

OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED

Writings From Letsema



CREATING ZERO PERCENT
GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN THE VAAL

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The Writings in this book are by Letsema community participants and coaches. The Letsema process was facilitated by Gender at Work and Labour Research Service, with funding from the Dutch government's FLOW fund.

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they are people like us
by are breathing like us



"I feel like a
queen of
my own
cuntry!"



to produce words on p



a space of safety, love and sharing



a deeply grounded
humanness

bringing our
monsters to
trial



home

commitment to non violence



Foreword

Michel Friedman

South African Gender at Work Program Manager

The stories in this book invite the reader to taste the texture, messiness and impact of Letsema - an emergent, inspiring and ever changing process to address gender-based violence (GBV) in the Vaal.

The authors of these stories have all been active in the Letsema process, either as residents in the Vaal, as coaches or as facilitators. Many of the authors would not consider themselves writers. Some have not written since school. They have all chosen to write about some aspect of the Letsema process that moved them.

The Letsema process touched every one of these writers in profound, challenging and at times surprising ways. The stories beautifully illustrate the ways in which the process nurtured a threading and weaving of connection and love among participants who might never have had anything to do with one another otherwise.

What started as a search for new ways of addressing gender-based violence, (violence against women, lesbian, gay and trans people), has ended up growing a strong community spirit of care. Participants are learning to give themselves, their families and general community members the 'gift of harmlessness'. This is an important ingredient in beginning to sow the seeds of a less violent Vaal.

The dedicated commitment of the participants, their sense of ownership and responsibility for acting on what they feel passionate about and their willingness to be open to learning new ways of thinking, doing and being is both striking and inspiring.

Gender at Work and the Labour Research Services (LRS) initiated the Letsema process in mid 2013, together with some organisations we

had worked with in the past, in order to develop new ways to respond to the high levels of violence against women and against gay, lesbian and trans people. The organisations involved in setting up Letsema included women's and feminist organisations – Vukani and Remmoho; community based organisations - Kganya Consortium and the SA Gay and Lesbian Equality Project; and Trade Unions – (BCAWU) - Building Construction and Allied Workers Union and the Health and Other Service Personnel Trade Union (Hospersa) .

One of our colleagues, Nosipho Twala, lives in the Vaal and was willing to facilitate the process locally. We invited participants from different organisations to work with us in creating new norms (ideas and practices) of gender equality and a society as free from gender-based violence as possible.

A core guiding principle in Letsema work is to support those experiencing violence to be the decision makers and directors of the actions to be taken. We were inspired to experiment with the Collective Impact Approach which offers ways for many different actors to collaborate on a large-scale social problem to achieve maximum impact. We worked in a flexible way, encouraged reflection and learning from actions and applied our learnings to improve future results, as well as to respond to on-going changes.

The first nine months of the Letsema process was spent setting up a Core Group of 20 women and 6 men with a shared vision. The Core Group sustains Letsema work. During September and October 2013 the Core Group shared their own stories, their different perspectives on violence, and reflected on existing strategies to address gender-based violence. For many, this was their first time working on issues relating to gender-based violence and for everyone it was their first time working with such a diverse group of people. The Core Group generated a core framing question to guide their actions: “How can we create a Vaal with zero % GBV?”

Participants chose the name Letsema for the process. Letsema is a Sesotho word referring to the practice in rural areas where women come together to work the soil. In the context of the social change process in

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the Vaal, “Letsema” was taken to mean women (and men) coming together to work the soil of creating new and more equal social norms; non-violent relationships between women, men and with gay, lesbian and trans people. For those who want to read more on the Letsema process please see my article *Transforming cultures of violence: Ploughing the soil, planting the seeds of new social norms. A story of the Letsema Collective Impact Process focused on “How can we create 0% Gender Based Violence” in the Vaal, Gauteng, South Africa*, available on the Gender at Work website: www.genderatwork.org

The Vaal is a relatively under-resourced area in terms of NGOs, especially those focused on servicing survivors of gender-based violence. Women struggle to break the silence and most people are scared to talk. The Vaal has experienced more massacres than any other region in South Africa. It has high rates of illiteracy, informal employment and unemployment. Letsema participants say that unemployment leads to high rates of crime, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, and child abuse. Girls have problems with respect to early pregnancy, sexual abuse and bullying. There is a high rate of school dropouts. Old people are vulnerable to abuse and often have their social grants abused by others. There are many illegal initiation schools and many stories of young boys who have been abducted without their parents’ consent. There are few recreational facilities.

Despite on-going challenges Letsema has made remarkable progress in a short time period, as the stories in this book show. In March 2014, the Core Group with the Gender at Work / Labour Research Service team organised six district community level meetings in different areas of the Vaal around the question - “How can we create a Vaal with zero % GBV?” Each meeting was attended by 40-60 people and in all involved a total of 280 diverse participants - including youth, the elderly, women, men, gay, lesbian and trans people, HIV positive people, disabled people, health workers, church pastors, shebeen queens, taxi associations, traditional healers, and hawkers.

In June 2014, with the help of Gender at Work facilitators, the Core Group organised an Open Space meeting at the Saul Tsotetsi Sports

Centre in Sebokeng. This meeting brought together two hundred and eighty people including representatives from schools, technikons, and government departments.

In response to the question - How can we create a Vaal with zero % GBV? - 90 topics were generated for discussion at the Open Space Meeting, and 20 action plans were suggested for further work.

Since August 2014, the Core Group and six action groups have worked on various activities aimed at reducing GBV in the Vaal and they have come together from time to time to reflect on and strengthen their actions. Each group has been assisted by a coach. Four of the six groups that continue to work on reducing GBV include:

- Vegetable Growing Group which aims to build relationships of equality between men and women, as they work together in growing vegetables
- Dialogue Group which creates spaces for community members to break their silence about GBV
- Traditional Healers Group which aims to stop the kidnapping of boys by illegal initiation schools which are linked to gangsterism and which trap boys in violent behaviour
- Alcohol and Drug Abuse Group which aims to address the lack of open communication around drugs which the group sees as linked to violent behaviour

Whereas Gender at Work initially facilitated the early community dialogues, Gender at Work now only provides reflection and thinking support.

Between November 2014 and September 2015 the Letsema groups organised community dialogues with new stakeholders. These included: five World Cafés - gatherings where community members share experiences and ideas - on tradition, culture and gender, alcohol and drug abuse, gangsterism in schools, or general dialogues; a Heritage Day event; a one day workshop on gender, culture and tradition; a sports tournament for young girls and boys; a policy discussion on controls for

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illegal initiation schools with Contralesa, the traditional leaders authority; a large public gathering of three hundred and fifty four people to discuss the abduction of children for initiations as well as bullying and gangsterism; a memorial walk in honour of a local woman who was stabbed to death by her partner; a peaceful march to Eskom demanding a return of electricity.

Letsema group members organised some of these dialogues themselves, and in some cases they organised dialogues with the assistance of Letsema coaches. Since July 2015 Letsema action groups have been busy working on their own fundraising proposals in order to be able to take their work forward into 2016.

The stories in this book give more detail on key Letsema events and processes from the perspective of Core Group members, Working Group members, facilitators and coaches. We hope these stories will inspire and encourage others who are organising to create safer societies, by changing ideas and practice relating to gender equality and the rights of women, lesbian, gay and trans people.



Letsema writing workshop, September 2015.

Introduction

Shamim Meer

The writings in this book tell the story of community members joining together to find answers to the question: “How can we create a Vaal with zero % gender-based violence?”

The writers are fifteen Letsema community members from townships and informal settlements across the Vaal, and six Gender at Work/Labour Research Service team members and coaches who supported the Letsema process.

In their writings Letsema community members give a sense of who they are, how they came to be a part of Letsema, how being in Letsema touched them personally, helped them connect with each other and their communities, and what they have been able to achieve.

