



Anecdotes on

EXPRESSING EXPERIENCES

Perspectives on Gender Based Violence,
HIV/AIDS, Teenage Pregnancy and
Parent & Child Communication.

*Twenty short stories by secondary school students
in Botswana.*

BOOK 1

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*Twenty short stories by secondary school
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BOOK 1

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FOREWORD

Anthology of Experiences of Gender Based Violence and the Link to HIV in Botswana: Told from the Perspectives of Adolescent Girls and Young Women

This anthology of experiences of sexual, gender and other forms of violence among Adolescent Girls, 15 – 24 years in Botswana is derived from real life experiences collected across 10 Global Fund Districts in Botswana i.e. Kgalagadi North, Okavango, Ngamiland, Francistown, Tutume, Selebi-Phikwe, Kweneng West, Boteti, Palapye and Serowe Districts. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as depicted here encompass a broad range of harmful acts such as rape, incest, intergenerational sex and forced marriage. The Anthology is a collection of 40 stories packaged as Book 1 with 21 stories and Book 2 with 19, which BONELA (Botswana Network on Ethics Law and HIV/AIDS) and its partner Women Against Rape (WAR) with support from ACHAP, commissioned as part of the Global Fund TB/HIV Project.

With these books and in combination with other empirical national data on SGBV among Adolescent Girls and Young Women (AGYW), we hope to propel national discourse on the same seeking opportunities for the effective integration and alignment of Gender and Sexual Violence to the National Strategic Framework on HIV/AIDS. We hope that this documentation, used appropriately as an advocacy tool, will also facilitate policy and legislative review within the justice, health and broader Botswana development context, which will result in reduced vulnerability especially of underage girls to HIV, teenage pregnancy, sexual violence and sexually transmitted diseases.

This process of documenting these stories developed storytelling and writing skills of the 40 young, adolescent writers to reflect and tell the experiences of young people under 4 themes: 1. Gender Based Violence, 2. Teenage Pregnancy, 3. Parent and Child Communication on sexual health and sexuality, 4. HIV/AIDS and Treatment Adherence. The narrators bring out the underlying causes of sexual, gender and other forms of violence as well as the interconnectedness of these themes and how these can be addressed at individual, family, community and policy levels in the context of HIV.

Even though the reflections on experiences came from 10 districts in Botswana, they are not only unique to these districts. They also depict the experiences of many other girls across the country. In essence these are not just fictional stories, but rather a compilation of evidence that should direct us to re-prioritise interventions aimed at addressing GBV and HIV/AIDS among adolescent girls and young women to minimise their vulnerability.

Apart from the threat associated with HIV exposure, SGBV has long lasting effects on the mental and physical health of survivors. These implications, in addition to the stigma associated with survivors of sexual violence, often lead to economic hardships and the loss of a sense of community. Because many stories of sexual violence remain untold, it is hard to understand how far-reaching the impact can be.

I am honoured to present this set of books to Botswana and I would like to acknowledge the efforts of these remarkable young women. It is my sole desire that these stories will ignite a new way of thinking about adolescent programming and effectively respond to the relationship between HIV and violence as a Human Rights issue to support the national target to reach 90/90/90 by 2020.

THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW!

Most sincerely

Cindy Kelemi



Executive Director
BONELA
November 2018

The following stories are works of fiction based on reality.
Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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*I am a girl child
Human, not a trophy
Equal I am to the boy child
He is my brother, nephew, uncle
And I am his sister, niece, aunt.
We are all woman born;
Fathered by a man*

*I am able, I can, oh yes I can.
Don't treat me as a trophy
The predators might mistake me for their treasure
Treat me as such-Equal to the boy child
It will build me a security wall from my predators*

*Protect me from early marriages,
defilement, rape, std's, sti's, HIV, rape, GBV
And all sorts of abuse
I am a girl child and not a trophy
I am able, I can, oh yeah, I can
As long as you treat me equal*

Poem by Naval Kathapelo John



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THE CAMERA NEVER LIES

TSHOLOFELO PERTUNIA MAWA
BOIKHUTSO JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Selibe Phikwe District

“Why are you doing this to me Tina? Why! What have I done to deserve this?” Keitshokile asked. He was sobbing like a baby.

“Do you really think I will give you everything you want? I mean did you think I will supply you with food and buy you clothes just like that?” She said as she walked away, swaying her hips with a daring attitude. As she reached the door, she stopped and turned back to say in a threatening voice, “Don’t forget to do my laundry, clean the house, wash the dishes and cook because I will be back in a while. I want to find the job done. If not, trust me you will regret the day you were born.”

Keitshokile broke down every time Tina said these kinds of words to him. He lived a miserable life. He cleaned the house and washed the dishes. As he was doing the laundry, he came across Tina’s panties and he was disgusted such that his face turned sour as though he had eaten a lemon. “Oh God, how can this woman be this heartless? Is she not ashamed of making me wash her panties?” he asked himself as he held them with disgust between his fingers and tossed them into the bucket.

But this was life as Keitshokile knew it. This was what he had to go through on daily basis. Sometimes, when Tina was in a really foul mood, Keitshokile was denied food. Tina would leave him to starve.

Later when Tina came back to the house, the job she had assigned her husband was done. She looked around in inspection, nodding. Then she noticed that her husband wasn’t in the house.

Keitshokile had gone to meet his friends at the popular bar in Mapoka. It was there where he found peace; freedom from his bully wife. Kagiso and Mike were waiting for him when he arrived.

“Ao! Monna e le gore o ne o diilwe ke eng?” Kagiso asked.

“Come on guys, there is nothing to worry about,” Keitshokile replied with a fake smile. “Can we talk about something else.” When Kagiso changed the topic to talking about his family, his wife and children, and the way he loved them, Keitshokile felt a burning in his heart. How could all men out there enjoy their marriages but him?

1 “Hey man! What delayed you?”

Keitshokile was in pain, just thinking about this. Blood dripped from his heart. He and his wife never lived the happy life he had imagined. Suddenly he excused himself from his friends and scurried to the restroom. He couldn't stand Kagiso's words anymore. Instead of making him happy, they made him sad.

“What was that?” asked Kagiso. “That dude ain't cool.”

“Well, I don't know. He seems to be lost in his thoughts. I think something is bothering him.”

Inside the restroom, Keitshokile stood in front of the mirror, splashing water on his face. He looked like a ghost. There were lines on his face, under his eyes; lines that showed how much pain he was suppressing inside. A few minutes later, he joined his friends in the bar. “What's wrong man, are you okay?” Kagiso asked with concern.

“It's complicated. You won't understand,” Keitshokile said. With enough pressure from his friends, he spilled the beans. He told them everything. They listened with their hearts and when he finished in tears, they took turns counselling him and advising him on what to do. They gave him strength.

That evening when he stepped into the house, Keitshokile had made up his mind. “I want a divorce,” he said to his wife.

“Are you mad? What the hell are you talking about? I'll cut out your tongue if you continue talking like that,” his wife stood up from the chair and approached him. “You want me to break your neck, right?” This time Keitshokile didn't flinch.

“I said I want a divorce. This is not a plea,” Keitshokile stubbornly stood his ground.

“From where do you get the guts to talk to me like that? You're not getting any divorce. I will divorce you when I want to. You can't divorce me.”

“I want a divorce,” Keitshokile said again.

“Are you a robot? Or are you deaf?”

With that, his wife leaped onto him and started throwing punches to his head. Keitshokile stood there, taking the punches and the kicks until he fell down. He didn't defend himself. He was tired of trying to defend himself without any success. His wife was tougher and stronger. She sat on top of him, mounting him like he was a donkey, clawing and slapping him. Keitshokile was as unresponsive as a bag of maize.

The door sprang inwards and Mike and Kagiso rushed in. They had a video camera in their hands. They had been filming the couple through a window since Keitshokile stepped into the house. Tina looked up and jumped away from her husband.

“Who the hell are you?” she asked.

“You’ll see how to explain this film to the police,” Mike said. “Let’s go, Ketshokile. Well done!”

“Hey you fools! Wait a minute!”

A few months later, Tina was ushered through prison gates, manacles claspng her arms. Keitshokile went through counselling sessions and regained his life – a free man at last!



Take-home message:

Men can be physically, emotionally and verbally abused. It is rarely reported or acknowledged. It is important for men to speak out about this abuse in order to get relevant support. Abuse is an offence punishable by law.



TODAY I WILL FIGHT

GOMOLEMO LEBOGANG WOTO
DENJEBUYA JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Tutume District

*T*ill death do us part. Those words still rang in my head. I sat on my bed recalling that very moment I said 'I do'. How did I not see I was tying the knot with a monster? Tom's harsh and scary voice sliced through my thoughts like a knife. "Bontle! Get here right now," he called from the kitchen. Those days I was always ready for anything. Tom did anything he pleased to my body. Sometimes he made the legendary Muhammad Ali seem like he was just a baby, because Tom's fists were harder. Tom could have won heavyweight championships.

I headed to the kitchen. All I could think of was, what did I do this time? Was it because I was illiterate and had no job? Did I really deserve that? "Where is my food?" Tom asked, frowning. Every time Tom and I had an argument, he would scold me for being unemployed and tell me that I was a burden. Our arguments usually ended in a physical fight. He always won.

Tom and I had children. It was his task as a man to provide for his family. He had to buy the food and I had to do the cooking. That was the natural order of things. I didn't have to work. But that day Tom hadn't bought food, yet he wanted to eat. What was I supposed to do? Suddenly he grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled. "Can't you hear me? I asked; where is my food?"

"I... well... there is no food," I stammered and Tom slapped me hard.

"Aah!" I screamed in pain. It's amazing how even people like us who get beaten almost every day still feel the pain whenever we get beaten. No one can get used to pain.

"Mommy, mommy!" my two kids ran to me." They always wanted to help but they couldn't.

"Mommy will be fine, darlings. Go to sleep," I assured them. As soon as they left, the boxing champion rained fists on me. Tom enjoyed hearing me scream, hearing me beg for mercy. That night, I denied him either. He punched, kicked, punched, kicked. I bled on my face but I remained mute, like a sheep. Besides, I didn't want to scare the kids. He then stormed out.

He didn't come back that night. I was bruised all over, and disfigured. My name just didn't suit me anymore.

Time went on and the abuse continued. It was my way of life. If only I had known back then, I wouldn't have married him in the first place. Tom's true colours had come as a shock to me. But then again I wondered why I stayed in the marriage, why I endured his abuse. The children. I held on to my marriage because of my children, our children.

When I woke up the next day, I made breakfast with what was available. My husband Tom ate like a lion. But there wasn't going to be any lunch and I knew that telling him would be like sparking a fire. How irresponsible of him.

Enough is enough, I said to myself. I couldn't take it any longer. I made up my mind. Today I wasn't going to bow. Today I would fight back. I was going to stand for myself and protect my life.

Tom came drunk after work and started screaming for nothing. For the first time, I answered back. "Hold it right there, mister. I'm your wife and you should respect me." Tom froze. He couldn't believe I said that. He looked at me, sizing me up.

"You heard me," I said. "Today I will fight."

Tom charged at me and delivered a slap to my face. I ducked and he lost balance, almost tumbling over. He must have been surprised by my reaction. But also, it excited him. He beamed and faced me again. Then charged at me like a bull. I picked a frying pan from the worktop and smacked it hard on his head. The pan deformed, taking the shape of Tom's head, like his head was a mould. He clutched his head in pain and looked at me with disbelief.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his voice weakened.

"You have eyes, can't you see? I told you, today I will fight!"

He might have been wondering what got into me. I stood up for myself.

With the kind of speed I never saw in him before, Tom rushed towards me and knocked the breath out of me. I raised the pan again but something cold and sharp pierced into me, once, twice, thrice and I screamed. Then everything went black.

Beep, beep, beep, went the machines as I woke up in hospital. I thanked God I was alive. I hadn't seen Tom take out the knife when we fought, when I finally tried to fight back. I was told he was in a holding cell, awaiting trial. All I wanted was to get out of the hospital and live a happy life with my children. We would find a way to survive. Where there was a will, there was always a way.



Take-home message:

Marriage doesn't always present a bed of roses. To leave an abusive marriage, one needs a safety plan, particularly when children are involved. To challenge an abusive partner needs careful thought and support.



THE GAMES ROOM

PAULINE IRIS KINNEAR
DUKWI JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Boteti District

Oneile quickened her pace as she walked along the deserted street. A cold wind had sprung up and she shivered, pulling her silky jersey tight and folding her arms over her chest. Just then a vehicle pulled up next to her, surprising her. She had been preoccupied with what awaited her at home. The driver of the vehicle rolled down the window and said, “Hi babe, you want a lift? It’s cold and you will freeze out here in the streets.”

Oneile considered the offer and decided to take the ride. Little did she know that it was the beginning of her misery. George drove towards the village centre shops and parked his vehicle behind a local bar. In a kind voice he asked Oneile what her favourite drink was. Oneile wasn’t sure she had a favourite drink; after all, it was a long time since she had one. George stepped out of the car and went inside the bar. He told Oneile not to talk to anyone while he was inside. He came back quickly and handed her an alcoholic drink. They both opened their cans and sipped silently.

They talked a little about the weather, a bit on politics, just small talk that didn’t seem to have any direction. The focus was mostly on the drinking and listening to the music spewing from the car speakers. Oneile felt George’s arm slide around her shoulder. She shuddered a little, but then relaxed, because his touch was warm and comforting. After a little while, George shifted even closer.

“I love you, Oneile,” George said, and Oneile wondered if he was for real or it was just the influence of beer. She hesitated. If George liked her, maybe he would help her cope with what’s happening at home, Oneile thought. Her mother was unemployed and her three siblings were registered with the social welfare.

“I love you too, George,” she said, even though she didn’t mean it. They kissed, sealing the agreement. The car had dark tinted windows, so no one could see them from outside.

George promised Oneile that they would be happy in their relationship and that they would eventually get married and have a wonderful life together. But Oneile didn’t know that George was married. After long min-

utes of kissing and fondling and touching, the two decided to leave the public space. The heat was building up and they needed a private space. They drove to George's place – a nice, cosy house.

Inside, Oneile wasn't surprised when they went through the nicely furnished living room to the bedroom. But despite the alcohol that she had been consuming, her conscience nudged her, because she knew what going into the bedroom meant. Was she ready? Did she really want to do this? Wasn't this prostituting herself? How could she meet a man and go to bed with him right away before getting to know him first? But then she thought; no, George is genuine, I need money and he can help.

Unlike the well organised living room they just walked through, the bedroom was a mess. It was like there had just been a war going on inside; clothes were scattered everywhere, empty beer cans and bottles littered the floor, cigarette stubs and the distinct smell of marijuana. And amongst all the rubbish, to Oneile's horror, were empty boxes and packets of used condoms. She hesitated, her heart jumping to her throat. The alcohol must have numbed the reaction of instincts in her, because, had she been sober, Oneile could have bolted away right then, screaming '*mme weel, mme weel!*' But instead she looked at George in horror.

"Relax," George said in a slur.

