

Ke Batla go Itse: Sexual Assault Prevention Program

Botswana

St. Lawrence University

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Section I - Narrative

Project goal: My project, *Ke Batla go Itse: Sexual Assault Prevention Program*, had four goals to achieve by the end of the three-month period. These included: engaging youth in conversations about healthy sexual practices and issues about sexual assault in Botswana; promoting a safe space for survivors to share their stories, report perpetrators, and seek counseling; teaching members of our communities' various ways of supporting sexual assault survivors; and redefining the existing rape culture in the country as one that supports survivors instead of blaming them.

Other funding: One of my project team members was St. Lawrence student and fellow SLU Advocates member Martina Leake '21, who received funds from the Jennifer W. Knowles '89 and Robert H. Knowles P'21 Internship fund to help pay for her travel and lodging expenses. I also did not have to pay for lodging for myself because I stayed with family, although I did contribute some funds toward the cost of utilities and food during my stay.

How I came up with the idea for this project: Having observed how St. Lawrence runs its Title IX program on campus, an idea came to mind to develop and implement a prevention program in Botswana high schools mind. Additionally, as a St. Lawrence Community Assistant, I was fortunate enough to work closely with the SLU Advocates, an organization that supports sexual assault survivors on campus. The partnership between the Community Assistants and Advocates allowed me to observe the impact the club has had on students. I decided to target high school students in public schools in Botswana because they are at an age where their belief systems are still forming. Further research indicated that many high school girls have already been sexually assaulted at some time in their lives.

Why I think the issue my project responded to exists: Few Batswana talk about issues relating to healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships. This lack of dialogue has manifested itself by creating a culture where sexual assault survivors are afraid of opening cases and sharing their stories with loved ones. It is also difficult to talk about preventative methods because sex-related conversations cannot be held between adults and teens. Additionally, many people do not realize that their actions and words unintentionally contribute to a systemic rape culture that glorifies violence, blames sexual assault survivors, and erodes the trust that used to build the communities we live in.

Statistics provided by the Botswana Police Service reveal that the number of women being sexually assaulted is rapidly increasing. This information motivated me to seek ways to address the issue. In addition, issues of sex and rape are ones that Batswana communities are afraid to engage in. It is very rare for parents to have a conversation about sex with their children. Failure to have these difficult conversations about sex-related topics has led many kids to suffer from a lack of emotional support from loved ones.

Botswana is very patriarchal, and toxic/hyper masculinity is very much entrenched in society. The tendency for men to adhere to societal gender roles has led to men often using violence to demand sexual favors, and to project their masculinity. Furthermore, because sex education is seen as a taboo, kids are seeking answers about it online from websites that perpetuate violence against women.

Why I chose this site: I selected Botswana as the site for my project, because issues in my home country are very important to me, and because I noticed that the government has certain gender-based violence policies that were poorly implemented and failed to target the youth of the country. My reason for choosing schools in the capital city is based on the fact that Gaborone is a central location that hosts people from various towns and villages around the country. I hoped to have students from a variety of villages taking the lessons they learned from the program and sharing them with their peers back in their communities.

What it was like to work at this site: Running the program in Botswana came with its own challenges. We were only able to recruit four team members instead of eight, including Martina Leake '21, the above-referenced member of the Advocates Club on campus, who served as Director of Programming for the project in Botswana. An invitation to assist with the program was extended to her after identifying and observing her passion for assisting sexual assault survivors on campus. Her duties included researching information that is user friendly for high school students. Unfortunately, Tebogo Ramatebele and Lesego Nchunga were unable to participate in the project, as expected. Tebogo fell sick during the start of the program and was unfit to continue her duties as Assistant Director. Instead, she helped with reviewing documents and drafting contracts for the other members. Lesego was accepted into the Mandela YALI Fellowship in June and left for the United States to pursue the program.

Additionally, the lack of urgency in the various government departments I had to work with derailed the timeline of the project. Various stakeholders such as graphic designers and gender-based violence groups brought into the project failed to deliver and keep their word. The printing of program merchandise such as sweaters and booklets was postponed because I didn't have a logo. Furthermore, we ended up cutting down the number of schools to run the program from three to one. Despite such challenges, these did not stop the program from happening, but instead fueled my existing passion to continue the struggle and see that the program was implemented.