Many experienced a change - as one of the writers Simon Bull Lehoko puts it - from ‘silent observers of community problems’, to concerned activists - leading marches and engaging community members in order to raise awareness around violence against women and against gay and lesbian people. They share through their writings how Letsema joined people’s hearts. As Lebohang Ramahole writes: “There is this Sesotho saying *Le ha re ka arohana dipelo tsona di teane* – meaning that even if we are separated our hearts are joined together.”

Letsema became a space where people could participate as equals, were free to talk, were heard, were encouraged to ask questions. A space for open discussion ‘from the heart’, a space of love, sharing and caring. Members became confident, they came to believe in themselves. They learnt new skills and surprised even themselves with the initiatives they took to address the high levels of violence against women

and against gay and lesbian people in their everyday lives – issues they previously had taken for granted as facts of life that they could not change. As Eunice Lehlaha writes so powerfully “I am a person today because of Letsema”.

Letsema got people moving, taking initiative, growing, flowing, and the creativity they took in their actions they brought to their writings in this book. The writing workshop where Letsema community members produced these writings was held around eighteen months after the formation of Letsema. The idea of writing was to share the Letsema experience more widely, while giving each writer the opportunity to reflect more deeply on their experience in Letsema. Writing allows the writer to reach into his or her heart and soul and the words that flow from heart to hand to paper are often deeper than words spoken in a discussion or interview, and it was this depth we wanted to reach.

Those who attended the writing workshop were Letsema members who took up the invitation to write. Interested members were first invited to a one day workshop to get a taste of what the writing journey would be like. Drawing on the work of my writing teacher Louise Dunlap I shared with the would be writers that everyone has powerful thoughts and can write powerfully; that we each have a unique voice when we talk and it is this unique voice that we want to bring out in our writing. People were invited to write in the language of their choice or if they preferred in a mixture of languages. We practiced free writing and gave and received supportive peer feedback. The main idea was to build their confidence and trust in themselves as writers. All of those who attended the first workshop were inspired to attend the next three day workshop.

I facilitated the three day workshop with Jackie Mondl. I worked with those writers who wrote in English, Jackie worked with those who wrote in IsiZulu and seSotho. The first day was a day of thinking through what the writers wanted to write, for who they wanted to write, their main message. The second day was a day of writing. They wrote in two hour stretches in triplicate books placing a copy of each completed page next to them so that Jackie and I could collect these,

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as quietly as possible so as not to interrupt the flow of writing; and so that we could read and offer feedback as we felt necessary (but being careful and mindful of allowing as much of a free flow in the writing). The third was a day of finalising the writing so that there would be a product to share with readers in and outside the community and through the production of this book.

The writers came to the workshop anxious, exhilarated, wanting to write, but not sure what was expected of them. Day one was confusing and for many a struggle. Jackie and I found some of the writing to be formal, some in the style of inspirational greeting card messages. The writers were struggling with the flow from heart to mind to paper. They were struggling to find their unique voice. We needed to find a way to unlock the creativity that each one had within themselves.

On the morning of day two I brought flowers from my garden. I presented each one with a flower and asked them to write on how they felt or what they saw when they looked at the flower. I passed out copies of old SPEAK magazines – I put up SPEAK posters. I read the words of writers like themselves – community members with little formal education - from two books that were the products of previous writing workshops I had led. I urged the writers to go deep into themselves to find their own unique writing voice.

A magical process unfolded. People wrote from their heart, from their soul. The hall where they usually met to talk and plan, was transformed into a serene quietness. Some wrote their pain –and as we read these pages of pain we approached the writers to offer support of finger-holds and head holds from our knowledge of Capacitar. I cautioned. I questioned. “Do you really want to write about this?” “Yes” was the response. “Why?” I asked. “To heal and to help others in similar situations”.

At the end of day three we celebrated the achievement of fifteen completed pieces of writing. As each writer read out loud a few paragraphs she or he had chosen to share we were all moved by the power of their words. Those who wrote of painful experiences showed how these experiences can get transformed through writing, to find hope and com-

munity. Each had found their own writing voice. Each piece of writing is a gift – a gift to themselves, to each other, to the facilitators and to whoever reads these pieces.

The writings by Letsema coaches, with the exception of Michel Friedman’s piece, were written at a two day workshop with the coaches. They write about what they learnt from guiding the Letsema process, what they learnt from creating spaces for community members to come together, share experiences, listen to each other, decide on and lead their own actions.

Once the pieces were written Jackie translated the IsiZulu and seSotho writings into English, and I edited the English writings and English translations, with a light touch. Both of us took care in translating and editing not to disturb the unique voice of each writer. I took the edited writings back to the writers so that each one could read her or his piece and give the go ahead for publication. The joy, pride and almost disbelief as people read their own writings was wonderful to see.

These writings tell the story of something unique. Together they paint a picture of how Letsema has worked. From these stories, and from my involvement in Letsema since August 2014 as coach and facilitator, three things stand out. The first is Letsema made sure that women’s rights and gay and lesbian rights are at the heart of things; the second is that Letsema pushed through to new ways of thinking, not relying on readymade solutions; the third is Letsema’s belief that community members can lead, make decisions and direct their own actions.

The involvement of feminist organisations, Remmoho and Vukani, and the Gay and Lesbian Equality Project right from the start placed women’s rights, and gay and lesbian rights at the heart of Letsema. This made sure that straight women and lesbian women and gay men could open their hearts and share their experiences. This enabled the men among Letsema members to question and change the ideas they were brought up with and believed - that men are superior to women. This enabled straight women and men to realise that gay and lesbian people are ‘people just like us’.

Instead of working to address gender-based violence with ready-

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made solutions, the Letsema Core Group searched out creative ways of addressing the high levels of gender-based violence in their communities. In one of their first meetings facilitated by Gender at Work/ LRS facilitators, Core Group members searched out a question that could guide, energise, and lead them to creative ways of addressing the high levels of violence against women and against gay and lesbian people. They came up with the question: “How can we create a Vaal with zero % gender-based violence?” This wide open question invited people to be creative and take initiative. It opened up a way for Letsema members to think up new ideas and actions for a violence free Vaal.

Letsema facilitators put across strongly that each community member could lead and make decisions. As the writings show, within Letsema spaces each person felt important, each realized that she or he could come up with good ideas, could make decisions and could lead. Building such confidence and trust enabled the initiatives and actions shared by the writers in this book.

I hope you as readers will experience these writings as the gifts they are – gifts which show what is possible from working creatively to find new ways of addressing violence against women and gay and lesbian people.



Letsema writing workshop, September 2015.

Reflections on the writing workshop with Letsema Core and Action Group Members

Jackie Mondí

I had created my own images of the workshop participants and so I was quite surprised when we arrived and saw the actual participants. I was expecting a group of young people. I don't know why but that was my expectation. So, I moved from being surprised to being a little concerned. How are we going to get these people to write, especially the elderly? Writing is hard even when you are trying to get yourself to write. Now, how difficult was it going to be getting people who don't usually write to actually write about their lives and their work? And then I was just as fascinated by the mix of people we had in the room. It was really an interesting group of people.

Young and old, there was a mother and her son, who is gay. A traditional healer, a woman who was a sangoma who had been initiated by the traditional healer, a gay young man who is also a sangoma, there was a pastor, an elderly church going woman, an elderly former soccer star, a couple of young women, an elderly woman and two other men, one very quiet and the other a social activist if there is anything like that. It was really just a fascinating combination and more fascinating that these people, of different ages, sexual orientations, different spiritual beliefs were all working together and doing so harmoniously. Oh! And they do Tai Chi! How weird is that? Who would have thought one would find people at a workshop in Evaton doing Tai Chi! This is a special group of people in so many, many ways that cannot be put in words.

They were all enthusiastic about the writing workshop, I loved that! From the very first free-writing activity, they just got on with it and started writing, no qualms at all.

I was quite excited to read the writing from the first day, not so much the content but the fact that everyone had actually produced words on pieces of paper. It was like watching a miracle unfold! The writing was initially inhibited and I could see that the participants were writing more what they thought the facilitators were looking for rather than writing from their hearts, but this changed on the second day as Shamim explained that people should write freely and in their own voice. Reading from other books also helped participants to see that the writing had to be their own. This definitely freed them from inhibitions and fears as their writing became freer and had more of themselves in it.