"What is this? What's going on?" She asked.

"Welcome to my games room," he said.

"Your what?" Oneile was perplexed. For a minute she thought maybe the beer was making her hallucinate and this wasn't real.

"It's not a bedroom, darling. It's a games room. Are you ready to play?"

"No," said Oneile. "I have to go!"

"Listen, I told you I love you, right?" George reminded her, his voice heavy from the alcohol. "So trust me. We play this little game, and you

1 "Mama, help! Mama, help!"

walk away with lots of money.”

“But you’ve been sleeping with lots of girls in here. Look at all these used condoms!” Oneile objected.

“They were only playing the game. Look, I know your family suffers. I know everything about you. I’m offering help here. Now, why can’t you get undressed, climb on the bed and we can get this over and done with?”

Oneile thought about it. She really needed the money. Besides, the sight of used condoms was proof that George had been protecting himself. What harm would it do if she cooperated, got the money and ran away? George, she now could tell, wasn’t a man for keeps.

“And?” George asked impatiently.

Oneile started stripping.

“Slowly,” George commanded. “I want to revel in every move you make as you undress.”

If it wasn’t for the beer she drank, Oneile might have been embarrassed. In hindsight, she thought it was a great decision for them to drink first. She couldn’t have stood any of these ‘games’ if she’d been stone cold sober. The game was, as it turned out, a rough and violent sex session. The sheets slipped from the bed. Pillows flew across the room. George’s strength was extraordinary despite the alcohol. Oneile had hoped that it would be over quickly, that maybe he would pass out. The game was long, too long for comfort. It wasn’t anything that Oneile could have wanted. Sex was supposed to be good, to be gentle, to be enjoyed. But George was a beast. He heaved and puffed like a buffalo. When it was finally over, she realised with numbing horror that George hadn’t used a condom.

George wrote Oneile a cheque and handed it to her. The amount was good, but it wouldn’t sustain her for long. It certainly wasn’t worth the trouble and abuse she had just gone through. There was no goodbye, no when-will-I-see-you-again? Clearly, George had lied when he promised a relationship with her. He had only wanted to entice her to his games

room.

Two months later, she was pregnant. She sent George a text message, telling him she had missed her period and suspected she was pregnant.

George responded; “Get an abortion. It was only game!”

How many other girls had seen the inside of that wicked games room? How many lives had George ruined? How many illegitimate children did he have in the village? Who really was this guy George? Oneile decided that George was a psycho of some sort. No normal person could harness an idea such as the games room.



Take-home message:

*Never let desperate circumstances lead you to compromise your values and decisions.
There are support systems within the communities such as teachers and social workers.
Transactional sex is against the law in Botswana, therefore it's a crime.*



THE RUTHLESS MEN

CONNY MOLELOWAMODIMO
KGARI SECHELE II SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Kweneng-west District

The first thing she heard when she opened her eyes was a drizzling sound, reminiscent of a mild shower, droplets echoing eerily in the canal. She looked around and she had no idea where she was. She was bound to a chair, ropes tied around her feet, her hands and her chest. Where was she? There were human skulls and bones around her, and she knew instantly that she was in the home of the devil.

Boipelo Moseki was just a girl, living in a cattle-post called Maisane, a few kilometres outside the village of Kanye in southern Botswana. She was only fifteen. Many people believed that the cattle-post was cursed because quite frequently, bad things happened there: car accidents, people committing suicide, livestock dying from unnatural causes, kidnappings, killings for muti and many other bad things. It was said that it were the bad spirits hovering over Maisane causing all these tragic occurrences. Although she had never seen any, Boipelo had heard stories of dangerous men who wielded axes and machetes, men who derived pleasure from cutting innocent people's heads off. These men were known in Maisane as '*Boraselepe*'¹.

Despite these threatening, gloomy circumstances, the children of Maisane attended school in a small village called Molapowabojang. One day, very early in the morning before the sun rose, Boipelo walked to school. Above, the moon hovered, surrounded by a million of its little sparkling friends. It was still dark but the moon lit the way for her, though it occasionally hid behind clouds, leaving in its wake a total blackness, only to creep out again. When the moon once more lurked beneath a blanket of clouds, a strange feeling swept over her and she stopped. She felt her body getting cold and the nape of her neck crawling. Her hair shrank, or at least it felt so. These feelings were said to be harbingers of bad things about to happen. She heard footsteps behind her, a sign that she wasn't alone. Boipelo's heart turned to ice, then quickly to a cold fist that punched hard against her ribs. She responded to the first instinct. Run!

The pathway along which she ran was thin, flanked by small shrubs with tree branches hanging over the path. Leaves slapped her face as she stormed ahead, her bag of books heavy like it was loaded with stones. The

1 Henchmen

sun was about to rise and darkness was slowly receding. She could see the path better than she did a little earlier and she increased her speed, even as the bag was weighing her down. She didn't dare look behind, but she thought she had outrun the footsteps. Then she heard them again, running as well. Someone was in pursuit of her, someone probably faster. She was being chased. Boipelo knew, as her heart hammered and as her feet tried to carry her away from danger that behind her, puffing and stomping the ground with heavy feet, was one of them – *boraselepe*.

Something grabbed her shirt from behind, pulling. The shirt tore, snapping buttons and sending them scattering away like seeds. The force of the pull threw her off balance. She lost control and went sprawling to the ground, face first. Boipelo turned on her back to face up, just in time to see a blurring arc of something whooshing down on her. The impact was like an explosion in her brain, but thank God it was brief because what followed was an abyss of darkness.

“Aah, you're awake,” a voice said to the successfully captured Boipelo. On the center of her head, she could still feel the impact of the weapon that took her out. The way it throbbed, she wondered if she didn't have a concussion. She looked up at the man who just spoke, her gaze rising from his shoes up. They were huge shoes, those shoes, like they could be worn by that folklore character Matsieng².

“Good girl,” he said in a raspy, but not really menacing voice. His legs were thin, not proportional to such big feet. But then from the midriff up, the man was a giant. His tummy was like a bag of melons, his arms big and muscled like those of wrestlers. He had a solid dark complexion, like his skin was covered with charcoal powder.

He freed her from the chair of bondage and took her to yet another strange room. Inside, a group of young girls were sitting. They were all dressed in black, like mourners at a funeral. They raised their eyes as Boipelo was pushed inside. There was pity in their looks, something that said ‘welcome to hell, sweetie’. There were scars on their bodies, scars in their eyes and scars in their souls. That was when Boipelo knew that it was goodbye to

2 A Botswana giant whose footprints can be seen near Rasesa village

her jubilant life at the cattle-post of Maisane.

She was initiated that first night. She was told those who tried to run away were caught and brutally killed in front of all the girls. Then their skulls and bones were displayed in the foyer. That explained the bones that Boipelo saw when she first opened her eyes.

“God made women as tools for men,” the giant told her. “They are servants of men. They have no rights. They are weak and their only role in the world is to pleasure a man.” Boipelo shuddered, wondering what else was in store for her. But she didn’t take long to find out.

Coping was difficult at first, but they made her drink concoctions of things only they knew of. Men came from afar for sexual escapades. She and several other girls were made to star in amateur pornography films that were sold to clients somewhere out there in the world. Sometimes they would make her stand naked in a room. As if in punishment, she was flogged, kicked, beaten severely, had water poured over her, torturing her to the point of collapse. All these were filmed and sold to people out there. Apparently there was a big demand for films in which girls were tortured. But who bought these? Who derived pleasure in seeing women suffer to such an extent? The world was sick, Boipelo concluded. She also concluded that she would never come out of that place. At least not alive. There was no hope. Escape was out of the question. None of the girls knew the men’s names. They referred to them as ‘the ruthless men’ for they really were ruthless.

Three years later, after she had just been through yet another episode of misery, a horde of armed soldiers barged in, breaking doors and spraying bullets at the ceilings and at the windows while screaming, “Everyone down on your bellies!”

The ruthless men were captured and manacled within the blink of an eye. Those who tried to resist were clubbed and kicked hard because they were heavily outnumbered by the soldiers. What goes around comes around. The soldiers gathered the girls together and escorted them out to a military truck. Even as the truck rumbled away, taking them to safety, Boipelo

couldn't help wondering what exactly was going on in there. For some reason, she had felt as though she was outside the country, where cases of such things were reported in the news. How many other secret places like that one were there in Botswana?



Take-home message:

Inequality between men and women, boys and girls leads to abuse and exploitation of girls. The national security forces are available to protect all citizens.



THE NEW GUY

LONE DIKOLE

KGARI SECHELE II SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Kweneng West District

Just one incident on that day changed my life forever. My dreams were crushed and as if I was being punished, I lost my dignity and a loved family member. Now all I was left with was a burden I hated with all my heart.

I started junior secondary school as a very adorable child, being called ‘the teacher’s pet’. That was before my desire to join the school’s popular squad. Some other children at school warned me about them and all I could think of was that they were jealous because they couldn’t be as exquisite as the popular kids. The squad welcomed me with so much gratitude.

At first everything was good, and we would study together and sometimes do sleepovers at each other’s houses, where we also did school work. After a period of six months things began to change. They would call me and say we should meet at the mall; where we would have fun the whole day, get home tired and couldn’t do school work because of the tiredness from the days spent at the mall. Everybody at school now knew me. I was approached by a bunch of good-looking hunks and even attracted a lot of ‘likes’ on my Facebook account. I lived the life that I had so long wanted to live, like being whistled at by hunks salivating at my sight. I started changing my behaviour, gave my school work less attention and even got out of hand at school.

I cut my school uniform to make the skirt short, so that I could reveal my luscious legs and thighs. I often forgot my books at home and even skipped lessons. We would hang out at the toilets with my squad and as if all this wasn’t enough we started to smoke ‘weed’ and drink alcohol because we were now put under pressure by the boys we hung out with. At times my classmates would try to talk to me about the bad things I did and I would brush them off and say, “*Go a itshelelwa, tswang mo go nna!*”¹ I would also tell them that they were blabber mouths and that they should stop being on my case. I was entirely a new person, no longer the smart kid I was known to be when I started off.

One day during break time we saw our school head walk side by side with a new kid in school. I almost lost my breath when I saw him. I discovered

1 Mind your own business and leave me alone

he was our type. As soon as the school head parted ways with him I approached him.

“Hi, my name is Lone...” I told him.

“I’m Bryan,” he said. “Nice to meet you.”

Lucky enough for me, I hit a jackpot and he said he would check out our squad after school. He actually didn’t hesitate joining us.

Everything went well until one of the girls in the squad told me that Bryan had a crush on me. I wasn’t surprised because I had noticed the way he looked at me. About two days later, he told me he had a party at his house and he would like me to attend. I agreed.

My mom was as stubborn as I was and when she refused to let me go out to the party, I just walked out in front of her, leaving her gawking at me. It gave me so much pride and I just couldn’t stoop so low to obey her. It would hurt my pride. Besides, I didn’t want to disappoint Bryan.

When I arrived at Bryan’s, the party started. We drank and danced. The vibes were good, spirits soaring high. Bryan asked me to accompany him to his room, away from the loud noise. I was like, “Why not?!”

We started kissing immediately when we got inside his room as if we had been together for a long time. I allowed myself to be in his control; after all, I wanted to have a guy like him as mine. It would actually be so cool to me. As our friends were partying outside, Bryan and I were in a zone of lust and infatuation, oblivious of their drunken noise. The rest of the night became a blissful heaven for me.

I missed my period for two months and I knew something was wrong. Regret began to taunt me. I remembered how everyone used to warn me. I told my squad and Bryan about the pregnancy. They told me to get away from them, that I shouldn’t be seen with them anymore, that I was a disgrace. It hurt so badly. Bryan even told me to stop bothering him because I was causing tension between him and his girlfriend.

At six months of my pregnancy, my mother was hospitalized because her blood pressure was so high and couldn't be controlled. I now had to drop out of school because of the pregnancy and had to take care of my younger siblings while awaiting delivery. Since rumours fly, I heard that some of the girls in my former squad fell pregnant too and Bryan was arrested for selling drugs.

A few hours before giving birth, I contemplated on the past. The squad wasn't really that bad. But my life took a wrong turn when the new guy arrived in our school. How could I have been so blind not to see that Bryan was fake, that he wasn't the real thing?



Take-home message:

Negative peer pressure can lead to dangerous circumstances and unwanted pregnancies. Children have the responsibility to prioritize their health and safety over temporary pleasure.



WRATH OF A GRANDFATHER

KATLEGO MATLHARE
LEHUTSHELO JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Kgalagadi North District

Morning sunrays flooded her room, painting everything a warm gold. Setso cuddled in the bed, enjoying the warmth of the blankets. She heard footsteps approaching her door and she knew instantly that it was her wicked grandfather. That old man, he wouldn't just let her rest. Setso jumped out of the bed and rushed to the door but her grandfather opened it before she could touch the knob. She knew, as he opened his mouth that she was going to suffer another verbal attack.

Setso's parents worked at different places in some other parts of the country. They had both agreed that since they couldn't split their only child between them, she better stay with their father, who needed more domestic assistance than they did. When they made this decision, they didn't know that their father was the most abusive human being ever to walk planet earth. Whenever they visited, he faked warmth, pretended that all was good, but the moment they left, Setso would be back in the frying pan. It was either the frying pan or the fire, and neither of these was good.

One morning while her grandfather belched from the tea he had just had, the tea that Setso made but was not allowed to drink, he told her the news that would turn her life upside down. "You're not going to school anymore," he said. "The herd boy at the cattle-post ran away and my livestock is at risk of getting lost, stolen or eaten by predators. You're moving to the cattle-post."

Setso's resistance meant nothing to her grandfather. She moved to the cattle-post. There, life was different and tough: the perpetual smell of cow dung, the oily milk that had become staple food, the brownish borehole water for drinking, and the flies, oh, the flies that were everywhere. But worse still were the tasks that Setso was given. She had to look after cows and goats, milk them every morning, take them out to graze and look after them all day, and herd them to the borehole for drinking. She had to cook for her grandfather every morning and evening. She had to clean the huts and the yard. She had to fetch water and cook the dog food. It was too much and she thought she was going to fall down and die from fatigue.

Where were her parents? She asked herself often. Were they not aware that she was living under the shadow of their father? Why was her grandfather so vile to her? Was he administering some form of revenge against her

parents? But for what? All these questions lacked answers. What she knew was that her parents sent money every month to her grandfather. The money was supposed to buy her food and anything that may be needed at school. Needless to say, the money ended up in drinking holes and a huge chunk of it used to pay her grandfather's debts. She also noticed that her grandfather occasionally bought a goat or a sheep and sometimes a cow. Setso suspected that it was her money that financed these purchases.

It was in the early evening of a Saturday when Setso's aunt arrived at the cattle-post. She found Setso driving the livestock into the kraal and securing the wooden makeshift gate. "Good evening, aunt," Setso said, wiping the dirt from her hands. "What puts you here?"

"Where is your grandfather?" her aunt asked.

"At the shebeen. He comes home very late these days."

"Your teachers called me. They say you're missing at school."