Point at which I doubted project's success: I witnessed a lot of delays after starting the project on site. The development and implementation of the program in high schools required me to seek approval from the Ministry of Education, Special Support Services. Correspondence with the Deputy Director of the Department was established, and back-and-forth meetings were held, with very little promising results materializing. Days turned into weeks, and the weeks turned into months. Permission was granted in late July after schools had closed which gave us only two weeks to run the trainings. Ledumang Senior Secondary School administration was only going to allow us to talk to their students once we met parents during their PTA meeting in August. We then made the decision to drop Ledumang and focus on the other two schools. Additionally, a guidance and counseling training session was organized for Naledi and Gaborone Senior Secondary School (G.S.S.) teachers to make sure that they knew what information would be provided to their students. The failure for the G.S.S. teachers to show up to the two-day training led us also to drop that school. Despite these setbacks, the tremendous support from Naledi high school teachers ensured that the project went through within the last two weeks I had in the country. The teachers helped arrange a meeting with parents to inform them about the project and to also seek approval from them. The parents were happy with the project and proposed that such a conversation about sexual assault should be held during one of the Parents-Teacher Association meeting this term.

Communication challenges: I visited various departments and met a lot of people who kept on referring me to other people. Throughout these visits, I left letters that described the project and stated the program objectives, and was promised that someone from the office would call back. It was difficult to see the project getting off its feet and benefiting the people of Botswana. I struggled to get volunteers for the project in the first month of the program. This was because I failed to recognize that not a lot of people have Internet and were unable to apply online. Furthermore, some governmental

officials failed to see the benefits of the program, which made it difficult for the project to be executed on the original timetable.

Additionally, Women Against Rape (WAR) failed to respond to communications from the project team; the Kagisano Women's Shelter maintained communication with me for a couple of weeks during the planning process, but failed to assist with reviewing the booklet material we sent over to them. When Martina and I visited the University of Botswana Psychology Department, it appeared to us that the lady assisting us was not comfortable with us running the program. She kept on advising us about the sensitivity of the issue and how we could do more harm than good running it. She took down our details and promised to pass them along to one of the psychologist who could help us, but that too never happened.

How I define peace: Peace involves the process of seeking the means to reconcile different groups of people within a community in order to establish trust, which forms the foundation of every society. Peace can only be achieved when people take the time to understand one another, from their struggles to their achievements, and through that process find ways to hone their strengths so that all are empowered.

How my project will contribute toward peace: In order to find solutions to a problem it is important to address the root causes. Running this program has highlighted the numerous ways society contributes to the rape culture and makes it difficult for sexual violence perpetrators to be held accountable. This program was a stepping stone for survivors to heal, work on building trust with people, and also for community members to learn the various ways they can prevent sexual violence in their society. Such an approach helped the program participants to self-reflect, recognize the ways their actions glorify violence and blame survivors. I strove to bridge the gap between sexual assault survivors and community members. The intention was to reassure survivors that we believe them and want to help them through the healing process. *Ke Batla Go Itse: Sexual Assault Prevention Program* worked towards empowering survivors to tell their stories, inspire other survivors to come forward and help society figure ways to stop sexual violence.

In the long-term, we hope that students will apply preventive methods in their daily lives and start having conversations about gender-based violence in the country. Furthermore, involving the Ministry of Education, Special Support Service department, was to try and convince the government to develop and implement a sexual assault prevention program in schools across the country. I was happy to see the principals, and guidance and counselling teachers, at Naledi and Gaborone Senior Secondary School recognize the importance of addressing issues of sexual assault. We were asked to run sensitization for larger groups of students in conjunction with the small group training. At the end of the program, there were discussions regarding ways such a program could be implemented during school orientation sessions in the future.

How my project has changed the way I think about the world and changed me: There were so many things I got to learn about my society during the period I ran the program. Something I realized about the world is, there are many issues to address but we can only do so one day at a time. After working on this project, I now have a greater interest in learning more about gender-based violence. I have become more aware of my actions and try to avoid acting in any manner that can be perceived as glorifying violence against women and protecting sexual violence perpetrators.

Personal statement: "Sexual assault prevention should not be the responsibility of only women. Both men and women need to work as a united front in the fight against sexual assault. Implementing this project in high schools restored the dignity of many survivors and helped them find the peace and closure they longed for."