I noticed something special about the group I don't know how to put it but they have a spirit of inclusivity about them that I have never experienced anywhere else. From the very first day, I felt welcome and not like an outsider, they related to me as they did to each other. They have this amazing ability to focus on what needs to be done and just get on with it and forget about peripheral stuff. I am struggling to explain it but they see everyone as a human being, that's it. I suppose this is what enables them to work together so well despite their diverse ages and especially their spiritual beliefs.

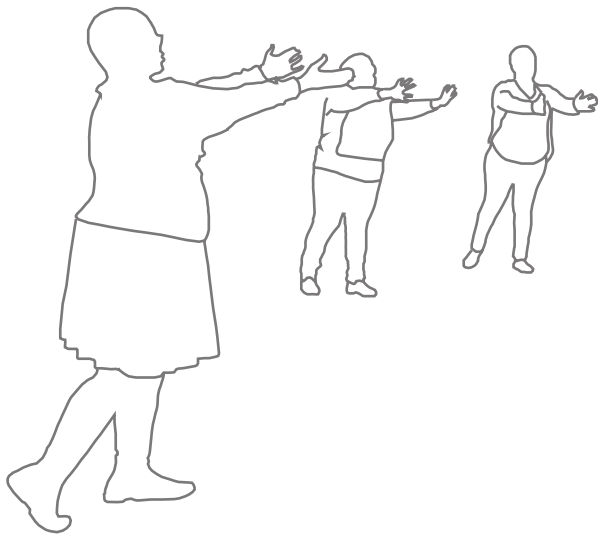
I also learnt a lot from Shamim's way of doing things, interestingly I saw some of the theories I am learning in my education studies in practice. One example is scaffolding – which is about helping someone do something they would not be able to do on their own and getting them to do it so well that they can do it next time without any support. So, by providing writing prompts, examples of other writing and the encouragement to write without inhibitions and from the heart as well as telling them that there was no prescribed way of doing it, she enabled the participants to write confidently and honestly. I also appreciated the commitment and passion that Shamim put in the work, bringing flowers and magazines to raise energy levels. I also like her firm gentleness that helped keep participants focused without being harsh or authoritative. I am very happy with what came out of the workshop.

The writing helped participants in ways they had not anticipated, once they let go of everything the writing took them to the deep and

dark places of their lives which they had locked up but needed to be opened for them to heal. Even if that had been all that had come out of the workshop, it would have been worth it. But the workshop produced pieces of writing that will be valuable. I remember a time on the second day when the hall was in complete silence and everyone was just in his or her own world, oblivious of what was happening around them, just writing! Shamim says it was magic, I say it was a miracle and I am very happy to have been part of this!



This page: Letsema Open Space, Saul Tsotetsi Sports Centre, June 2014.
Opposite page: We started off each day of the writing workshop with Tai Chi, September 2015.





Letsema writing workshop,
2-4 September 2015.

Part One

*Writings by Letsema Core
Group and Working Group
Members*

The Writers



Carol



Jabulani Dlomo



Eunice Lehlala



Lebohang Ramahole



Flatta Mqwati



Khetiwe Matumelo



Sipho Booi



Magogo Zwane



Millicent Phillips



Moeketsi Lehlala



Mazet



Nathi Zwane



Simon Bull Lehoko



Radikeledi Letuma



Mokete Lephalletse

Writing Workshop Facilitators



Jackie Mondli and Shamim Meer

Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu – A person is a person because of people

Carol

It was a sunny hot Tuesday in February 2015. We were at a presentation at an Anglican Church. It was me, Nathi, Ntu and Jabu and we were very happy to do this presentation. But also scared.

As people started entering the church and taking their seats Jabu said to me, ‘You are doing the presentation Carol’. I was like, ‘*Bathong* (But, really) Jabu, you know I don’t like talking. I will take the minutes’. He said, ‘Nope, you are doing the presentation because it is the job of all of us in Letsema to talk, and today you are going to talk’. By now the church was already full neh, *ke batho kamo le kamo. Yoo nna Carrie wa batho* (there were people on all sides. I thought to myself, “Oh, poor Carrie!”).

At around 10.30 we started our presentation. Remember, the church was full of parents, youth, a pastor and an archdeacon. Nathi started a nice chorus for me - Namhla Nkosi - because he knows I like this chorus. People started singing with us. The pastor opened with a prayer. I came forward shy as I was and I said ‘I am here about alcohol and drug abuse’. *Yaba ekare ke hlabile mmuso ka lehlabathe* (it was like I had stirred up a hornet’s nest), some people started moaning and mumbling. I was now getting worried and scared but I told myself that I won’t show the congregation that I am worried about what I see in their faces. My job in Letsema is to talk about these things.

I told the congregation that I am a Christian lady who used to think that people who go to taverns or those ‘night riders’ as we call them, deserve to be raped, or killed because they do wrong things. But when I started attending Letsema, listening to people at Letsema and out-

side Letsema, sharing their stories, I started to see that everyone needs a chance in life and that as Letsema I must make it happen. And the congregation was like, ‘Wow! *Wa tla bua ngwana motho la o ka thola, shame* (You spoke really well and said it all, there’s nothing left to say)’. Within five minutes people started to feel free and started talking about their problems. They began to see that some have similar problems, that they never knew they had similar problems and that they can even talk about these problems in church. *Ya ho a makatsana neh!* (Yeah, it is truly amazing, hey!)

There was this moment when a woman told us about her naughty son. The way *a neng a ele ka teng* (the boy was in such a terrible state) she could not take it. Because the boy was naughty she chased him out of the house and he never went to school. He felt the best thing was to do nyaope, a dangerous street drug. The woman cried as she talked. I asked her, ‘why are you so in tears? Where is the boy now?’ She said he is now in rehab. Her neighbour took him to rehab because she felt the boy needs help, whereas she thought that the boy must be chased out of the house, because she is a Christian and cannot live with the devil. It was so quiet in the church. Some other parents were also crying and saying they judge people but they also have their own mistakes. It does not mean that when you are a Christian you won’t have mistakes or problems. *Bophelo ke semphekgo* (Life is unpredictable).

I was like wow the heavens are opening up for me. I am so short and thin but I can make people talk this much. These parents and youth started seeing that they have to be there for each other because they all need each other. There was also a young lady who said she used to insult her granny because every time she asked for money her granny always says she does not have it. Yoo I felt like really now people are willing to make changes in their lives. And all of these problems are addressed inside the church, I mean a holy place.

Truly, *dintho di ya fetoha and bohlale ba phala bo tswa phalaneng* (adults can learn from children). I loved these people because they cared about sharing and getting solutions to their problems. They all needed help and they all wanted to help each other where they can.

The pastor too gave advice about how not to judge people, but to help each other. He also said he used alcohol when he was at school. One day he was drunk and his friends beat him and he nearly died. So he realised that alcohol is not for him. He continued attending school until he became a pastor. He said some people think pastors are perfect, but they also make mistakes.

I was very happy and proud at the sharing of such stories. People could see that life is about helping each other and not fighting each other. Also the solutions came from the congregation. We did not need a professional to give us answers. This is so sweet and precious about Letsema. Communication brought us together via Letsema.

Bathong ba Modimo (People of God) life is too short to fight each other. *Bathong* (People) unity is power. I felt blessed because before I got to Letsema I used to stay indoors.

Getting to Letsema and what Letsema means to me

The first time I attended Letsema was at the Saul Tsotetsi Sports Centre. I was invited by Sis Nosipho. I got the invitation through my mom. At first I did not want to go because I like sleeping during the day and I love to be alone most of the time. I felt like I was going to be crowded there because there will be a lot of people. '*O' Modimo wa ka*' ('Oh my God') I said, let me go just to please my mom.