"Yes, aunt. Grandfather said I should live here and look after his livestock."

"You're going back. Pack your things."

"I don't have anything to pack," Setso said. "Grandfather will kill me if he finds out that I ran away."

"You're not running away. I'm taking you. Get in the van now. Forget about your grandfather. He's very irresponsible."

Now staying with her aunt, Setso was enrolled in school again. Her aunt had told her parents the entire story and they jumped into action straightaway. It was found out that indeed Setso's grandfather was using Setso's money to buy livestock for himself. The village chief ruled against him and rendered ten cows and thirteen goats to Setso.

A few months later, when her grandfather was lying on bed sick, he called for Setso. "I'm sick because I never apologised to you," he said, his voice weak and frail. "I'm very sorry for the way I treated you. I was very wrong."

And so Setso forgave her grandfather. She prayed that when he died, God would forgive him and allow him into heaven.



Take-home message:

Parents should have open and free channels of communication with their children so that they are informed and aware of the issues in their children's lives. They can only fully support their children when they know the inside story. Taking children out of school is against the requirements of the Botswana Children's Act of 2009.



THE STEPBROTHER

MAITUMELO LEPODISE
LEHUTUTU JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Kgalagadi North District

They should have talked to them but they didn't, until things went bad. Bareetsi, Mellissa's father, had married another woman after the death of his wife. Mellissa now had a new mother and a new brother who was six years her senior. Mellissa was only five. Annah, the new mother, was beautiful, but Mellissa thought her beauty couldn't beat that of her late mother. The step brother's name was Danny. He was tall, about 1.70 meters, with pleasant features except for the gloomy eyes that didn't match his otherwise wonderfully square face.

When she was eight years old, Danny started making moves on her. He lured her with colourful candy. "You want these, right?" Danny asked her, flashing a packet of sweets.

"Yes please!" Mellissa exclaimed.

"Only under one condition – that you allow me to touch your little body."

And that was how it began; sweets, body touching, more sweets, more body touching until Danny enticed her to his bed. At first Mellissa didn't know what coming to the bed meant. The first time she complained that it was hurting but Danny assured her that the pain was only temporary. One day she asked him, "What are we doing, Danny?"

"This is what people who love each other do, like husband and wife, mama and papa," Danny said, grinning widely.

"But you're my brother," Mellissa argued.

"No, Lisa. You come from a different mother and father, and so do I. We're not really siblings. We're justified to do what we do."

It went on and on, with Danny constantly reminding her not to say a word to anyone. "If you tell a soul, there will be no sweets for you anymore, and I will do something very bad to you. Don't disappoint me, Lisa."

One day Mellisa told Danny that she didn't want the sexual activities anymore. "It feels dirty," she complained with teary eyes. "I feel dirty. It's

wrong, please stop it. I don't want your sweets anymore."

Mellissa's behavioural patterns started changing. More often she would be reserved, not talking as much as she used to. She acted like someone with a troubled mind. Her father could tell by the look on her face that something was amiss with his daughter. He glanced at her frantic eyes, honey coloured and bright, and yet with a shadow that unsettled Bareetsi.

"Princess Lisa," his voice was gentle, "what is troubling your mind this much?"

Mellissa, young and vibrant with a glamorous exterior, well known for her openness, sat there quietly. One could tell that her silence spoke words that couldn't be heard. She started trembling. How could she tell him? Where was she going to start? Would they believe her?

It was hard to believe that for the first time, the ever talkative and glamorous Mellisa was suddenly an introvert, crippled by her inability to voice out her concerns. This was extremely unusual of her. Her father cuddled her, whispering assurances.

"Princess Lisa, please talk to me. You know I'm your father." When she finally spoke, her words were like bricks hitting her father hard on his chest. Mellissa cried. Her father cried with her.

Danny was not in the house. Bareetsi summoned his wife and told her the sad news. "I've seen signs of something fishy in the early days. Remember I asked you if we should talk to them? We should have had an orientation talk with them. We should have shown them what they are to each other, now look what our lack of communication with our children did!"

Annah was silent for some time and then said, "Lisa, are you sure about this? Are you not just imagining things?"

"Danny raped my little girl!" Bareetsi sprang to his feet. "Can't you see that she's tormented? How can you even have a little doubt?"

"Calm down, Bareetsi. I was just asking."

“We’re going to do the tests. In the meantime, I’m calling the police.”

“Please don’t. They are both children. We can talk this through in the house. We don’t need to take it out. Come on, Bareetsi.” Annah begged, trying to protect her son.

“I don’t think so, Annah. We weren’t able to talk to them earlier. Now the damage is already done. Imagine how this assault will ruin this little girl!”

“It’s not an assault, Bareetsi. They were in consent.”

“Consent my foot! What does an eight year old know about such things? Danny abused this child, period. He knew exactly what he was doing? God, I can’t believe you’re defending him.”

As they were talking, Danny entered the house. “There you are, you moron! Sit down, right now,” Bareetsi barked at him. Immediately, Danny sensed it. Lisa had let the cat out of the bag. How could Lisa betray him? They had agreed on confidentiality.

“I didn’t do it,” he said before being asked anything.

“You didn’t do what?” Bareetsi asked, resisting the urge to pulp him down with fists.

“Whatever she said I did,” Danny said.

“Cut the crap young man and tell the truth or I will break your bones to pieces,” Bareetsi threatened.

“You don’t have to threaten him,” Annah interrupted. “Maybe he is...”

“Shut up, Annah! Let me handle this,” he exploded.

Danny started crying. His big sobs shook his body. Annah embraced him, cuddling him like a little baby.

“I’m sorry mom,” he said between sobs. “I didn’t know what I was doing. I thought we were only playing. Please don’t take me to the police.”

With the confession, Bareetsi cried again, hoping that his daughter wasn't pregnant, or worse, infected with STIs. At that moment he hated Danny deeply, and to some degree, his mother too for she was trying to defend him.

The following day, they all went for counselling. Promised that he would be thrown to the dogs if he ever did that again to anyone, Danny was sent away to live with his aunt in a village far away. With constant counselling sessions, Lisa became composed again and refocused on school. As for Bareetsi and Annah's marriage, it was rocky since the incident, but gradually, through the help of therapy and marriage counsellors, they got better by the day. Now they knew how important communication between parents and children was. They would never have to wait until things went bad.



Take-home message:

Step-parents have the responsibility of ensuring that their children are well-informed on family issues and sexual health matters. Incest between (step) siblings happens and should be vehemently spoken against by parents, teachers, and community leaders. Survivors of sexual violence must be taken through psycho-social support to build their self esteem.



RIVER OF TEARS

PRECIOUS GABADIRWE
LETLHAKANE SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Boteti District

His hard fist punched me on the jaw, sending me spinning out of control. The ceramic cup came hurtling towards me – a weapon thrown with malicious intent. Black, hot coffee trailed the spinning cup, looking for an instant like a Harley’s comet. The cup crashed on my chest, knocking the breath out of me. I was determined not to give him the satisfaction of my anguished cry, but when the coffee scalded my breasts, I screamed.

Rewind to a couple of years earlier. I met this man at the supermarket. He was rolling a big trolley heaped with expensive goodies. I received each item, scanned the code and marvelled at the total on the computer monitor. I hadn’t seen anyone spending that much on food alone. This guy must have been rich. Physically, he was handsome – amazing, probably a result of eating well. Taking his bank card from him to swipe his payment, my hand touched his and a wave of electricity shot up my arm. I couldn’t control the butterflies and the goosebumps.

Fate threw me onto him that very evening. I was on my way home from the supermarket. We closed a little late and darkness had already spread its blanket over the small town when a big, white Jeep stopped by my side. He asked me to take a ride with him. I jumped in and he drove away.

“Thanks for the ride,” a wide smile spread across my face.

“Don’t mention it, why would a beautiful woman like you walk alone during the night? My name is Modiri.” He stretched his hand to shake mine.

“I’m Betty,” I responded.

A call interrupted our conversation. It was Dr. Robert from the hospital. I listened intently as he told me about my mother’s condition. He also reminded me of the pending medical bills that needed to be settled quickly.

“Are you okay? You look disturbed,” Modiri asked, with a worried look on his face, as he parked off the road to talk further.

“I am okay, it’s just that...” I broke off and started sobbing.

Reaching up with his hands, Modiri gently cupped my face, wiped away my tears and hugged me. That was such a compassionate gesture from a stranger. His heart must be big and loving, I thought. I opened up and told him my story.

My mother had a problem with her appendix, underwent an operation procedure and would soon be released. But the medical bills were the problem. Modiri assured me that everything would be alright as he drove off to take me home.

Later that night, we chatted on social media, little did we know that it was the beginning of our relationship. He called frequently, took me out and gave me expensive presents. But most importantly, he cleared my mother's hospital bills. A few months after my mother's discharge from the hospital, wedding bells rang.

“My daughter, Modiri is a good man, you are lucky because you found yourself a loving, handsome and rich man. So please, don't let me down. Be the best wife, through thick and thin,” my mother smiled proudly.

The first few months of our marriage were heaven on earth. He was what a woman would die for in a man. I felt like I had made it in life. My friends envied me.

Things changed. Modiri showed his true colours. He started coming home late and gave silly excuses. Some days were the worst as he would come in the morning, smelling alcohol, with lipstick marks on his shirts and when I asked about them, he would get angry and raise his hand at me. I started feeling lonely and neglected.

“Where is my son-in-law? I have been here for three days now but I haven't seen him and when I ask about his whereabouts, you just tell me he is at work? Betty, what's going on?” my mother asked.

Nodding and fighting back tears, I said, “Mum, Modiri no longer stays home, he comes home late, drunk and beats me. Our house is now a wrestling ring...”

“My daughter, I am sorry I took you for granted, but please don’t lose hope yet. Just talk to him and fix your marriage.”

One Tuesday morning I sat on our well-varnished timber dining table, having a cup of black coffee with no sugar just the way I liked it when I was stressed. For the first time I felt that the house was too big for me, no noise, except for the humming of the fridge in the kitchen. Suddenly I heard the door banging, I looked and it was my husband who left home the previous night saying he was going to get his laptop from his work place. He came straight to the dining table and sat down.

“So the laptop swallowed you and vomited you this morning, huh?” I asked. I no longer cared about how he would react.

“Don’t ask me where I come from. It’s none of your business. Why do you care?” he argued.

That was enough. I couldn’t keep up any more. “Modiri, I think it’s time we get a divorce,” tears rolled down my face.

He stood up and approached me, “You are mine, my property and I will initiate the divorce, not you. Do you think I spent money on you for nothing? Now stand up and let’s go to bed,” he demanded, angrily pulling me up.

“I will rather die than sleep with you. Why are you doing this? What changed you?” I pulled my hand from him. That was when he knocked my jaw with his hard fist and threw the cup of hot coffee at me.

My hurting eyes flipped open to a blurry vision with my mother sitting by my side. Standing beside her was a man in white, scribbling on a card. I was in a hospital. I began to regret the day I met Modiri. First of all, what did I gain from this marriage? Nothing but a river of tears, an ocean of pain and low self-esteem. No, I refused to be chained to those expectations. Not me, I was not going back to that house. I was happy to be poor, even if it meant I had to be single again.



Take-home message:

Intimate partner violence can be physical, sexual and emotional. There are support services within the community for survivors of violence that should be approached for assistance. Children should accept their home and family financial circumstances and know that they cannot always have what they want. Further, they need to learn to live within the means of their family and learn to wait.



CURSED IS THE ONE

NKAMOGELANG KEMOIPONETSE
MAKGADIKGADI JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Boteti District

The last sparks of the sun had already disappeared behind the hills of Magotswana village. As Selelo approached the gates, she realised that they were closed. The roar of her father's voice full of questions towards her mother made her realise something was wrong. Her hair twisted as if someone was working a crotchet needle in it. Her legs started shaking. She had no choice but to arm herself with the hope of a successful self-defence. Selelo thought about the solution to her problem.

Why had they locked the gates? She climbed the fence to enter their home. At the door, she opened without knocking and found her parents already having dinner. Her father's eyes were red because he was irritated about their daughter's behaviour.

Selelo's mother called her and talked to her, "Selelo my daughter, I noticed that you have changed behaviour nowadays. You come home late from school. Look at the time now. You even opened the door without knocking, what kind of behaviour is that? Coming late can bring you trouble. You can get yourself raped. Why do you always come home late? What made you come late today? Maybe you have a boyfriend. I'm worried about that Selelo. Tell me, what brings you late or I'll let your father hit you?"

Selelo cried immediately. "Mom," she said. "I don't have a boyfriend. I'm trying to focus on my education. I came late because I have a study group that meets every day after school. We finish a little late because there's a lot of material to cover."

"You lie! You have a boyfriend. You think we don't know children's behaviours?" her mother counteracted. "Listen, the Bible says in Deuteronomy that 'cursed is the one who disrespects his father and mother'. You don't want to be cursed, do you, Selelo?"

"Fine! I'm dropping out of school then! What's the use? When I do additional work to boost my academic performance you think I'm *jollying*. I'll make you happy, mom. I quit school!"

"What! Selelo how can an intelligent girl like you abandon her education like that? Please! Please! Don't drop out of school. You are our only hope.

Please, I'm very sorry I offended you, my daughter. Let me serve some dinner for you. Would you like chicken or beef?"

Selelo's parents never talked to her about her late coming again, but Selelo's late coming persisted, getting worse as the year progressed.

At times she didn't spend the night at home. Even as they noticed a new cellphone that they didn't buy her, Selelo's parents didn't speak about it. One night, they debated talking to her. Her father wanted her mother to do the talking because it was, according to him, a girl to girl kind of talk. But her mother, on the other hand, wanted her father to speak because he had a stronger voice that might scare Selelo back to her senses.

At the first attempt of her mother in talking to her, they argued and Selelo threatened to run away. Her mother gave up and she never talked to her again. Selelo became rebellious, even to a point of questioning family rules and regulations. Then Selelo fell pregnant. Her mother noticed the symptoms three weeks before the diagnosis. When she asked her, Selelo said she was just sick and didn't want to eat. Three weeks later, when the vomiting didn't end, she was taken to the clinic where she was pronounced pregnant.

"We should have spoken to her while there was still time," her father told her mother.

"I tried. You know that. It's you who feared talking to her. It's too late now."

The blame game and finger pointing between the parents didn't end. They could now see that had they spoken to their child on time and ensured that she followed rules and regulations, the current matter could have been prevented.

Selelo was embarrassed and ashamed of what she had done to her family, letting them down and making them the scorn of the village. Her mother said to her; "Are these the results of your study group? Have you been studying or spending time with boys? What did I say to you? All you knew was to threaten to leave school. But now you are going to really leave

school with a baby in your stomach. Remember that Bible verse that says ‘cursed is the one’? How can you disappoint us like this?

“I’m sorry mom,” Selelo cried.

“There is no point in being sorry now. It’s way too late. Why didn’t you at least use contraceptives? Who knows what diseases could be festering inside you right now?”

