmed when we received the support we did for this project. It was both happiness and sadness, happiness in that we will be able to reach out and help more people and sadness in that, it reflected just how many people were praying and waiting for such an intervention but had no capacity to start. It showed me just how much males suffer in silence, it made me aware that we activists overlook the cause of abuse but react to the consequences.

"Until we stop viewing insecurity and war as just guns and genocides, until we acknowledge that world peace begins in family units, we will never win." Lineo Matlakala, 2022, Lesotho.