When I got there I found so many different jolly and happy faces, a lot of topics and different groups. The exciting thing was that every language was spoken and I was like wow this is my first time to see a multilingual workshop. I started being free but I did not speak. I was the one who wrote in every group I joined that day. I did not want to speak but I wanted to be useful. The last group I attended was the drug and alcohol abuse group, and there I talked a lot because I know this leads to a lot of problems. The group appointed me to be the group leader and my cell number was written on our chart.

Some few weeks after this I was called by Sis Nosipho for a Letsema workshop. I was like, '*ke tlo etsang nna nthwana ya batho*' (what am I,

poor little thing, going to do?), because I don't like talking to strangers and I don't even know anyone there. When I got there the hall was again full of different happy people and there was a table with a lot of food. But I did not see the food. I saw the milk. I am a cat *tjoo* (wow)! *Bathong* (Amazingly) everybody was talking freely about anything. Even things I thought must be kept secret were brought in the open. I was like hey these people are real people and they like helping each other and supporting each other, black or white, male or female, and even young or old.

I started taking some tips from there – *bitjie bitjie* (little by little). I also started talking in our regular meetings and opening up because Fazila and my coach did not take no for an answer. If you are in a meeting you have to say something and at Letsema when you come in they ask, 'how are you feeling?' And before you leave they ask, 'how was your day?' Yoooo what a workshop!

I started getting communication skills, life skills, listening skills and planning skills. *Yaa neh, mehla ya fetoha. Carol a dumela hoba hara batho a be a buwe le bona. Yaa* (Indeed, times are changing. Carol agrees to be among strangers and speak to them). Variety is the spice of life neh. And Shamim too will go like 'and you Carol?' Hey these facilitators will cook you like samp! Slowly but surely. I love all my facilitators and my Letsema fellows because I am what I am because of them.

Letsema is full of love for everyone. Even if you have a suitcase of burdens they will help you clear your suitcase and you will leave feeling free and happy. Our facilitators can see if something is bothering us and that is what makes Letsema so unique and special. Letsema is about building each other and working together. And there is no certificate or diploma needed at Letsema. We are all equal there.

Volunteering for Letsema is very fruitful and I do not regret doing this for Letsema and my community. Especially when I think of all the opportunities they gave me. I never thought I can be such a beautiful, intelligent and loving Carol who also helps people with their problems and gives inputs and ideas.

Letsema is my second family where we share ideas and problems,

where we really listen to each other and comfort each other. A place where we are also taught to be considerate of others. A place where we are all equal.

I have self-confidence. I can even give my coach answers to questions that she cannot even answer. I feel more respected by my family and my community. I now no longer judge others. I listen and learn from others and even get solutions from them. Letsema taught me that we all deserve to be happy and live peacefully. We must talk more, rather than fighting more. It taught me that we all need each other in this beautiful world, especially batho ba baholo (the older people).

Hamba Letsema (Forward, Letsema!) and thanks for the skills. *Hailala* (Hail!) Letsema you are a soul provider!

An eye-opening moment

Jabulani Makhoba Dlomo

I am Jabulani Makhoba Dlomo. I was born and raised in the rural areas of Pongola in Kwazulu-Natal (KZN). I was brought up in a very deep Zulu traditional way. My environment was dominated by all sorts of traditional practices of the Zulu nation. This included teachings about the Zulus being a superior nation who ruled or conquered other nations.

I grew up to believe that a woman's place is in the kitchen and fields, while a man's place is in formal work and making decisions, and that men should dictate in the home. I believed that as a man I was obliged to give women instructions and impose my decisions on them.

However, being brought up in a polygamous family I also learnt women are powerful and brilliant. My father would impose his decisions on everyone but I would hear my mother and my two stepmothers objecting to his decisions with facts, and proposing good ideas to him. My father would lose in these discussions but he would then use violence and physical force to get his message across.

I was taught that there is only male and female and that gay and lesbian people are a curse or a self-made thing. I was taught males are meant to take decisions on behalf of females or society in general and that leadership positions in all spheres were to be taken by men.

For 36 years, since my birth I have been groomed by these beliefs and I lived my life under these beliefs, practices and behaviours.

However, there was one crucial moment which changed my perception and beliefs about gender. This moment came after I had had numerous discussions about this topic. Previous workshops I had attended on gender or gender-based violence were very formal. Some

even took a whole week. But none of these workshops could make a shift in my mind-set. Even though they were led by people who had in-depth knowledge or experience on the subject, my original thoughts and upbringing overruled the objectives of these workshops.

That special moment came to me unannounced. I attended a meeting not knowing its agenda. The meeting was convened by Letsema at the Saul Tsoetsi Sports Centre in Sebokeng. The theme of the day was Open Space. It was one of those hot days during winter. The audience consisted of people from different backgrounds, organisations, races, age groups and genders. Everyone wore a smile on their faces. The hall echoed each time someone coughed or laughed. We would pause for the echo.

To my surprise there were a handful of gay and lesbian people, around 25 years of age. Some were couples. They were so free and comfortable amongst the group of so-called straight people. Neither group showed arrogance towards the other group. I wondered how the straight people were going to address or engage the so-called gay or lesbian people.

The facilitators opened the session by announcing the day's proceedings and the topics for discussion. The discussions were about gender – what is gender, what is gender-based violence, etc. We broke into about fifteen groups.

Here I was in this group where there was this person who looked friendly, vibrant and very outspoken. I was suddenly caught in this 'catch 22' situation where I was not sure if I should refer to this person as 'he' or 'she'. 'He' then said 'Oh no papa Jabu don't worry – call me whatever you like, I know what people think of me. I don't take offence. But I would like you to know I am a girl and there is my girlfriend over there'. I felt very sad with myself but pretended to be comfortable. It was the first time someone politely expressed such information that sunk into my deep thoughts and this changed our task at hand. I started asking very personal questions and raised my perceptions and beliefs about gay and lesbian people. Sweeto, this young lesbian from the East Rand made me comfortable and confident about asking questions and

An eye-opening moment

politely and convincingly gave me insights about being lesbian.

I could feel my past traditional behaviours, practices and teachings being erased by each moment Sweeto engaged me in discussion. This was an eye-opening moment for me and I thankfully acknowledged and expressed my feelings and the value of that thirty-minute discussion. As a result I invited Sweeto and her partner to other events where they engaged people openly about gay and lesbian issues.

From that day or moment my approach, behaviour, and practices have changed. I believe I am now a gender activist and I have helped to change the mind-sets of other people including my peers.

The scourge of illegal initiation schools

Jabulani Makhoba Dlomo

Normally the traditional initiation process is not a topic for open discussion by just anyone. Only those who come from initiation schools have the authority to discuss this subject. However, through the Open Space created by Letsema the topic was somehow thrown open. Fortunately some influential traditional leaders were present at the Open Space, and I grabbed the opportunity to present challenges around traditional initiation practices and also some possible interventions.

Initiation malpractices have spread to become a serious problem throughout the Vaal-Sedibeng region and its surrounding townships. Gangsters use the traditional initiation rituals for their own personal gain, violating every rule governing traditional initiation practices. This is why I refer to their promoting traditional malpractice.

Our communities are under siege by the gangsterism that dominates our schools, streets and homes, and these gangsters are graduates of the illegal initiation schools. The community is broken and divided, angry and frustrated. Police and traditional leaders cannot seem to have a positive influence on the gangs that run these illegal initiation schools as they themselves have contributed largely to the formation of these gangs.

The gangs are spread across the Vaal and each location and zone has one or two rival gangs. In Evaton and Sebokeng alone there are five main gangs – the Mambas, Alaskas, BBFs, KM, and Wrong Turn. The gang members are teenagers in and out of school. On average there are two or more gangs in one school. This results in violence in schools. Some teenagers drop out of school from fear, others are suspended,

others are expelled, others are arrested and some run away from home.