Selelo looked at her toes and remained silent. After darkness fell, Selelo jumped the fence and walked out to her friend’s. “I need your help,” she said. “I know you once fell pregnant but then reversed it. I’m in dire straits, right now.”

After chatting a little, the friend walked with her to a nearby homestead. She told Selelo to wait outside while she herself went in to speak with the herbalist. A few minutes later, in exchange of some banknotes, she gave Selelo a bottle of medicine. “Swallow it all in one gulp before you sleep tonight,” the friend said.

Selelo’s mother was awoken at night by a fierce groaning from Selelo’s room. She kicked the blanket and ran there. Selelo was crouching on the floor, her face contorted in pain. She groaned and moaned, palpable pain evident in her eyes. She clutched her stomach and when her mother looked again, she noticed blood on the floor – and a small, empty bottle. She screamed for her husband. Together, they carried Selelo, threw her in the back of their car and sped to the hospital.



Take-home message:

Parent to child communication must be open and truthful to ensure clear guidelines are

given and received to avoid problems such as unplanned pregnancies and school drop-outs. Home rules are meant to guide, protect and nurture families. Children should be willing and ready to discuss growing up matters with their parents. Illegal abortions are a crime and should be avoided as they can lead to death.



AMON

THE DEMON

TSHOLOFELO SEBOKO
MAUN SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Ngami District

Lexy Monni resented men. To her, all men were monsters. She couldn't bear to be in the presence of men. Even the sight of men, at times, disgusted her. This was a result of a damage she sustained years ago, a damage administered by a man. To make it all worse, the man who caused her all this resentment was her stepfather. His name was Amon, wicked and evil. Lexy preferred to call him Demon instead of Amon. It was revealed that Amon, or Demon, was instructed by a witchdoctor to force himself into his stepdaughter in order to revamp his low libido. *Inject yourself with the fresh blood of the young, colourful flower you live with and your sex drive will be restored*, the witchdoctor had advised him.

The assault by Amon that fateful night when the first showers of the rain began to fall triggered in her a bitter hatred for men. If someone she trusted could be that cruel and insensitive to her, what of men out there who were total strangers, or men with whom she had no blood ties? Out of her heart, love was swept away. Because of Amon the Demon, her heart stiffened and became cold. Lexy broke up with Nathan, her boyfriend, because she couldn't stand being next to a man, let alone being in a relationship. Romance, for her, was now a thing of the past. Nathan cried bitter tears, but Lexy was resolute in her decision. All men were trash, she believed.

After completion of her secondary school, she went to study accounting at a university. Four years later, without any men coming close to her, or touching her, Lexy graduated with a degree. She was instantly employed by a banking institution.

One night she was chilling with her friends at a party when someone touched her hand. She turned and saw Nathan standing there. She gaped in surprise. She didn't expect him there. What was he doing there?

“Well, hello Lexy! Surprise, surprise!” Nathan beamed.

All the pain she endured years ago rushed back into her, so strong that she almost cried out. “Hello,” she said without smiling, without warmth and Nathan must have felt the bitterness that seeped from her because his smile faded.

“I have to go,” Lexy said, leaving Nathan standing there, perplexed. As she walked hastily to her car, Lexy felt deep inside that she was being unfair to Nathan. It wasn’t Nathan who had raped her. It was Amon the Demon. Nathan had done her no wrong. In fact, it was he who was justified to be mad at her for breaking their relationship. On the other hand, the bile that her stepfather had poured in her was evidently still in her, because she could feel it burning her insides. Was it because she was never taken for counselling? She had always thought she was strong, that she could make it through without anyone spelling things out for her.

At work, Lexy was lost in her thoughts when her cellphone rang. There was no caller ID on the display. “Hello,” she said into the phone.

“Lexy, it’s me, Nathan. We need to talk,” the voice on the other side said.

“Talk about what, Nathan?” Lexy rolled her marble eyes. “You’re part of my past, don’t you know? You’re history!”

“Lexy, please don’t speak like that. Let’s go for a bite at Riverwalk. Dinner’s on me. I need to talk to you, please,” Nathan begged.

“Sorry. I’m busy,” Lexy said and hung up.

Lexy avoided Nathan. She didn’t answer his calls and never returned them. After three months of silence, her cellphone rang, signalling that it was Nathan calling. Surprising herself, she pushed the answer button.

“Hello, is this Lexy?” a voice asked. It wasn’t Nathan’s voice.

“Yes it is,” Lexy tensed, sensing something, or maybe preparing herself to lash back if this was just a tactic from Nathan to win her back.

“This is Doctor Thuso at the Blueberry Private Hospital. Nathan is hospitalised, unconscious right now.”

“Oh my God. What happened?” Lexy asked, alarmed.

“Apparently he collapsed after receiving a call. His workmates brought him here. We went through his phone so that we can contact his next of

kin or someone to alert.”

“I’m coming there, now!”

Lexy sped to the hospital, her mind in a whirl. What if Nathan was hurt? She felt a strong sense of responsibility. Nathan needed her. She also felt, albeit awkwardly, that she too needed him. The hard layer that had crusted around her heart was peeling away.

Upon arrival at the hospital the doctor addressed her. “We called the number from which he had received the call before he collapsed. She had just been told about her mother’s death. It must have shocked him so much to make him collapse. All her siblings and family members are far away and he needs someone who’ll be here when he wakes up.”

“Is he going to be alright?” Lexy asked.

“His pulse has stabilised and we’re monitoring his blood pressure. He should be up in the next hour,” the doctor assured. “Remain here; I’ll be back in a while.”

After the doctor left, Lexy pulled her chair closer to the bed and whispered to the unconscious Nathan. “I’m very sorry, Nathan. I have been very insensitive to you. Please forgive me.” She reached out and held his hand. The machines beeped around her. “I should have been there for you. Nathan, I found my heart again. You helped me find my heart. Please come back for me. I miss you Nathan, please forgive me...” She broke off and cried.

“Your hand is so warm,” Nathan spoke and Lexy jumped in excitement. “Your voice too.”

“You’re up! Nathan, oh, Nathan! Doctor!”

When the doctor arrived, Lexy was leaning over the bed, kissing Nathan. “Easy now, kids. Take it easy. I need to do some check-ups first. Then you can have each other for as long as you want.” The doctor smiled.

And with that, the lump that had burdened Lexy melted away, giving way to a fairytale life she would live with Nathan. Whatever her stepfather, Amon the Demon, had done to her back then, it was immaterial now, for she now found joy in the arms of a man who loved her.



Take-home message:

Sexual violence can traumatize survivors for a very long time after the assault, causing a flashbacks that can impact on those around them. In this story, we see Lexy developing hatred towards men due to sexual violence in her earlier years. Survivors of sexual violence must seek psychological counselling support from the social workers and report the matter to the police for corrective measures.



THE DRUG LORD

KATLO PHETSO

MOTSWASELE JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

Kweneng West District

I didn't know pills like ARVs could be peddled like hard drugs until I realised my aunt was doing that. My aunt, Aunt Merriam, stole ARVs and sold them to some secret clients of hers. What they did with them I never knew, but I heard rumours that some bad people crushed them and mixed them with other substances to create a new concoction of illegal drugs. The one thing that brought me into the picture, or the cycle of this small drug trafficking, was the fact that my aunt was stealing from me.

She didn't break into hospitals or clinics or pharmacies to steal these pills. She stole my ARVs. I noticed this because my packets of pills didn't last at all. Sometimes I would think I still had a good supply only to be surprised to find the boxes empty. One day I caught her red-handed in my room, pulling my drawers open and emptying the contents of the boxes of ARVs into her handbag. When she realised I had seen her, she smiled and said, "You'll go get some more from the clinic." I asked her what she did with them. Aunt Merriam only glared at me.

I was sixteen, born with HIV. My parents died when I was young, apparently from the disease. They left me alone, under the supposed guardianship of my aunt. Unlike my mother who used to ensure that I got my medication on time, went for regular check-ups, Aunt Merriam didn't care. She didn't provide enough for my basic needs. I couldn't buy sanitary pads, my school uniform was old and tattered, and the food I ate at home was unbalanced, lacking proper nutrients necessary for someone like me.

With time, my aunt didn't steal my ARVs. She took them by force. If I refused or gave her a hard time in taking them, I would be denied food, sometimes even lashed for it.

"But aunt, what about my health? I feel weak these days because it's been a while since I took the pills," I complained to her once.

"Go to Mannathoko ward," my aunt said. "There is a traditional doctor there. He will help you."

"Over my dead body!" I shouted. "I'm not doing that!"

"Do as you please then!" she screamed back at me. "But your pills are

mine. Those ARV drugs are mine, sweetie. This is my house and I make the rules. Besides, I'm the lord here. I'm the drug lord and you're a mere servant! You take the drugs from the hospital for me."

"Listen to you! Have you no shame! A grown up, big woman like you taking advantage of a helpless child like me. Shame on you!"

Her expression changed, making her face dark with anger. She stormed outside and I knew right then that I had spoken too much, that I had sent her over the edge. I ran to my room and hid in the wardrobe, shaking like a reed in the wind. Her stomping feet approached my room. I heard the door being yanked open and Aunt Merriam stormed into my room. Through a crack in the wardrobe door, I saw her looking around, under the bed, around again and then at the wardrobe. She had a stick in her hand and I could tell it was a thorny branch of the peach tree outside.

"I know you're in there, you disease carrying pest!" She approached the wardrobe and my heart thumped against my ribs. When she opened the wardrobe door, I was already crying, cringing in fear. She pulled me out, threw me on the bed and started lashing me with the stick. Every hard strike she administered spurted blood on my skin.

"Help! Please, stop! Help!" I screamed but my aunt seemed to enjoy herself. At that point, I thought she had gone utterly insane.

"Today I'll show you who I am," she said as she lashed down on me. "You don't speak to elders the way you just did!" *Whoosh. Crack!* "Asking me if I have no shame!" *Whoosh. Crack!* "Calling me a big woman who takes advantage of small children!" *Whoosh. Crack!*

"I'm sorry, please aunty. I'm sorry!" I begged between cries.

"Your mother had spoilt you, you little swine!" *Whoosh. Crack!*

"Pleeeease!"

"Who am I? Tell me, who am I?" *Whoosh. Crack!*

“Aunt Merriam!”

“Wrong!” *Whoosh. Crack!*

“The drug lord! The drug lord! The drug lord! Take all my ARV drugs please.”

“Good girl!” *Whoosh. Crack!*

“I’ll collect them for you, pleeeeeease.”

“Great.” She stopped beating me, heaving heavily, her chest rising and falling. I was covered in blood. The stick was smeared with my blood. “Shut up and go and take a shower,” she instructed.

That night I slept with a bleeding skin, itching all over, trembling like a scared chicken. The following day at school, my class teacher called me aside. She saw my scored skin, my red eyes and swollen lips. Without wasting time, she knew what to do. That morning, the police took Aunt Merriam, a.k.a. The Drug Lord. She was sentenced to three years in jail for emotional and physical abuse. I was taken to a social worker and started a series of counselling sessions. A few weeks later, I was admitted into an SOS camp where life was much better than at my aunt’s house. I was able to constantly take my ARVs without anyone stealing them from me, or beating me to a pulp for them.

In my mind I could see my parents smiling down at me, patting me for being strong and withstanding the abuse that my aunt had taken me through. I wanted to live my life to make my parents proud, even though they were not physically present. I was going to defeat the challenges of life. Not even HIV was going to stop me.



Take-home message:

A health care worker should be contacted as soon as possible, if there has been an interruption in taking ARVs. Children need to know that they have rights as stated in the Children's Act of 2009 and any violations are criminal. Sources of support for children are available at social workers, health facilities, schools, police, NGOs, traditional leaders, etc.



THE TASTE

TUMELO MOALOSI
NATA SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Boteti District

“This must be some form of hallucination,” Flora thought. But reality hit hard on her, reminding her to face her problems. Flora imagined the love of her life, the person she trusted, the one she relied on. She despised him now because instead of him standing by her, he decided to vanish like a ghost. The pain ground Flora’s insides, instantly bringing tears to her eyes. She was left alone now, except for the silent darkness, the ticking clock and of course the burden that was growing in her belly.

Her parents lived at the cattle-post, trying hard to look after their livestock; the only source of income for the family. They were poor, but with the goats and cattle, they were able to once in a while send money to Flora. Flora stayed with her uncle, Kagiso, in Kasane. To Flora’s dismay, Uncle Kagiso had a desire to ‘taste’ her, as he called it. The more Flora grew up, her curvaceous body showing even more, the more her uncle salivated at her.

Flora’s indisputable beauty qualified her to partake in beauty pageants and it was no surprise to anyone when she won the Miss Chobe 2018. Her sparkling beauty, dressed in an island blue, long and tight dress, grabbed somebody’s attention. Calvin. The feeling of being loved, being cared for or rather being recognised was something Flora could never reject.

Flora and Calvin were head over heels. Most of the time she would spend nights at Calvin’s place, while her uncle burned with jealousy at the thought of what Calvin could be doing to her. And as youthful as they were, they couldn’t resist the urge to visit bars and clubs and pubs. With Calvin’s influence, she started drinking alcohol.

One morning Flora arrived home from the club drunk as a skunk. She slumped on the couch and immediately snored, her skimpy clothes revealing almost every part of her body that should have been covered. When her uncle Kagiso saw her in that inviting and vulnerable state, he didn’t waste the opportunity. He jumped onto her and finally, did what he had been longing for – ‘tasting’ her.

Weeks later after the taste, when the common signs of pregnancy started showing, Flora was distraught. She had been mad at her uncle for raping

her. But her uncle threatened to throw her out of the house and even worse, burn her and her boyfriend if she spilled the beans. As so she kept quiet. But now she was pregnant, caught between a rock and a hard place. Who was the father really, Calvin or Uncle Kagiso?

Three months down the line Flora decided to tell Calvin. Her hopes were high as she knew that Calvin, the love of her life, would not let her down. Reality, however, turned otherwise. Calvin changed colours like a chameleon.

“Don’t ever come back here again or you’ll suffer the consequences!” Calvin threatened. She was confused at Calvin’s reaction. Was he not ready for a child? Did he know that her uncle was a possible father?

Her belly was growing fast and Flora had to drop out of school. Her insides burned and fumed with anger, she felt hopeless as she knew her dreams were all shattered. She took the hard decision of telling her uncle. Who knew, maybe Uncle Kagiso would be delighted by the news. With wet cheeks, Flora stood at her uncle’s door, too afraid to knock. When she raised her hand to knock, the door swung open. The brute must have noticed her presence at the door.

“Ahh, yummy! So, you came for some...” he cut his sentence when he noticed that Flora was crying. He also saw, for the first time, Flora’s ballooning belly. “How do I help you?” His mood had switched quickly from the playful boyish grin he had shown just a few seconds ago to a gloomy, sombre face.

“I’m... I’m pregnant,” Flora said, her fear rising like mercury.

“So?” Kagiso asked, his voice biting. “Why are you telling me this? Your parents are at the cattle-post, should you not be telling them instead?”

“You’re responsible for this pregnancy,” Flora bit her own lips.