The main reasons these young men resort to gangsterism are firstly to form a defence unit, secondly to become a fearsome group and thirdly to establish themselves as untouchable as they open illegal initiation schools. Armed with pangas, knives, and guns, these young men eliminate whatever comes their way. Even the police do not arrest them or enter their territories. When these young men are on fire community members remain behind closed doors no matter the time of day.

These gangsters abduct young boys, especially boys from families headed by single women or grannies, and take them by force to the illegal initiation schools. They target teenagers from top class families and demand huge amounts of money as ransom. When families refuse to pay, the abducted teenagers are assaulted, stabbed, starved, or beaten. Some children have died during these abductions, and the whereabouts of others are still unknown.

In May, June, July and December boys are not free to move around, as they fear being abducted. Some abductions take place from schools. There have been lots of meetings convened by police and other government departments and by traditional leaders but these have not brought any results.

Soon after the Letsema Open Space three important meetings followed between the traditional leadership and myself. These meetings resulted in our partnering to fight the initiation malpractices. Letsema had broken the barriers and everyone was comfortable to raise an opinion or openly challenge these practices.

My friend and colleague Mabochocho and I took the risk. We said we cannot find a solution for this scourge unless we involve the two main stakeholders: the gangsters and the victims. We started to plan such a meeting.

We were confident enough to engage and consult the leadership of various gangs, meeting them in their territories, talking their language, seeking to understand why they formed these gangs and highlighting to them the consequences and results of their behaviours. We held three to four meetings per gang.

Within three months – from March to May 2015 – we managed to disband two gangs – BBF and Mambos through consultation meetings.

We convened a meeting on Sunday 24 May 2015 to discuss and resolve the scourge of initiation malpractices in the region. The participants included three gangs, traditional practitioners, victims, community members, police and other community based organisations. We prepared each gang on the mood and intention of the meeting. The gangs committed to the course and we won their trust. We had explained the purpose to them carefully and we had agreed on strict ground rules – that everyone should speak through the chairperson, that no vulgar words would be used, that there would be no intimidation, no defensive or attacking statements.

The meeting is to be held in an isolated area of Evaton West Extension 4, in a hall that has been vandalised but is still used by the local community for various events including weddings and church services.

The day of the meeting arrives. It is a warm and windy winter's day. The roads are busy, people are walking from all directions, some going to church, dressed in colourful church uniforms, some in suits, some going to social club meetings in colourful uniforms. Young men gamble on street corners. Teenagers selling cigarettes whistle at passing pedestrians and motorists.

The meeting is scheduled to start at 12:30. But by 12:15 the congregation of the Church, which uses the hall, is still worshipping. There are by now 300 plus people outside the hall ready to attend the meeting. The congregation soon vacates the hall and community members help us to set up the seats as per instructions from my colleague and myself.

Around 12:45 people are still milling around the hall. The chairs have been arranged. There are 15 chairs x 4 divided by 50 chairs in between. We have invited 15 members from each of the three gangs, and 15 victims. The other chairs are for community members, traditional leaders and police.

As I wait outside to welcome special guests, the gangs and victims, a Kombi suddenly enters the gates. It is the victims. I request someone to escort them to their seats in the hall. My colleague signals to me that

the three gangs were five minutes away from the hall. I quickly run into the hall and ask the pastor to get things started with hymns.

Now the big moment had arrived. For the three of us from Letsema who had organised this meeting – Radikeledi Letuma, Mabochocho and I - our emotions are tense. However, we cannot show this to the audience.

After the pastor opens with hymns, we the three organisers from Letsema make a presentation detailing the challenges and the journey thus far. Our presentation sets the mood and encourages everyone in the hall not to stigmatise anyone, but to offer solutions to prevent the scourge.

Following our presentation there are questions and inputs from the audience. This breaks the ice and tension in the hall. Five of the fourteen victims present share their experiences with the audience. Here are testimonies of three:

My son was fifteen years old when he disappeared from home. He was missing for three weeks. I soon learnt he was abducted by the Alaska gang. When I traced him police could not assist me. Some gang members from another gang offered to help find my son if I gave them R 2 500. I agreed just to get my son back. But I only had R 1 000. I promised to pay the balance when they brought back my son. Four days after paying R 1 000 I received a call to come and get my son. I was so excited and relieved. I took my friend to the place I was to pick up my son. To my dismay I found only his clothes, full of blood, and I knew what had happened. He had been murdered during the fight between his abductors and the gang that tried to rescue him. No one has been charged or punished for my son's death to this day.

My seventeen-year-old son has been missing since 9 December 2012. He was last seen at an illegal initiation school which was set alight by police. I have been sent from pillar to post but I don't know where my son is. Please tell me where my son is, whether he

is dead or what. Tell me so I can get closure.

My sixteen-year-old son went missing on 4 December 2014. I learnt he was abducted by some young men. On the 12 December my son called me asking me to bring R2 000 so that he can be initiated fully and properly. I asked him where I was going to get the money as I did not even have a mere R 20. He said if I did not pay in five days he would be killed. I pleaded with him to plead with his abductors not to kill him. I was going to ask my mom to go to the loan sharks. I asked him where he was but he could not tell me. I could not raise the money in five days. After two weeks I was called to the police mortuary and told that my son was found lying in a pool of blood along the N1 road. When my mom (his granny) got the news she had a heart attack and died. Now two of my close family members had died.

At this point the woman giving this testimony bursts into tears. Everyone in the room stands up and starts singing hymns. The pastor then prays and asks everyone else to pray. The mood changes. There is grief and sorrow. The young men gangsters are also remorseful, some crying, some with their heads between their legs, others looking down.

Each gang is then asked to present its case in response to what has been said thus far. A young man from the BBF gang says, “Ke kopa tshwarelo, ke kopa tshwarelo ke a kopa hle hle batswadi ba ka” (Please forgive me, please forgive me I beg of you my parents). He cries loudly, showing real remorse. Then all the young men from BBF join him and say from that day they commit not to engage in anything that has to do with initiation schools and violence, that they are giving away their weapons.

The other gang members just cry and request to be excused to go home as they could not bear to see parents crying that much. However, we remind them that they had made a commitment that they were going to talk about what they have done in society. Then two gangsters from the Wrong Turn and BBF stand up and tell the audience about the bad

things they have done and that their actions were motivated by revenge, hunger for power and money.

We then plead with everyone present to embrace the gangsters and support them to heal. As a result two support groups are established in that meeting – one for the gangs and the other for the victims.

This gathering bore good fruit. Since this gathering the three schools most affected by these gangs -Dinokaneng Secondary School, Moshate Secondary School and Crystal Springs School - have not reported violent incidents related to gangs.

The BBFs have since disbanded and the members were placed in various extra-mural activities and some have gone back to school. I can celebrate that some gangsters are on their way to becoming change agents in their various communities.

I am really grateful to Letsema for creating safe spaces that break through barriers allowing all stakeholders to participate fully in issues affecting community members without stigmatising any one. This has brought confidence to me and my colleagues.

Forgiveness brings healing and peace

Eunice Lehlaha

(translated from Sesotho by Jackie Mondl)

My name is Eunice Ntu Lehlaha. I am 29 years old and I am excited and looking forward to turning 30 next year. I live in Evaton, in the Vaal. I live with my three boys and my husband. My firstborn is 10 years old, the second is nine and the lastborn is three years old. I love them so much, they complete my life. I really love spending time with them because they amuse me. I am unemployed. I spend most of my time cleaning the house and cooking so that there is something to eat for the children when they come back from school.

One day earlier this year, Carol invited me to hear about what was happening at Letsema. When I arrived, I was received with love and people were laughing with me. So much love! We sat down and they told me I was welcome and that I must feel free.

I like attending Letsema workshops. I love being there. Even my husband says: 'You get quite excited when you go to these workshops as if you get paid.' I just say to him, 'I just love to volunteer and I like being there because I get time to meet with other people and talk and laugh.' I forget about things that bring me pain. They teach us that you must love yourself before you can love another person. They also guide us on the things we should and should not do. I am happy with the love I get there. We support each other.

Wow! There is so much love there and so much respect between young and old people. The older people show us the way and we also show them things from our perspective.