“Listen to me, young girl, put on your shoes and go to that Calvin of yours. Tell him you are pregnant. And don’t you go around spreading these lies that I’m the father, or I’ll send you to the graveyard!”

That was the last time Flora had seen her uncle. Kagiso, afraid of the gossip, the murmuring and the shame he was to encounter in his community, left the village and found a job in a city far away.

One morning, Flora lay motionless on her bedroom floor, her hands clinging to her belly. Through the open windows, a gale of wind fluttered the worn-out curtains, sending in streaks of light into her room. Flora's marble eyes glittered and sparkled with sunrays. Blood painted the white tiles of the floor, pill containers spread across the room, clothes were stained with blood, tissues and pillows scattered on the floor. The room was scruffy, engulfed with an unpleasant odour.

“Flora! Flora! Open the door!” a voice shouted from outside.

Opening her eyes at the hospital, a familiar face stood before her. It was Abel, her school mate. Abel had been bothered by Flora's absence at school. He paid her a visit and found Flora in the process of committing suicide. Abel was a lifesaver though, sadly, he came too late to save the life of her unborn child.

Abel and Flora's friendship grew month after month, and slowly developed into a genuine relationship. While the mystery of who had impregnated Flora was never solved, Flora resumed school and successfully completed her education. She forgot about Uncle Kagiso and Calvin. Her focus was on making life better for her parents who still lived at the cattle-post.

Three years later, Abel and Flora were sitting on a park bench, surrounded by greenery and white doves. Abel dropped on his knees and said, “Flora, will you marry me?” He held a small, golden box. Flipping it open, it revealed a sparkling diamond ring.



Take-home message:

Parents who leave their children under the care of guardians should ensure that their duty of care and protection for the children is maintained. Parents and guardians have the responsibility to look for warning signs of distress in their children. If the warning signs are ignored, the distressing situation may lead to an increased chance in children engaging in behaviours that harm them, e.g. suicide and substance abuse.



LOAGO'S TRUE COLOURS

PEARL MAEZE
NGAMBAO JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Okavango District

Memories of her childhood always made her cry. Not so long ago she would sit on top of a *Motsentsela* tree most of the time when she was sent to gather fruits by her aunt. With her cheeks wet she would remember how life seemed to be idyllic at her younger age – way back before her parents passed away. Now her world was crumbling down like a sand castle.

Things had fallen apart: her hopes and dreams. Since her childhood she forever yearned of becoming a social worker. That was the least she could do to make her late parents proud. The fact that she was denied her childhood kept on drilling harshly into her heart. Sometimes she could think of scoring her skin or punching herself to make the pain fade away. Her heart burnt but she still swore not to let that dishearten her. “I will do it, even during the most daring times, I will do it,” That was the prayer that she always recited.

After the burial of her parents, her aunt Poloko volunteered to adopt Goitse. Back then she used to work as a cleaner at Mogotho clinic, taking good care of Goitse just like she promised the elders when she took her. Even school became more interesting for Goitse, her spirit was buoyed after all. They carried on like that until Poloko introduced alcohol and a boyfriend into her life. Aunt Poloko was forever drinking. Her boyfriend Loago, was of no use. Indeed birds of the same feather flocked together.

Hunger then took on and it was Goitse’s burden to care for the family. Her aunt always commanded her to go and gather fruits and fetch water at the river. So every day after school she had to do exactly that. Mogotho is a village surrounded by wild bushes and Goitse had to go there alone. Junior Certificate Examinations were approaching and Goitse had to give her full concentration to her studies, so she thought of talking to her aunt about it. “Aunt P, actually the examinations are just around the corner and I cannot manage to go to the river every day after school. So I was wondering if you could find a piece job; maybe you could ask my teachers, they might want someone to do their laundry.”

“How dare you say such things to me? You should be thankful to me. Your so-called parents have failed. Moreover I took you in and you don’t even pay rent. Goitse you are just an ungrateful idiot,” said her ferocious Aunty.

With wet cheeks and a shaking voice, she tried to be calm and explain to her aunt what she meant, “Actually... actually I thought...” before she could even finish her line, a palm slapped her hard.

“If you continue with these manners of yours, one day I am going to pack you in a box and send you straight to hell where you will join your parents,” her aunt threatened.

Loago used that for his own benefit. He knew very well that Poloko considered Goitse deceitful. He now started to say some silly and daft comments whenever he was left alone with Goitse. He became so obsessed with her that his concentration was focused only on Goitse. Most of the time he would just stare at her and say, “You know you have such luscious lips and one day I wish to sleep next to that curvaceous body of yours.”

Goitse never responded to his dirty advances. One day she told her aunt. “I have a problem, Loago always makes sexual advances on me and that makes me uncomfortable, can you please talk to him?”

“Little girl, are you crazy? Why do you insult my man? Loago can’t harass you in anyway. You want to ruin my life, hey? I knew you were just a calamity from the time you moved in here. Now you want to take my man.” Goitse lost all hope.

Loago’s true colours came out one evening when Goitse arrived from school late after an extended study session. Her aunt Poloko was out, but Loago was in the house. Goitse changed in casual home wear and walked into the kitchen to prepare dinner. She didn’t see Loago coming after her. When she turned, there he stood, naked in the kitchen. Before Goitse could scream, Loago grabbed her and blocked her mouth; he was as strong as a horse. Goitse tried to struggle free but Loago was much stronger. “I told you I want this body!” he breathed out the hot words that scalded her. “Give me this body! Let me taste these lips! Your aunt’s lips are not sweet.”

“No! Please! Leave me alone,” she protested. Loago punched her in the head and Goitse lost balance and became weak. Helpless, Loago pulled up her skirt and planted her on the kitchen worktop where he raped her over and over. When he was done and heaving in satisfaction, he pulled her to

the living room and dropped her like a sack of potatoes on the couch.

“Wow,” he said. Goitse could hear him, though faintly like he was speaking from the other side of the mountains. “Such deliciousness. We should do this again another time.” Goitse fainted.

When her aunt arrived, she found Goitse bleeding on the couch, unconscious. Quickly she checked for her pulse and called an ambulance. At the hospital, she was confirmed to have been raped. After three months, she was found to be HIV positive.

“The monster,” Poloko snarled. But her boyfriend had long vanished into thin air. Poloko held Goitse’s hand. “I’m sorry child. I should have listened to you. I’m so sorry.”

Later in the year, Goitse safely gave birth to a baby boy. The baby was free of the virus. Her aunt had found a job and helped support Goitse and her child. Goitse went back to school and completed her studies. She was determined and strived even harder so that she could be better someday, for the sake of her child.



Take-home message:

Parents should believe and follow up what children tell them as this builds trust and protects the child from any abuse that may arise. Rape victims should visit a health care provider within three days to receive emergency contraceptives and HIV post exposure prophylaxis. This will prevent an unwanted pregnancy and HIV infection. There is life after HIV and unwanted pregnancy.



THE TROLL

DITEBOGO MAENGE
NGAMI JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Ngami District

I remember coming home from school last week, arriving to the usual scene: her screaming, her wailing, her begging, his thumping fists and his heavy kicks. He was used to it. It made him feel manly. *Punch-kick-punch-kick*, I watched in terror. There was nothing I could do, but only to close my eyes and wait for him to stop, to stop hitting her. How long was I to cry and hide as he hit her? I wondered inwardly afraid to make any noise lest he switched to me.

My mum married Bongo last year after my dad died. Tradition and rules set by a cruel society dictated that she do that. Women are passed along from one man to another like a piece of clothing. Why my mother had consented to the marriage I really don't know. How could she do that? He wasn't even handsome! Bongo had a giant's body with huge hands, long legs and a monstrous head. He was even old enough to be her father. To make matters worse, he had a big, smelly mole on his rather huge and deformed nose. A complete troll, that was what he was, nothing else. Just one look at him made me feel pity and anger for my mum. I kept asking myself what had made her marry such an ugly, smelly and hideous man. My mother was a beautiful woman: petite, with marble brown eyes and a fair complexion. Wherever she went, eyes followed, admiring her natural beauty. She jokingly used to say she was the village belle. The attention people gave her made Bongo even more jealous and more aggressive towards my mother. He always beat her to 'cure her of her flirting ways', whatever that meant. I hated those words coming from his foul mouth whenever he assaulted mum.

Little by little she became his servant, his robot. He used the beatings to program her to do everything and anything for him. She cooked for him, fed him and washed his clothes. Everything had to be done to his liking or there would be hell to pay, with a whip or a slap, a kick or a punch. She learnt to live with it; I guess it was for the sake of the four walls, the roof over our heads, the food and the money for my school fees. I am pretty sure she would have continued doing so even if it meant her death. The regular beatings had sucked the life out of her. My mother's once beautiful face was gone. There were deep hollows where there were once dimpled cheeks. Her face carried a look of fear and sadness. She even lost her mind

sometimes and often had a few episodes of hallucinations because of the regular blows her skull and brain sustained. She practically lived to serve the man. *No sir, yes sir, sorry sir, food is ready sir, can I sleep sir?* were the daily phrases she spoke when addressing him, almost like mantras recited by a faith-blinded monk. Hearing my mum talk like a pre-recorded tape and seeing the spacious gap between his yellow teeth as he smiled in enjoyment to the replies irritated me. It built a bitter hatred in me, a terrible disgust for the man which built up in the core of my being like residues of a poisonous chemical. Sooner or later, I had to spit out the venom or it would eat me up.

Last night he came home high on *nyaope*. He was hallucinating, and in his crooked mind he said he had seen my mother dancing at the shebeen with some man. *Nyaope* is a synonym for marijuana, a name commonly used in our neighbourhood. Those who know it say it's not child's play; that it hits one pretty badly. His horrible stench filled the room; it was a result of not bathing for several days. That was how disgusting he was. The look in his eyes made my blood cold and I sensed a brutal beating on the way. He quickly stumbled, reached for my mum and clenched her hair into his hands, pulling her towards the kitchen. He was going to get his whip, I knew it. I jumped on him and tried to stop him, but it was a pathetic attempt which resulted with me being thrown against the kitchen counter. Against the big troll, I was only a mouse, small and vulnerable.

When he let go of her hair, strands of it remained in his hands and blood oozed from her scalp. He took out his whip and started the torture. He kept calling her names, kicking her, punching her. He went on again and again, letting out his cruel devilish laughs in between. I looked at her and she was completely swollen, bleeding and red from the whip. I couldn't take it anymore. I had to stop him. Somehow. With something. Anything. I pulled the drawer that contained the still new, long knives that were their wedding presents. I snatched two out. Weapons gleaming under the kitchen florescent, I must have looked like a samurai, or a ninja. The knife in my left hand went into his gut as if it were cheese. He groaned in pain, eyes bulging in surprise. My right hand drove the other knife through his chest. No rib came in the way of the long, sharp, stainless steel blade. My

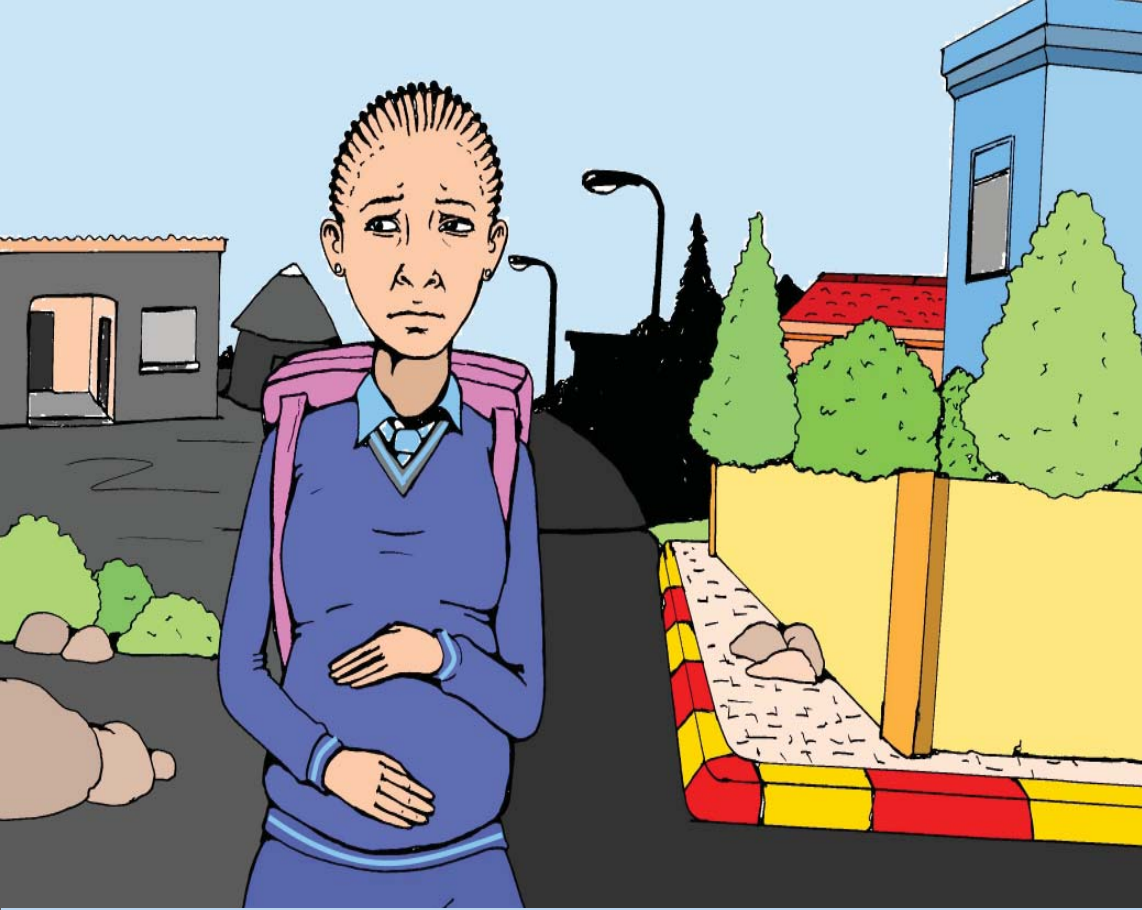
mum screamed and fainted at the sight of me stabbing him. I couldn't let him do that again! NEVER! He fell to the floor, supine, gargling for breath. His legs twitched, once, twice and he lay still. It was finally over. This monster, the troll's reign of terror, was finally over.

I watched him bleed to death before I called the police. He had to die, he deserved it. "I did this for you, mum," I kept saying over and over again, as I waited for the police to arrive.



Take-home message:

Traditional practices that contravene children's and women's rights need to be reviewed. Violence in the home must be reported to the police for investigation and corrective action. Silence about violence is violence. Find your voice and speak out against the violence.



HELLO

BEAUTIFUL

LAONE LUCKY THABENG
SELIBE PHIKWE SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Selibe Phikwe District

I knew it was wrong, living with this man. But what could a sixteen year old girl thrown out of the house by an evil aunt do? I flung conscience out through the window because in my case, conscience was tantamount to hunger and suffering. This man treated me well. He drove a sleek BMW. We lived in luxury, in a house bigger than any house I had ever seen in Mochudi. In return for the nice clothes, the good food, and paying for my school fees, I cooked for him and slept with him. Those who saw us together and didn't know better thought I was his child. Some of course could see it – that he was the sugar daddy that provided for me. Let them say what they wanted to say, I had concluded, my life was my life.

Before I came to live with this man, my aunt had been a total misery in my life. I don't have a problem with children attending to home chores like doing laundry, washing dishes, cooking and the like, but my aunt didn't give me space to breathe, let alone to rest or do my school work.

“Masego!”

I always had to answer when she called out. If I happened not to hear the calling, my cheeks would explode from her backslap. My aunt enjoyed cracking her palm against my cheeks, across my face and sometime a punch to my jaws. I still have the broken tooth from one of her blows.

“Masego!” She called out.

“Mmaaaa!” I was outside sweeping the yard and raking fallen dry leaves into heaps to be burnt later. I dropped the rake and ran into the house.

“I'm leaving, will be back in the afternoon. Clean the dishes, wash my clothes, stoke a fire outside and cook the beans. You know they will drain the gas if you cook them inside. And don't forget to water the hedge along the fence. Remember, for the hedges we use only water from the public tap. You don't have money for a high water bill, do you? You can borrow a wheelbarrow from the neighbours or carry the pail on your head.” With that, she swayed out and off she went.

When she came back, I was done with everything. She checked the my-to-do list, inspecting and checking if all the tasks were done properly. She

ran her finger along the surfaces, on the TV screen, looking for specks of dust. Nothing. She gazed up at the ceiling corners, hoping to see strings of cobwebs. Nothing. She peered under the couch but it was all spotless. Even when she was satisfied, my aunt never said it, or at least showed me a sign that she was happy. She always had this angry, sour face, like someone chewing on a bitter root. She sat on the couch and I knew I had to wash her hands and bring her food, after warming it in the microwave oven, of course.

While she was eating in silence, I wanted to tell her something but I hesitated. It was important but what if it sparked her anger again? But I decided to say it anyway. I was already used to her outburst. "Aunty," I said and hated the tremor in my voice. "They want school fees at school. They say I shouldn't come to school without it tomorrow."

She was silent for a while and I knew she was summoning the right, scathing words that would burn me. "Then don't go to school. Do they think money grows on trees? Do I have a horse that defecates money?"

"But aunt..." I started and she smashed the plate of food on the carpet where it thudded into pieces and scattered the rice, meat, soup and vegetables across the floor. She was on her feet before I could step back. Her left hand grabbed my neck and squeezed. I choked, feeling the world revolve. Her right hand smacked my face, folded into a fist and knocked my jaw, opened again into a palm and scorched fire on my left cheek. Tears and phlegm mixed on my face and I knew she was intent on killing me this time. When she released me, I staggered and fell on the coffee table, breaking the legs of the furniture.

"Out!" my aunt commanded. "Get out of my house, now!"

Out in the streets, the only clothes I had being the ones I wore, I was a complete vagabond. I sat on a stone in a cool shade of a tree by the roadside and got lost in my thoughts. I had never known my parents. I was told my mother died while giving birth to me and that I didn't have a father. My grandparents were in the village of Selolwane, living in abject poverty. So I couldn't go there. How was I going to live from now on-

wards? Should I steal? Should I prostitute myself? Or maybe suicide and get it all over with?

I didn't see the vehicle that had stopped on the road. It had almost passed but the driver launched it into reverse and swerved the car out of the road, to my side. It was a BMW. "Hello beautiful. Is everything alright?"

No one had ever called me beautiful before. In fact, I wasn't even sure if that was a correct description of my features. The mirror had always shown me otherwise: scars, frightened eyes, swollen lips and cheeks discoloured from constant impact with my aunt's palms.

Hello beautiful. That line melted my heart. And that was how David and I met.

At David's, food was in abundance. School fees were not a problem. David had introduced me to the other side of life I had never known. Before meeting David, I had dated only once, with a classmate back then in primary school. But it was what we called 'face love', nothing intimate. David showed me what making love was. He was overjoyed when he noticed that I was still pure, never touched in that way before.

I finished my junior secondary school and proceeded to a senior school. Unfortunately I fell pregnant before I could complete. Teenage pregnancy was something I never anticipated. To my relief, David didn't deny the child. He didn't kick me out. We continued to live together, though I had lost an opportunity at education.

I lived like a house wife, hoping that one day David would marry me. I wasn't sure of my future and feared that David would someday change like the weather. What would I do? Would I go back to live with my evil aunt, or head home to Selolwane?



Take-home message:

Early sexual debut predisposes to HIV infections, unplanned pregnancies, school drop-outs and family problems. Children who have been abandoned by their guardians must seek help from the relevant authorities.



THE PREDATOR

CHIDOCHASE GUMUYU

SETLALEKGOSI JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

Francistown District

Tanaya is HIV positive. As a boarding student in a junior secondary school in Francistown, she faces rejection and discrimination. In response, Tanaya has become rebellious and decided not to take her medication. One night, lying curled up in a foetal position on her bed, tears stream down her face. “My life,” she croaks into the blackness of the night. “Will it get any better? For how long will I suffer? I can’t even take my medication around here, where everyone is watching and ready to scorn me.”

*

It started when Tanaya’s father, Mr. Bangala, gave up the ghost. His friend Spero read the ghastly details of Mr. Bangala’s death in a newspaper. It sure was good news to him. Spero set off hunting for the Bangala family. It didn’t take long for him to locate them. He studied Tanaya, his mouth watering like a predator’s. Tanaya was only fourteen, with pink juicy lips and small brown eyes that peered out innocently from under curly brows. She had long, thick black hair and a petite nose, well proportioned to the rest of her facial features. The predator licked his lips. For how long had he always wanted a slice of this girl! Her father had always been in his way, a barrier between him and the luscious piece of meat. Mr. Bangala was his friend but he had a really beautiful and ripe little girl. Spero had a thing for little girls. Now that the barrier was dead, he had to make his move, one way or another. And there was Mrs. Bangala, the widowed wife with a hot Spanish figure and a killer smile. Surely the daughter picked her amazing looks from her amazing mother. When he was done with the small chicken, Spero fantasised, he sure would fry the turkey.

Tanaya walked home slowly in the heat of the afternoon. Like always, she passed through the usually loud street of Kgaphamadi. But today the street was different. Silence cut across the atmosphere, as though the street was mourning. Exhausted and sweating from the intense heat, Tanaya strolled along the road, clusters of old, cracking houses flanking her. A shadow loomed behind her and she turned to an aging man wearing a shabby old coat, despite the heat. He was hobbling towards her. “My daughter, where is the river?” the man said in a crackling voice. He had a small, plastic container in his hand. “I need to get to the river.” The river was only a stone’s throw away and Tanaya thought that the old man must have struggled, perhaps due to poor sight, to find the river. She led the old man to the

river, through a mass of green and thick vegetation. “Please get me some water,” the old man begged and Tanaya walked through tall grasses and small shrubs to dip the container into the water.

As Tanaya turned around to head back to the old man, a strange tall man stood there, not an old man anymore. The coat was tangled in a heap on the ground. Clearly, the man had been in disguise. He smiled and Tanaya recognised him. It was Spero. She gasped and dropped the container. “Who are you? What do you want?” she wanted to shout but her voice was only a whisper.

“Come on, you’re too young to be that forgetful. You know exactly who I am. I’m your uncle, Uncle Spero,” he was leering, a playful smile on his face.

“You tricked me. Why?” Tanaya asked, clenching her teeth and balling her fists. She had never liked Spero. Spero was supposedly her late father’s friend but she learnt later on that he was only a parasite. He had not even come for her father’s funeral. Instead of responding to her question, Spero bolted towards her. There was the river on the other side and Tanaya’s escape was highly limited. She picked the water container and threw it at him. Spero ducked and sprinted after her. Although much younger and possibly faster than Spero, she had nowhere to run. She was trapped between the river and a wall of shrubs. Spero snatched her like she was a scared chicken destined for slaughter. She struggled to free herself from his grip but he knocked her on the face, sending her to the ground. When he started raping her, Tanaya was helpless. She couldn’t even scream for help. She must have been bleeding in the head, where she was hit, because as the assailant groaned on top of her, she felt herself fading into a painful darkness. There was pain in her head, and pain between her legs.

She woke up feeling dizzy, shaking and shivering. A nurse entered her hospital room with a dose of medicine and some pills for her. After Tanaya narrated the story to her mother and the police, Spero was locked behind bars. A few weeks later, Tanaya was diagnosed HIV positive. This was how her life had dramatically changed.

*

Now as a boarding student, she encounters another problem; Thembiwe, a short, sassy and loutish girl who has discovered Tanaya's status, has made Tanaya's life a misery. Thembiwe had seen some ARV drugs in Tanaya's red bag after Tanaya mistakenly dropped it on the floor. Civics day has arrived and Tanaya's life is about to disintegrate. All the students are gathered in the dining hall as the talented Tanaya serenades the crowd with a melodious song, her voice as sweet as that of a bird. "Yeah! Ooh!" the crowd of students cheers. After she finishes, Thembiwe stands up and everyone goes like, "Mmm...what now?"

"I know," Thembiwe says. "I know you don't like me but it's better not to be liked for who you are than for who you are not, right Tanaya?" she says, winking at Tanaya and everyone knows she is about to drop yet another bomb. "Tanaya here, your 'celebrity', is HIV positive," she says.

"Boooo," the crowd shouts in response, giving Thembiwe a thumbs down.

"It's true," Tanaya cuts through the booing crowd and everyone falls silent. "It's true that I'm HIV positive and I guess Thembiwe the witch is happy that I just confirmed it." Tears spill down her face. Tanaya runs to the hostels and buries herself in her blankets.

The week that follows becomes very tough for Tanaya. Thembiwe has convinced her friends and a few other students to keep a distance from Tanaya. They start teasing, rejecting and discriminating against her.

One Monday morning, Tanaya enters the classroom and Thembiwe shouts, "Good morning Mrs. HIV, here is a special treatment for you, boys," she commands one of the boys to place a chair and desk at the far end of the classroom. Some students start giggling. "Those are yours. We quarantine you, Mrs. Big Disease. I hope you see that I care for you." Thembiwe speaks malevolently and the rest of the class bursts into a loud laugh. During tea break and lunch, her best friend betrays her by putting a plate, spoon and cup aside for her, isolating her from everyone. At night, Tanaya cries bitter tears.

Her mother withdraws Tanaya out of that school and enrolls her into a different institution where Tanaya feels welcome. She gains confidence and

is now free to take her medication. What anyone says doesn't matter to her anymore. She now lives her life with peace in her heart. With God and prayer being her first priority, she is healed and inspired to write about her life story, emphasising more on adhering to treatment. As for Thembiwe, that's another story.



Take-home message:

Bullying in schools must be reported to relevant authorities who should ensure that vulnerable children, including those infected with HIV, are not stigmatized and discriminated by other students. Defilement is a crime punishable by law, and must be reported to the police for investigations.



THE CHIEF'S HEART ATTACK

OGAUFU DIKHEZI
SHAKAWA SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Okavango District

1 1:00 pm sharp, December 31. How did I even get here to start with? I can feel the reek of death battering hard on the door of the theatre. I look at the tubes sprouting out of my belly, then gaze at the far end of the wall where a note reads; 'Jesus saves, nurses try'. I catch a whiff of an unpleasant concoction of blood and medicines, making it even harder for me to breathe. I toss on the bed. The pain rises with my temperature from worse to worst. A nurse finally comes to the rescue.

I recall vividly how it all started. See, I am, or rather was, special. They chose me to be the wife of a chief's son. I am beautiful. Not that I am exalting myself. No. But I was always described by my curved hips and well-toned legs. I was the only girl with curled eyelashes that didn't need mascara in Mohembo village.

Something had caused a quake in the village. The chief had had a heart attack. Everyone knew that Kgosi Dindere's wrinkled skin couldn't be smoothed out by any luxury soap. The chief was dying. Mohembo elders had decided that his 28 year old and only son Diyeve was to become heir to the throne. However, he was single and tradition expected Diyeve to have a wife younger than him. A virgin. That is how I came into the picture.

11:05 pm. I come back from my world of fantasies with blurry eyes. "Come on, nurse!" I object, "Two lives are more worth saving than one." Mohembo clinic doesn't even deserve to be called a clinic. It's a three roomed house operated by one nurse. At this time, she is helping the earliest bird, a man stabbed with a knife from the shebeen, probably while stone drunk from chibuku, or some other weird concoction of deadly ingredients. So I wait. I am very impatient. Like the Okavango River my past floods again in my mind.

Funny, it was a shock to me too. My parents tried to talk me into it, but I never wanted to give in. "*Ngwanaka'*, agreeing to the proposal is a blessing," mother said calmly, trying to chivvy me, "but rejecting it is a curse."

1 "My child"

“No, *mme*². I have another man in my dreams!” I cried out, being the mama’s baby I was. I brought a lump on my father’s throat.

“Then it is either that,” my father said, his face proportionally elongating with the shadows, “*kgotsa o tlaa batla boroko ko monnenyaneng wa ditoro tsa gago mosadi*³.”

*Mosadi*⁴.

That word. It then all dawned on me that this issue was as serious as the Chief’s heart attack.

11:20 pm. I wipe out the beads of perspiration from my forehead and take a deep breath, in, out. I feel the head, I assume, heading for the door to life. My muscles contract, but my past keeps on haunting me.

I was sixteen and I had a bodyguard wherever I went. His name was Katlo – strong and handsome. He guarded me even when I slept. I was the princess, you know. Katlo was so cute and muscled. How I wished he were the prince! This explains why I gave in easily when he expressed his love to me. My heart palpitations were at the peak in his presence. It was a Monday, I remember, and we were coming from the community water point when we stopped on the bushy track.

“Thiruthi,” said Katlo, “it’s time I see and touch that soft dark skin of yours.” I don’t even remember how we took our clothes off. The heat of the moment was in control, and little did we know that a storm was coming. I then remembered my mother’s words: ‘bad beginnings lead to bad endings’

I was no longer a friend to *bogobe* and *seswaa*⁵. My face was rapidly changing, developing pimples. I really had thought I knew my menstrual cycle. Day by day I looked at the calendar, but what I was afraid of happened; nothing. One drop, just one drop was what I yearned for.

- 2 Mom
- 3 Or you’ll go and stay with this little man of your dreams, woman.
- 4 Woman
- 5 A traditional meal of porridge and pounded meat.

I was often absent minded, my mother complained. My designer belt got tighter day and night. How I wished I could wear my pink skinny jeans. Crop tops were things of the past now. It was no help denying what was happening. I never knew time was able to drag itself, slower than a snail. I was no longer a princess. I was a piece of garbage in my father's sight. I had ruined the name his ancestors had left clean. There were whispers behind the doors whenever I passed.

11:55 pm. The beeping sound of the machine disturbs me. The nurse bursts in just as I feel I can't take it anymore. 11:59pm. I push harder with maximum strength. "Get it out!" I shout.