Oh! I forget to mention that we even have gay and lesbian people. Before coming to Letsema, I used to ask myself questions wonder-

ing what kind of people gays and lesbians were and how they lived. I would notice that they were loving and friendly but I was not sure about whether I would be comfortable with them. Fortunately I met them here at Letsema and realised that they are people just like us. I got an opportunity to speak to them and I learnt that they love who they are and they are always smiling and now I have made friends with them. We have one gay guy in our group, his name is Nathi. He is so funny, loving and I am free to talk to him.

I am in the Drug and Alcohol group where we talk to schoolchildren and church groups about substance abuse. We have helped many people and we continue to help many others. The first time I worked with the group we went to a school and had a meeting with the principal. We told him about our work. He was happy to hear about what we do and he told us he had to talk to his staff and would call us to set a date for us to talk to the learners. We were happy with his response. Days went by and we received a phone call telling us to come to the school.

It was a cold day in July and everyone was freezing but we went ahead. I thought it was not going to happen because it was cold. One learner admitted he was using dagga (marijuana) and alcohol. He said using these substances helped him not to join gangsters. As we were talking I felt like it was getting warmer because the learners were opening up and asking questions. They also shared their reasons for smoking - such as parents fighting and so they smoked to relieve stress. Others said it was due to peer pressure. One boy who used to smoke dagga and was now smoking nyaope (a dangerous street drug) asked us to help him. We took him to SANCA (South African National Council on Alcoholism & Drug Dependence). He is still going there and he is much better now.

I enjoy this work a lot and I enjoy working with my colleagues because we are always laughing and we are always there for each other. I want to see Letsema growing more than this. You know, Letsema does not discriminate, whoever you are and wherever you come from, you are welcome here.

Letsema taught me to be a leader in a different way. I can talk to peo-

ple now about their problems. I refer people to where they can get help. Some people feel better after talking to me and they bring others to me. There was this lady who used to drink so much that she even forgot that she had a family and never had time for the family. One day I sat with her and we talked. She felt better and that made me feel happy. I feel so important that I am making a difference in my area.

Letsema's role in my life

I am a person today because of Letsema. We talk about our problems and support each other, we do not laugh at each other. I first came to Letsema when they had the World Café – where many people had come to discuss gender-based violence in the community. At the next meeting after this I felt loved and was given time to talk. For the first time I talked about my pain from the domestic violence I witnessed at home when I was a child which led to me not seeing my father for 18 years. I was free to say whatever I wanted and they did not judge me. They supported me, especially Carol, and I want to thank God for her.

I was not a happy child growing up because my father used to beat my mother. Before that, we were a happy family. My father used to take good care of his family and my mother as well. They cared for us as parents should care for their children. We got so much love from them. They did not want us to lack for anything.

One Sunday, we were sitting at home having supper with my mother. My father came in and went to the fridge to get cold water to drink. When he finished drinking he threw the cold water on my mother's head. The water flowed into her food. My mother asked him, "Why are you throwing water at me?" We all cried with my mother.

I asked myself why my father would do something like that. We were small and with no power to do anything. I looked at my mother and my brother and saw the hurt on their faces. When I looked at my father, I saw wrath. I lost my appetite and left my food on the table. I took a cloth and wiped my mother, threw away my mother's food, which was full of water and wiped the floor. There was silence in the house. No one

was talking. My heart was bleeding. We were afraid of going to sleep because of what we had seen but my mother said, 'my children it is time to go to sleep'. She said this with a smile on her face trying to hide the pain she was feeling. We went to sleep.

The next day my mother woke us to bath and go to school. She was smiling as if nothing had happened the night before but in my heart I could see that she was humiliated and hurting. I was very sad at school wondering how my mother was doing at work. I did not play with my friends and when they asked me what was wrong I told them I was not feeling well. I could see that they were not happy because I was not happy.

That was the beginning of my father beating up my mother. He was angry all the time. My mother and I were always visiting people, to avoid being at home with an angry person. We would only come back when it was time for my mother to cook supper. My father would fight over the smallest things. My mother could not sleep because my father kept a knife under his pillow.

My mother started losing weight and eventually she became ill but not bedridden. She tried by all means to keep us happy. She baked cakes and bought us clothes but the happiness we used to have at home was gone. We were only happy when my mother was at home. We were never happy when my father was there. My brother would talk to my father and I would get angry. I asked my brother why he was even talking to that person. My mother noticed that we were fighting. She sat us down and told us to love each other in good and bad times. She also said I must not hate my father. But the only words that have remained with me to this day is my mother saying that my brother and I should love each other.

My mother became so sick that she was no longer able to go to work. She couldn't even bathe herself. My father would leave for work without giving her food or water. After school I would bathe my mother, feed her and give her pills. I would stay with her all the time. Even at night I kept checking on her.

Even when my mother was ill, my father always kept the knife un-

der his pillow. Her condition worsened and she was taken to hospital, which is where her life ended.

When I heard that my mother had left us, I did not cry at all because I had seen it coming. My mother was buried and after the funeral my father said he would not be able to take care of us and that my mother's people must take us. I was eleven years old and my brother was ten. We went to live with my mother's people. They brought us up with love until we became adults. Throughout this period I did not see my father. It had been 18 years since I last saw him but my brother used to go to see him.

After talking to my colleagues at Letsema I took a step to see my father. I had to break this wall. It was so hard for me to face him, this monster. I had to forgive him so that I could go on with my life. I went to him but he was not expecting me. He was happy and embarrassed at the same time. I was happy and that was how we started talking to each other again.

Carol was very happy when she heard this news. Letsema has played a significant role in my life.

Ho tshwarela ho tlisa phodiso le khotso

Eunice Lehlaha

My name is Eunice Ntu Lehlaha. I am 29 years old and I am excited and looking forward to turning 30 next year. I live in Evaton, which is in the Vaal. I live with my three boys and my husband. My first boy is 10 years old, the second is nine and the last-born is three years old. I love them so much, they complete my life. Ke rata ho dula le bona haholo hobane ba ya qabola. Ha ke sebetse, ka nako e ngata ke dula ke kolomaka hape ke pheha hae hore bana ba thole dijo ha ba khutla sekolong.

Ke ile ka bitswa ke Carol hore ke tle ke tlo utlwa hore ho etsahalang Letsema. Ha ke fihla ke ile ka thola lerato, ba tsheha le nna, lerato le le kalo hle. Re ile ra dula fatshe ba ile ba re ho nna ke amohelehile, I must feel free.

Ke rata le ho ya Letsema diworkshopong. Ke thabela ho ba moo. Ha ke patalwe empa ke rata ho ba teng. Le ntate ka tlung o fumane a re, “ha o tshwarehe ha o ya diworkshopong e ka re wa patalwa.” I just say to him, “I just love to volunteer,” and ke rata ho ba moo hobane ke thola nako ya ho kopana le batho ba bang re bue, re tshehe. Ke lebala ka dintho tse nkutlwisang bohloho. Ba re ruta hore o tlameha ho ithata pele o ka rata motho o mong. Le dintho tse o tlamehang ho di etsa le tseo o sa tlamehang. Lerato leo ke le tholang, we support each other.

Tjo! Lerato le moo bo na le batho ba baholo le babanyane re ya hlomphana ha re tellane. Batho ba baholo ba re bontsha tsela, le rona re ya ba bontsha.

Itjoo ke lebala ho le jwetsa hore re na le di-gay le di-lesbian. Ke ne ke ipotsa hore di-gay le di-lesbian ke batho ba jwang, ba phela jwang.

They are loving mara ha ke ne ke ba bona ne ke dula ke bona ba le friendly, ba tsheha and ke ne ke ipotsa hore nna nka kgona ho bua le bona ke dule le bona and ka lucky ka kopana le bana mona Letsema. Ka bona e le batho jwalo ka rona ka thola monyetla wa ho bua le bona and they love that love who they are and they are always smiling and now I have made friends with them and we have one gay in our group, his name is Nathi. Yoh, hle he is so funny, loving and free to talk to.