Suddenly the nurse suggests, "Hold on a minute and the baby sees the world on the New Year!"

"I said out!" I cry, wheezing heavily. The baby pops out at 00:01. It's a girl!

I feel affection towards my daughter, Mpho. I can already see her beauty. Something astonishing happens. *Mme* ⁶is at the door, with *motogo*⁷ for me and blankets for the baby. I shed tears of appreciation. We clamber aboard a hired Toyota bakkie. People despise me, but Mpho's grandmother is with me, through thick and thin. She even risks losing her share in the women's cooperation society. The generous social worker has registered me in our village for the poverty eradication programme. I now motivate girls in schools to save them from the dragon that swallowed my future. I preach the experience I have faced, trying to be the good shepherd to the lost sheep.

6 Mother
7 Soft porridge



Take-home message:

Child marriages are a violation of the rights of children and they are contrary to the Marriage Act of Botswana. Families and community leadership should strive to keep girls in schools to ensure a prosperous future. Boys and girls should equally be valued and educated.



GRANDMOTHER'S LOVE

ANGELA MMEREKI
SWANENG HILL SCHOOL
Serowe District

Elizabeth was only seven years old when her parents had a tragic accident that snatched their lives away. From that day on, her life was never the same. She now lived with her grandmother, but even at fifteen years of age, eight years after her parents were killed, the hole in her heart couldn't be filled. Elizabeth was usually in a sour mood, thinking about the past and not willing to let go of the pain of her loss.

One morning her grandmother called her over to talk to her. She came down the steps, towards her grandmother walking like a sick person – slow and laborious, as though she was in pain. She didn't sit down on the couch but just stood there beside her grandmother, in silence.

“Sit down, Lizzy, you don't look well,” her grandmother said. Elizabeth just stood there, not moving an inch.

“I'm fine,” she said.

“But it's bad manners to talk to me while standing up,” her grandmother said but Elizabeth kept standing and silent, clearly sulking. “Okay. I have to set rules in the house. I'm the elder here and you must listen to me.” Elizabeth stormed to her room, leaving her grandmother gaping in the living room.

Elizabeth's grandmother sat there, shocked by her granddaughter's behaviour. That afternoon, she called her uncles to speak with Elizabeth.

“Liz,” said Uncle Bob to Elizabeth, “we know you're still mourning the death of your parents, however, that doesn't give you the right to rebel against your grandmother. Our expectations are that, once you've done well in school, you'll be taking care of your grandmother, but you've let this eternal mourning of your parents interfere with your school work. You need to accept what happened and come back to reality. Do you understand me?”

Elizabeth nodded. Her grandmother was glad to see her responding positively to the advice given by her uncles. The talk went on, with each uncle speaking words of wisdom to her. By the time they left, they were all convinced that Elizabeth would heed their advice and become an obedient

child once again.

After they left, Elizabeth said to her grandmother, “Why did you call those old men to come and lecture me? Am I a baby?”

Surprised, her grandmother said, “Those are your uncles. They care about you, just as much I do.”

“No one cares about me. Even God doesn’t!”

“Don’t speak of God like that,” Her grandmother said. “God loves you. You’re a child of God.”

That night Elizabeth made up her mind and left the house. She didn’t want to ever set foot in her grandmother’s house again, but she didn’t know where to go. She roamed the streets, clueless of which direction to follow. She just wanted to go away, to go somewhere, anywhere, regardless of what the destination might be.

Elizabeth was out on the streets for three days and three nights. Worried about her, her grandmother reported her missing, and the police started their search for her.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth had met Daniel who promised her a high-paying job. He took her to a big, strange house which Elizabeth had never seen before. That was when she was introduced to sex-work. Elizabeth tried to refuse, telling Daniel that he must take her back to her grandmother because she didn’t want anything to do with the dirty sex-work. Daniel threatened her and told her that there was no way back. She was forced to have sex with older men.

Luckily, for her, it didn’t take long for the police to locate her. She was rescued a week after she had decided to go prodigal. She was taken back to her grandmother’s place. With her warm heart, her grandmother welcomed her. The police took Elizabeth and her grandmother to the hospital where the staff counselled her and offered her post exposure prophylaxis to prevent HIV infection and an emergency contraceptive pill (morning-after-pill) to prevent pregnancy. She took the medication. Daniel and his

team of crooks were arrested for kidnapping and defiling a child.

“Grandma,” said Elizabeth, “I’m very sorry I didn’t listen to you.” She started crying. Her grandmother hugged her.

“Hush, my girl,” she said. “I’m very happy you’re back.”

Elizabeth and her grandmother reunited.

She continued with her school where she discovered the benefits of blogging. After requesting grandmother to install Internet in the house, Elizabeth started her own blog. On the blog, she discussed issues on child rebellion, on child prostitution as well as on HIV and AIDS. Elizabeth’s blog became popular among the youth across the world. It was through this Internet based platform that Elizabeth started a new life of being a motivational guide. She blogged only during her spare time, when she wasn’t at school. By the time she finished school, Elizabeth’s blog had attracted millions of views from across the world, with lots of comments from victims of the very things that the blog was bringing awareness about.



Take-home message:

This story highlights the perils of being on the streets without protection of a concerned adult. Adolescents can positively use the internet to shine a light on issues that affect them.

Time Table



COULDN'T BE HAPPIER

ZANDILE KOKETSO CHELANE
TSODILO JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL
Ngami District

I was awakened by the sound of kids babbling outside. I looked out through the window. Free-spirited, cheerful children played outside. They had nothing to worry about. How I wished my life had been so free, so perfect like theirs. My life was a lie. Sometimes I even believed I was cursed. Or was this my density? Could fate be so cruel?

“Sesame!” my mom called from the kitchen. It was 8am and she was about to leave for work. As a cleaner at the local clinic, my mother worked hard to ensure that I didn’t sleep on an empty stomach. “Make sure you take your meds as prescribed, okay baby?” she said, patting me on the head. I nodded as usual, as if I would do as told. Every time I was supposed to take my medication, I would throw it down the kitchen sink, fill a glass with water and pretend to be swallowing the drained away pill. Mother thought I took medication because, as they should, the pills got finished in the box, only to be refilled time and again. Oh, how careless of me to refill pills every month as if I used them. Lots of people were dying out there because of lack of treatment, and I was just wasting government resources. How irresponsible!

My best friend Thabi was the only closest person whom I shared almost everything with. But she didn’t know I had HIV. I was ashamed, and I wondered what she would think of me. I only found out recently too that I had this deadly virus, since birth. Mother thought she would tell me when I was more mature because she didn’t want to hurt me. My soul was hollow, I had suicidal thoughts at first but I realised that taking my life wasn’t going to solve anything. Also, I didn’t want to leave my mother by herself. Yes, I loved her that much. To me, ignoring treatment was the only solution. I thought I did myself justice. It felt good actually because it made me forget all about the dark cloud I was under and live a free, perfect life. “You have been down lately, what’s eating you?” a concerned Thabi asked. She must have noticed my gloominess and my being down most of the times.

“Don’t worry friend, I’m just stressed by the oncoming exams,” I forced a smile on my face.

“Oh, don’t you worry, I believe you will face them. You are smarter than

you know,” she alluded. Thabi always knew just how to cheer me up, made me smile even when I had no reason to. She brought out the best in me. I loved her so much.

The second check-up was fairly good, as usual; my CD4 count was normal. The doctor just encouraged me to keep on taking treatment. For a moment I wondered how come my CD4 count was at that level when I wasn't taking treatment. Perhaps my body was just performing miracles. Mother was quite impressed, I guess. I was impressed too because my tactics were being cooperative and not letting me down. “I am so happy for you my child,” Mama said. I smiled and nodded. For months I went on with the act; throwing the medicine down the sink.

One fateful Saturday morning, I was surprised that Mama didn't wake up as early to go to work. I noticed she was sick when I was woken up by a dry cough from her bedroom. I rushed to her bedroom, and to my shock the floor was covered with thick blood. “Mama!” my voice trembled. I sat by her bedside and she was breathing heavily. The duvet covering her bed was soaked in sweat and spatters of blood. She squeezed my hand firmly and I could feel her raised temperature. “Call an ambulance,” she said. I instantly dialled the emergency number and within a blink, the medics arrived. I watched as they shoved her weak body onto the ambulance. I remained behind, lots of questions running through my mind. What if she died? What if I was next?

Two weeks passed since Mama had been hospitalised. The last time I checked up on her was the very first time I had seen her so weak, so sick. I couldn't bear the pain of seeing her suffer so much so I cried every now and then. I could see that her end was near, and she too could see it. She held me by the hand firmly, “You have to be strong my girl,” she mumbled.

“I wish I was Mama, but I am not! I'm so scared of losing you, *ke tsile go sala le mang fa o ile?*¹ Please don't do this to me!” I wept. There was a long pause.

1 Under whose custody will I remain when you are gone?

“Just be strong Sesame, plea...” Before she could finish talking, I could hear the machine beep. Her hand released mine. A cold chill ran down my spine and I could feel a streak of sweat on my forehead. I knew instantly that I lost her. “Mama...doctor!” I yelled. The medics rushed over and took her away. I remained alone in the vacant room. Reality stung me, telling me I was going to be a loner soon. I knew I was going to die if I didn’t swallow my pride and take my medication.

Three months was just not enough for me to get over my Mom’s death. I already told Thabi about my downfall. She comforted me, like all true friends did and I always felt better when I was around her because she was my source of strength. I told her about my status too, and her reaction was far much better than I had imagined. She still loved me so. My stay at Aunt Tshidi’s was quite awesome too. She treated me like her own, more like a princess. I felt lucky. With all that love that was over me, I couldn’t see any reason behind ignoring my medication. I realised that I could die anytime sooner and hurt the people that loved me the most. I made a life-changing decision; to take my meds. It was life changing because I lived positively and happier. I could smile and not have to force myself into smiling anymore. I couldn’t be happier.



Take-home message:

It is very important to adhere to HIV medication and attend medical check-ups as directed by health personnel. This story illustrates the value of a loving and supportive friendship/family in managing the Human Immunodeficiency Virus.



ENOUGH!

UNALUDO ANGELA KGOSIEMANG

TUTUME McCONNELL COLLEGE

Tutume District

The scorching sun and the melodious tunes of the birds disappeared into the night; and so did Boitshoko's mind. She sat in front of the mirror carefully applying lotion to her bruised and swollen body. She trembled at the thought of Ben, her husband. A stream of tears flowed down her face at the thought of how she had traded her happiness when she accepted Ben's proposal. Ben was an illiterate and stubborn man who blindly and irrationally followed the dark path of his culture. Ben was a fool, Boitshoko had concluded. "Enough!" she muttered to the face in the mirror that stared at her with bloodshot eyes. It was time.

Ben was a headman in Tsamaya, a small and traditional settlement located about thirty-eight kilometres north of Francistown, towards the Ramokgwebana border post into Zimbabwe. To be a headman was a position that Ben enjoyed so much, for it boosted his arrogance and egoistic flair. He had lots of respect and admiration for his adherence to culture, and he was careful never to do anything that contradicted his traditions. When, even after a year, Ben didn't have a baby, his image in the society started to get tainted. Not having a baby, especially as a headman, was a social disgrace frowned upon, and considered an insult to manhood.

What was supposed to be paradise became a living hell when the couple couldn't have a child of their own. Ben desperately longed for a child. They had been trying for months without any success. In Tsamaya, adoption wasn't an option. Men in the village lost their respect for the headman. They mocked him, first behind his back and ultimately out in the open and even to his face. What kind of a man was he who couldn't father a child? They called him a eunuch. Ben's frustration boiled down to misery for his wife. He took it all out on her.

It started with Ben calling her names, names that hurt her. Names like 'bitch', 'witch' and 'useless dog'. Ben believed that Boitshoko was barren. In their culture men were not supposed to be infertile. "How can you be so ignorant of our culture? You are the problem!" he once barked at Boitshoko after she suggested that they both go for a fertility test. To him, an unproductive woman was a bad omen, and a childless man was a shame to his society. He was about to lose power in the village, and nothing was

more important than power to him. Soon, the verbal abuse transitioned into physical abuse.

Boitshoko cursed the day they got married under customary law. She could clearly recall the incidents of that day, especially the part where her parents and in-laws sat her down, giving her advice on marriage. She clearly remembered her Aunt Maria's words "*Ngwanaka*¹, don't disappoint us. Represent us well." She had said while staring into her eyes as if seeking assurance that her words had fallen into wise ears.

Boitshoko was expected to be Ben's subordinate. She wasn't even supposed to talk to anyone about her marriage problems. "*O itshoke*²," added her mother. Boitshoko had no matrimonial rights whatsoever but still she obeyed. Just like the meaning of her name suggested, Boitshoko held on to the marriage, clasp the thistle. Then she realised it was now time to give up. She had failed. Let them say whatever they wanted!

Boitshoko was distracted from her thoughts by the sudden opening of the front door. It was Ben. She decided to beg him one more time for the fertility test. Maybe today he would listen. "Ben, about the fertility test."

"Shut up woman! Don't piss me off before I even sit down," his thunderous voice cut her short.

"I thought..." Ben's familiar slap struck her face. She stumbled and collapsed to the floor. She tried to get up but Ben's fist sent her back down. She felt something in her jaw snap, and she tasted blood in her mouth. Ben unfastened his belt. He was going to lash her like a child. Using all her strength, Boitshoko pushed him back. His hip crashed on the table and he lost balance. She grabbed a ceramic vessel and swung it down on his head. It crashed against his skull into a thousand fragments. Ben roared in pain. Blood gushed down his face like a waterfall. He stumbled, fumbled and clawed in air in search of Boitshoko. Rage was boiling in him, but pain was weakening him too. Trembling, Boitshoko ran off to her aunt's place.

The next day, with the help of her supportive aunt who had also been a

1 "My daughter"
2 "Persevere"

victim of gender-based violence, Boitshoko filed a complaint against Ben. There was a pile of evidence against him, and nothing could be done to save him from the wrath of the law. In spite of his social status, Ben was arrested.

Boitshoko began her journey towards social and emotional healing as she recovered her dignity and self-esteem. Her family, friends and the community supported her. It taught her that the process of healing began with forgiveness, and so she did. On the day of Ben's sentencing, she stood by the prison gates and watched as he stepped off the police van. She wondered how many people out there in the community were going through such an ordeal. It was time women found their voice and spoke out about gender-based violence, Boitshoko thought.



Take-home message:

The family and society need to know that there are various reasons why married people may not have children. Couples who cannot have their own biological children can have children through adoption or fostering. Gender-based violence is never an answer to any intimate partner problems and should not be condoned.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THEMES DISCUSSED

1. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV) IN BOTSWANA

1.1. What is gender-based violence?

Gender-based violence is violence that is directed towards individuals or groups because of their gender, which is a socially constructed difference between men and boys, women and girls. A person's gender is different from their sex. Sex refers to biological differences between men and women. Sex is fixed as it is defined by chromosomes and hormones whereas gender is socially defined and varies over time and place. Gender-based violence might be physical (being beaten or slapped), sexual (rape and defilement), financial (withholding resources), and psychological violence (threats, humiliation, mocking and controlling behaviours).