Nna ke groupung ya Alcohol and Drug Abuse moo re buang ka ho abuse-a dintho tse le ho di etsa ka tsela e wrong. Groupung e ke leng ho yona, Drug And Alcohol, re bua le bana ba dikolo le dikereke re ba jwetsa ka dithithifatsi tsena. Ke rata haholo ho sebetsa le bona haholo, ho na le batho bao re ba thusitseng le bao re ntse re ba tshusa.

Ho qala ha ka ho sebetsa le group ena re ile ra ya sekolong. Ha re fihla re fihletse ho mosuwehloho wa sekolo, ra fihla ra dumedisa mme ra me jwetsa hore re tlile ka eng. O ne a thabile haholo ha a utlwa hore re tlile ka eng, mme o ile a re o sa ile ho bua le staff first and he will call us, o tla etsa letsatsi re tle. Hai, re ile ra thaba ho utlwa tseo. Matsatsi a ile a feta mme ra thola founu e tswang ho mosuwehloho a re jwetsa hore re ka tla sekolong sa hae.

It was cold July weather and everyone was freezing. I thought it was not going to happen because it was cold. One student admitted that he was using dagga and alcohol and he said that using these substances helped him not to join gangsters. As we were talking I felt like it was getting warmer because the learners were opening up and asking questions. They also shared their reasons for smoking such as parents fighting and so they smoke to relieve stress, others said it was due to peer pressure. One boy who used to smoke dagga and was now smoking nyaope asked us to help him. We took him to SANCA (South African National Council on Alcoholism & Drug Dependence). He is still going there and he is much better now.

Ke rata haholo ho sebetsa le batho bao ke sebetsang le bona. Re dula re tsheha and we are always there for each other. Ke rata ho bona Letsema le hodile ho feta mona. Ho le be le diworkshop tse ngata. You know Letsema ka le kgethe hore o mang o tswa kae o amohelehile mona.

Letsema taught me to be a leader in a different way. I can talk to people now about their problems. I refer people to where they can get help. Some people feel better after talking to me and they bring others to me. There was this lady who used to drink so much that she even forgot that she had a family and never had time for the family. One day I sat with her and we talked. She felt better and that made me feel happy. I feel so important that I am making a difference in my area.

Karolo ya Letsema bophelong ba ka

Ke motho kajeko ke ka Letsema. Re ya bua mme re tshehetsane ha re tshenane. Ke tlile ha one e kare e ne e le World Café but then ka kgutla ka thola lerato ka fuwa nako ya ho bua for the first time about the domestic violence and abuse I witnessed at home when I was growing up, which led to my not seeing my father for eighteen years. I was free to say whatever I wanted to say and they did not judge me. They supported me, haholoholo Carol and I want to thank God for her. This group has supported me a lot.

Ke ne ke se ngwana a thabileng ho holeng ha ka hobane ntate waka o ne a rata ho shapa mme waka. Re ne re le lapa le thabileng. Ntate waka o ne a hlokomela lelapa la hae ha mmoho le mme waka. Ba ne ba re hlokomela jwalo ka bana bona. Lerato le ne re le thola ho bona ba ne ba sa batle hore re hloke dintho ne re tshwana le bana ba bang.

Ka tsatsi le leng e ne e le Sontaha re dutse le mme re ja, ntate o ne a le siko re ne re ja dijo tsa bosiu. Ntate o ile a kena a re thola re ntse re ja o ile a ya sehatsetsing a ntsha metsi a batang a nwa. Ha a qeta a tshela mme ka metsi a batang hlohong. Metsi ao a tshela dijo tsa mme. Mme o ile a re ho yena “hobaneng o ntshela ka metsi?” re ile ra lla le Mme.

Ke ne ke ipotsa hore hobaneng ntate a ka etsa ntho e tje. Re ne re le banyane re sena matla. Ka sheba Mme ka sheba ngwana heso wa moshemane ka bona bohloko difahlehong tsa bona. E itse ha ke sheba Ntate ka bona ho halefa. Ke ile ka siya dijo tsa ka tafoleng ka kgora. Ka nka lesela ka phumula Mme, ka qhala dijo tsa Mme tse nang le metsi ha ke qeta ka phumula fatshe yaba ho ya thola ka tlung ho sena motho

ya buang. Pelo ya ka e le bohloko e rotha madi. Re ne re tshaba le ho robala re tshaba ntho e re e boneng. Mme o ile a re bana ba ka ke nako ya ho robala ka pososelo sefahlehong sa hae a pata bohloko bo a bo utlwieng. Re ile ra tsamaya ho ilo robala.

Ka la hosane Mme a re tsosa hore re hlape re ye sekolong. Ka Mantaha a ntse a bososela ekare maobane ha wa etsahala letho empa pelong ya ka ke bona feela hore o swabile hape o utlwile bohloko. Tsatsi leo la Mantaha sekolong ke ne ke sa thaba ke ipotsa hore na Mme o jwang mosebetsing. Ke ne ke sa bapale le metswalle yaka jwale ka kamehla ha ba mpotsa ka re ha ke monate kajeno. Ke ba bona hore ha ba thaba le nna ke sa thaba.

Yaba Ntate o qadile ka ho shapa Mme. Ntate o ne a dula a kwatile ka nako tsohle nna le Mme re ne re dula re tsamaya re etela batho hore feela re seke ra dula ka tlung le motho ya kwatileng. Re ne re kguthla ha Mme a tlo pheha dijo tsa bosiu. Ntate o ne a lwanela le ntho e nyane. Mme o ne a sa robale hobane Ntate o ne a se a samela thipa.

Mme o ile a theoaha mmeleng hanyane hanyane a qetella a se a kula empa a kula a tsamaya. Mme o ne a etsa ka hohle-hohle hore re dule re thabile o ne a re etsetsa dikuku tse ngata a re rekele diaparo empa lethabo lane re ne re le phela ka tlung le ne le fedile. Re ne re thaba ha Mme a le teng feela ka tlung. Ha Ntate a le teng ne e sa thabe, ngwana heso ke ena a ne a buwa le Ntate jwale ka qala ka kwatela ngwana heso hore hobaneng a bua le motho oo. Mme o ile a bona hore re ya lwana o le a re dudisa fatshe a re re ratane bobeng le monateng, ke se ke ka hloya Ntate empa lentswe le dutseng la Mme ke kajeno ke hore nna le ngwana heso re ratane.

Mme o ile a kula hoo a sa a sa ye mosebetsing. Ntate o ne a mo siya moo a sa je a sa nwe metsi le ho hlapa a sa hlape. Ha ke ne ke kgutla sekolong ke ne ke tshela metsi, ke hlapisa Mme ke mo jese ke mo fe dipilisi. Ke ne ke dula le yena ka nako tsohle le bosiu ke ne ke mo sheba.

Le ha Mme a se a kula Ntate o ne a dula a behile thipa ka tlasa mosamo. Mme o ile a kula a ya sepetlele moo bophelo ba hae bo ileng ba fel-la teng. E itse ha ke utlwa hore Mme o se a re siile ha ka lla ha etsa nix hobane ke bone hore Mme o tsamaile a le jwang. Mme o ile a patwa ka

mora lefu Ntate o ile a re yena ha ha no kgona ho re hlokomela ba habo Mme ba re nke. Dilemo tsa ka di ne di le11, tsa ngwana heso di le10. Re ile ra dula ha bo Mme ba re hodisa ka lerato ho fihlela re ba baholo.

Nako e na kaofela ke ne ke sa batle ho bona Ntate. It's been 18 years since I last saw him but my brother used to go to see him but after some years. Moraho ha ho bua ka taba ena workshopong ya Letsema, I took a step hore ke ilo bona Ntate, I had to break this wall. It was so hard for me to face him, this monster. Ke ne ke tlamehile ho mo tshwarela hore ke tswele pele ka bophelo ba ka. Ke ile ka ya ho yena o ne a sa lebella hore ke tla fihla o ne a thabile hape a swabile le nna ke ile ka thaba ya ba ho qala ha rona ho buisana ho fihlela kajeno.