1.2. Does gender-based violence occur in Botswana?

Yes, it does. In Botswana, two out of three (2/3) women have experienced violence, mostly from men they know, whereas worldwide only one out of every three (1/3) women has experienced violence (Machisa & Dorp 2012).

Most cases of violence are domestic, committed by men against their wives or cohabiting partner. Domestic violence, assault, incest, rape and even murder is an escalating social problem in Botswana and has devastating effects not just on the victim but on other family members as well (Mookodi 2004).

1.3. Why is there a high incidence of gender-based violence in Botswana?

Men use violence against women in Botswana because they can. The use of violence is socially acceptable, transferred from one generation to the next. Women and girls are unequal to men; overall, they are less economically successful and often dependent on men for financial support. Lack of personal income makes women more likely to bear violence without complaint for fear of losing that support.

Despite being signatory to a number of regional and international protocols and laws that promote gender equality, it is the long standing cultural, religious and social norms that continue to dictate women and men's roles in Botswana (Machisa & Dorp 2012).

Women are valued differently; they do significantly more unpaid work than men including child minding, housekeeping and general family support (Ferrant 2014).

Marriage or cohabitation is often seen as granting men rights to sex with their partners whenever they want and the power to enforce this right through force if necessary. Where women are seen as inferior to men the opportunity for violence is greater as social sanction against violence is limited, if not entirely absent (WHO 2013). This culture of acceptance of violence by men against women and girls makes reporting incidents of violence to police or other authorities unlikely, only one in every ten (1/10) women who have experienced violence will report the case (Machisa & Dorp 2012).

High levels of alcohol consumption, violence and increased susceptibility to HIV infection are intimately related (Phorano et al. 2005).

All these factors contribute to Botswana's high levels of gender-based violence.

1.4. What is the effect of gender-based violence?

For the individual survivor GBV affects their physical, sexual and reproductive, mental and psychological health. The effects can be immediate and acute as well as long lasting and chronic, and these negative health consequences may persist long after the violence has stopped. The more severe the level of violence, the greater the impact will be on the survivor's health. Health consequences affect productivity which in turn will affect household income and consequently lead to poverty.

Women in violent relationships lack the power to refuse unwanted sex or negotiate for safe sex and are therefore at risk of HIV infection and unwanted pregnancies (Heise et al. 2002). Abusive men are more likely to have HIV and impose risky sexual practices on their partners (Machisa & Dorp 2012).

Gender-based violence threatens family structures; children suffer emotional damage when they watch their mothers and sisters being battered; two-parent (as opposed to single parent homes) homes may break up, leaving the new female heads of households to struggle against increased poverty and negative social repercussions. Psychological scars (Maundeni 2000) often affect healthy and rewarding relationships in the future. Victims of gender violence may vent their frustrations on their children and other family members, thereby transmitting and intensifying the negative experiences of those around them. Children, on the other hand, may come to accept violence as an acceptable means of conflict resolution and communication. It is in these ways that violence is reproduced and perpetuated (Maundeni 2000).

1.5. What is Botswana doing to end gender-based violence?

Botswana is signatory to a number of regional and global laws and protocols that are designed to protect women and girls and prevent gender-based violence.

- Botswana ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimi-

nation Against Women (CEDAW) and the Optional Protocol.

- Domestic Violence Act No. 10 of 2008. An Act designed to provide for the protection of survivors of domestic violence and for matters connected therewith.
- Children’s Act No. 8 of 2009. The Act is concerned with the protection of children and young persons and the elimination of child labour.
- Affiliation Proceedings (Amendment) Act 1999, which is a simple clear procedure for an unmarried woman to obtain support for her child from the father.
- Dissolution of Marriage Act is an Act to make provision for disposal of property after divorce between persons subject to any Botswana customary law.

Numerous programmes have been implemented that address individual and structural determinants of HIV infection and many of them have been successful. Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission of HIV (PMTCT) has resulted in a near zero mother to child infection rate. Other programmes have included behaviour change interventions and communications, encouraging male involvement in sexual health issues, promoting delayed sexual activity in young people, mainstreaming gender sensitivity and equality in the workplace (specifically in local and national government) to name a few.

2. HIV & AIDS AND ANTI-RETROVIRAL TREATMENT ADHERENCE IN BOTSWANA – THE FACTS

2.1. What is the prevalence of HIV in Botswana?

Botswana has a national HIV prevalence rate of 21.9% which is the third highest rate of HIV infection in the world after Lesotho and Swaziland (NACA 2015).

2.2. Who is most at risk of HIV infection?

Adolescent girls and young women are most at risk of HIV infection together with key populations (female sex workers and men who have sex with men). Figure 1 below shows the percentage of females and males who are HIV infected by age and sex in 2013 (NACA 2015). Boys and girls were about equally infected until age 10 and then the prevalence of HIV infection in girls began to rise sharply. Between ages 15–30, the proportion of females infected with the HIV virus was more than double that of males, with a peak of 50.6 % of females

Least risky sexual behaviors

- *Oral sex is much less risky than anal or vaginal sex.*
- *Sexual activities that do not involve contact with body fluids (semen, vaginal fluid, or blood) carry no risk of HIV transmission.*
- *Anal sex is the highest-risk sexual activity for HIV transmission.*

ages 30–35 being infected. Males become infected later in life than females in general. Among males, the prevalence of HIV infection peaked at age 40–44 (43.8%), and the proportion of men infected was somewhat higher than women until age 60 and above (Ola, 2016).

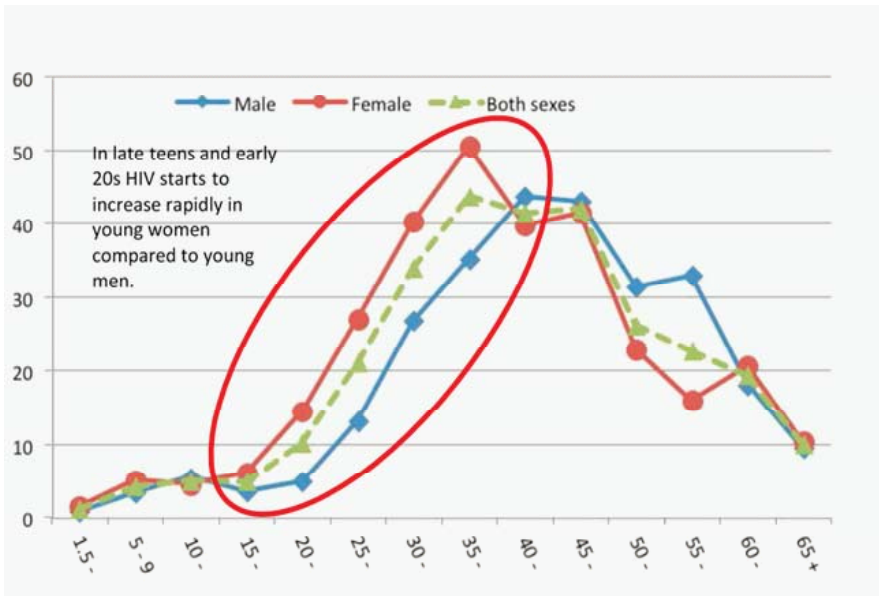


Figure 1, HIV prevalence in Botswana by age and sex in 2013

2.3. Preventing HIV infection

HIV infection is a sexually transmitted disease. It passes from a person infected with HIV to a person who is not infected through unprotected oral, vaginal or anal sex. Consequently, preventing the spread of HIV infection requires uninfected individuals to practise safe sex to maintain their negative status and infected individuals to take their antiretroviral therapy (ART) medication as directed, and to practise safe sex. For people who are HIV positive, to prevent the spread of the HIV infection requires always using condoms and choosing the least risky sexual behaviours and taking ART medication the right way, every day. The medicines reduce the amount of virus (viral load) in their blood and body fluids, maintain health, prolong life and greatly reduce the possibility of transmitting HIV to sexual partners.

Although preventing HIV infection seems straightforward, in fact practising safe sex, taking medication regularly and choosing less risky sexual behaviours requires considerably more than just personal choice and decision making. Sexual behaviour and medication compliance are made up of a number of personal (e.g. negotiation skills) and structural elements (e.g. access to condoms and lu-

bricants).

Understanding how HIV is spread, particularly which section of the population is affected most (Figure 1 above), steers the direction and content of HIV prevention programmes and makes them more likely to succeed. It's clear that in Botswana, adolescent girls and young women are most vulnerable to HIV and the underlying reasons for that are the marked male/female differences in sexual debut (first sexual encounter), intergenerational sex (sex between girls and older men), transactional sex (and sex work), multiple partners and partner concurrency (many sexual partners at the same time), low condom use and sexually transmitted infections (Kharsany & Karim 2016). New HIV infections among women aged 15-49 have risen from 4,500 in 2013 to 5,200 in 2016 and this increase is driven by intergenerational sex between young girls and older males (Ola, 2016).

In addition, gender inequality in Botswana is a major barrier to HIV prevention efforts. Women have less access to resources, work, education and power than men. There are "...unequal employment opportunities, unequal access to wealth, unfair division of labour in the household and generally unequal power relations." (Phaladze & Tlou 2006). The subordination of women to men makes personal HIV prevention difficult. Women are unable to practice abstinence, mutual faithfulness or the use of the male condom because none of these behaviours is under women's control. It is social norms and social structures that shape sexual behaviour, violence and relationships in ways that undermine efforts to avoid, prevent and treat HIV infection (Phaladze & Tlou 2006).

A recent innovation in the prevention of HIV infection in high risk groups is the use of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) has been proven to substantially reduce the risk of HIV infection in people that are at high-risk (Kharsany & Karim 2016).

2.4. Controlling the HIV/AIDS Epidemic - Antiretroviral treatment (ART)

Controlling the HIV/AIDS epidemic is about linking people who are HIV+ with services so that they can access anti-retroviral treatment. Once on ART people living with HIV become less infectious as the viral load is suppressed.

The only way to know whether a person is infected with HIV is through HIV testing. If a person is infected but is not tested or treated, the virus slowly weakens the immune system. After several years, the disease begins to affect the body's ability to fight infections and certain cancers and the symptoms of AIDS appear.

When a person who is HIV+ is tested and anti-retroviral treatment is initiated the amount of HIV virus present in the blood drops, limiting its ability to replicate and reducing the risk of progressing to AIDS. If a person with HIV discontinues treatment, then the person's HIV viral load can begin to increase again so

it is vital that anyone infected with HIV should always take his or her medication exactly as prescribed.

In Botswana, anti-retroviral treatment coverage for people living with HIV / AIDS is highest in women aged 25+ at 73% and lowest amongst those younger than 15. Botswana's overall viral suppression rate is 96.5%, however younger people have lower rates with the < 15 years olds at 89.6%.

In 2017 a total of 37,972 women aged 25 and above were tested for HIV in Botswana and 2,184 of them were HIV positive (5.8%). The women in this age bracket have a prevalence of 34.2% which is the highest amongst all age and sex groups.

3. PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION& TEENAGE PREGNANCY

When teenagers become pregnant, a number of problems occur. If they are at school, they have to drop out until the child is born and although they may return after the birth, they will have typically missed 3 to 6 months of schooling, which is difficult to make up. As a result, teenage mothers lag behind their peers, which affect their grades and their subsequent careers.

3.1 Consequences of teenage pregnancy

The earlier girls become pregnant the higher the likelihood of physical and reproductive damage and sexually transmitted infections including HIV. Although a teenager is biologically able to conceive, the pelvis is usually not fully developed, making labour and birth extremely risky for teenager's health.

3.2 What influences adolescent sexual behaviour?

Peers, social media, family and community all influence adolescent sexual behaviour. For a few adolescents, the pregnancy is planned but for most, the pregnancy is unwanted and unplanned. In order to prevent unplanned pregnancy, adolescents need to be able to access and use contraceptives correctly and negotiate for safer sex. There are a number of barriers to safe sex for adolescents including health worker bias against adolescent sexual health needs; pressure to have children; fear of side effects; lack of knowledge on correct use and difficulty negotiating contraceptive use with their sexual partner.

3.3 How can parents and guardians make a difference?

Parents and members of the extended family have always been important in the development of adolescent sexual decision-making. Just discussing sexuality with an adult helps them make better decisions. Together parent and child develop better interpersonal communication skills and the teenager acquires stronger sexual negotiation skills. A sense of self-efficacy influences sexual debut, particularly for females (Bastien et al. 2011).

The results of good communication between parents and adolescents about sexuality include delayed sexual debut, an increased likelihood of condom use and a reduction in teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections including HIV (Magowe et al. 2017).

Despite these benefits, the communication between Botswana adolescents and parents on issues such as sexual relationships, early pregnancy, HIV, and contraception is often very limited.

Education, particularly secondary education is associated with higher contraceptive use, increased age of marriage, reduced number of births, and increased use of health services. The longer teenagers stay in secondary school the less likely they are to ever have had sex or be HIV positive compared with those who leave school early. The longer they remain in school the greater the benefit. Secondary education is strongly associated with decreased HIV rates and the reduction of risky sexual behaviour (e.g., early sexual debut, number of sexual/casual partners, and unprotected sex).

The benefits of knowing about sex and sexuality, delaying sexual debut, using contraceptives at every sexual encounter and practising safe sex empowers teenagers with the requisite knowledge and skills to make healthy life fulfilling decisions.

TEENAGE PREGNANCY KEY FACTS

Every year, almost 21 million girls aged 15-19 years, and 2 million girls under 15 years become pregnant in developing regions.

Approximately 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 years and 2.5 million girls under 16 give birth each year in developing regions.

Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for 15 to 19 year-old girls globally.

Every year, some 3.9 million girls aged 15 to 19 years undergo unsafe abortions.

Teenage mothers face higher risks of eclampsia, endometritis, and systemic infections than women aged 20 to 24 years,

Babies born to adolescent mothers face higher risks of low birthweight, preterm delivery, and severe neonatal conditions.

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END

Anecdotes on **EXPRESSING EXPERIENCES**

Between these two covers await twenty anecdotes penned by students from nineteen secondary schools in Botswana. Though written in the form of fiction, these stories are a bagful of realities experienced in the different societies within which these young writers live. The experiences expressed in here are inspired by real life situations. Although there are several sub-themes imbedded in the stories, these expressions touch mainly on four major themes; Gender Based Violence, Parent & Child Communication on Sexual Health and Sexuality, HIV/AIDS and Treatment Adherence, and Teenage Pregnancy.

Anecdotes on Expressing Experiences is a two-book compilation of short stories meant to inform, to teach and to inspire. It is also hoped that readers of these books, especially survivors of gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy and HIV/AIDS will find solace, comfort and hope in the messages conveyed herein.

These books are supported by Global Fund through ACHAP in partnership with BONELA, developed and produced by WoMen Against Rape, Maun, Botswana. Jump in and enjoy the ride!