Carol o ne a thabile ho utlwa taba tseo. Letsema le bapetse ntho e kgolo bophelong ba ka.

Who I was is not who I am now

Lebohang Ramahole

I am a very smart person who likes to communicate with people. I love people. I am a gay person – a man who is sexually interested in the same gender/sex. I was born in 1994 in Boipatong Clinic to a single mother. When my little brother was born in 1999 that was when I realised I am not like other boys, that I am gay.

I am kind, lovely, smiley and flexible. Some see me as an attention seeker and I don't blame them. I am a person of his own thinking. I have skills and thoughts. I like to laugh a lot. I feel like a Queen of my own country. I do whatever I want the way I want.

The first time I heard about Letsema was when someone at work told me there would be a workshop at our workplace. I couldn't understand what she was trying to say. On the day of the workshop the Letsema people were late and I thought they were not coming. But we waited and they arrived. Once they started the workshop I felt like I fit in here. There was no wrong or right answer. Everyone participated happily. The LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Inter-sexed) people from Letsema were free and I thought if they are free why can't I be free.

Later my colleague Noxolo asked me if I wanted to go to the Letsema Open Space. I said, 'Oh yes please!' At the Open Space I found myself participating, expressing my feelings and my heart told me this is where I belong.

Letsema is a group of community people who share the same ideas and goals – to bring gender-based violence to 0%. Letsema brought people together in action groups and a Core Group. Many of these peo-

ple had never met before. There is this Sesotho saying *Le ha re ka arohana dipelo tsona di teane* – meaning that even if we are separated our hearts are joined together.

Bringing GBV to 0% seems so hard but when you are with Letsema you just draw ideas, you think out of the box and you figure out solutions. You hear others' options and opinions and then you tackle the issue.

It is important to reduce GBV to 0% because our nation, our people, our parents, our children are being destroyed by violence. We would like to see youth and elders saying, 'No to children abuse, No to women abuse, and No to insulting LGBTI people – they are people like us, they are breathing like us'.

Letsema does not have a boss, there are no leaders. The leader is you. At Letsema we have pastors among us, care givers among us, auxiliary social workers, former football players and businesswomen. We come from different areas of the Vaal and from different organisations. We engage with other NGOs.

After attending the Open Space, I decided to work with school children to make them aware of LGBTI issues. I was aware that loveLife had access to schools and I started to visit schools with a loveLife staff member. I spoke to the school children about LGBTI issues. I gave them information and I asked them what they wanted to know about LGBTI issues. I answered their questions no matter how silly, with confidence and dignity. Being so proud that I was doing this not just for me but also for the gay learners at this school, who like me when I was a learner, might not be able to answer these questions by themselves. Now I am an answer to all questions.

In February 2015 we as Letsema convened a World Café - a large gathering of community members - to see how traditional initiation schools can contribute to creating 0% GBV. It was a very challenging day. Different people, different gangs, many traditional healers, the police and NGOs attended. It was a day to talk to traditional healers and ask about things like why are new initiates carrying weapons and creating violence. One traditional healer arrived with two chameleons and a

very big snake around his neck. People were scared to come near him. A policeman talked to him to remove those animals because people were afraid. He took his animals to his car and came back to participate in the meeting. Community members asked him why he carried these dangerous animals. People communicated freely about issues taking place in the community.

We recently held an Auction Day where we learnt to draw up proposals to donors who can help us with funding so that we can move to a higher level, and can be recognised and spread information to the whole of South Africa. We blew balloons, made fantastic drawings and put ribbons on the wall. I felt good because we were able to tell the action groups about our plans as the Core Group. It was a creative day of colour and joy – we felt like we were being taken back to preschool!

Letsema changed my whole life. I used to want to fight, strangle and kill people when they asked me about being gay or why I am gay. I had the information but did not know how to deliver it. I did not know how to respond or how to explain my own personal lifestyle. It was like I did not know who I was.

When I wanted to do something like wear a dress or buy high heel shoes – when someone came to me and said, ‘this dress is nice but only if you had breasts it would be beautiful on you,’ I could not take this. It was like I had no self-control.

Letsema changed my attitude towards my friends, neighbours, colleagues as well as my family. When they want to know more about me I can tell them what kind of person I am and now they understand me better than they did before.

Letsema made me strong enough to stand on my own. After attending Letsema I felt special, like I belonged. I wish I had attended Letsema while I was still at school, because school was where I was dissed and asked about my gay lifestyle. I would have been able to answer all the questions and tell those boys off – those boys who stigmatised me and who said that gays are not made by God and that there is no such thing in the Bible. It hurt me so badly that I could not speak for myself. I was powerless.

Staying in Letsema is like a beehive with no bees in it. Here you need to be controlled by no one but yourself. You are your own boss. Everybody is equal. Letsema makes me express my feelings and learn from others, which is a good thing for all of us. I can be listened to at Letsema when I have something to share. I can speak my mind when I have problems.

Letsema has helped us all to have the courage to talk and spread information. I am proud to be who I am today and I will be proud forever.

The truth I learnt at Letsema

Flatta Mqwati

(translated from Sesotho by Jackie Mondli)

My name is Flatta Violet Mqwati. I was born in Sebokeng on 15 July 1978, the last born in my family. I am 37 years old. I have two sons.

We live in Evaton. It is a beautiful place. I have been living there for about four years and I have never heard of serious law-breaking. The area has different types of housing including shacks, and there are many kinds of people.

One day, a few months ago, I was sitting at home in the dark with no electricity and because we usually have load shedding, I thought the power would be back after four hours or so. But four hours turned into days and the days into weeks. In fact, we ended up without electricity for a whole month. It was really difficult especially for our children who go to school. We had to use candles and paraffin stoves, which are dangerous for our children. Our clothes smelled of paraffin fumes. It was very dangerous for people who go to work early in the morning as they could be mugged and lose their belongings in the dark. We could not even charge our phones, which was risky because how would we call for help in case of emergencies?

We took a decision, as neighbours, to call Eskom but we did not get any help. We called day in and day out. They promised to come but the sun would set without them coming.

I had learnt a lot from Letsema workshops. I learnt to discuss matters with people when there are problems. So my neighbour and I called a community meeting to discuss the problem we were experiencing with lack of electricity. We discussed the matter and agreed to have a peaceful march to Eskom but I advised them that we should not involve

the police in our march and also limit the number of people marching.

Heeding the words of the Sesotho idiom, 'Mmangwana o tshwara thipa ka bohaleng - A mother holds the sharp edge of a knife' - which means a woman will do anything for her family, we suggested that twenty women should march to the Eskom offices as they would be able to present our problems well.

On the set date, the agreed number of women marched to Eskom. We walked for about two hours to get there. When we arrived we asked to speak to the person in charge. Fortunately, he was there and we talked to him and explained our difficulties. He listened and promised to send people to restore our electricity. Indeed, it happened. They came and sorted out the problem and the electricity was restored. Marching helped us a lot because we have electricity today.

Meeting Letsema

I am very grateful to Letsema because they have helped me a lot. My friend invited me to Letsema. I used to work for a security company called Safe-Guard which used to provide services for Shoprite. My contract ended after four years and I was at home.

One day I was frantically busy with my housework, when one of my friends, Lindiwe, came around and invited me to attend a Letsema workshop. I went with her to see what was happening. I found myself in a strange place with strange people but after a few hours I understood where I was and got to know the people at the workshop.

I went home having gained some knowledge. Before this I did not know the meaning of those words 'gender-based violence' but after some days and weeks of attending Letsema workshops, I got to know what those words meant and I understood them.

Before attending Letsema workshops I was a person who was easily angered. I would shout at my children. I had a lot of anger. When my child made a mistake I would just hit him. I thought that was the correct way of disciplining him but that is not the case. Disciplining a child is talking to him in an appropriate manner. That is what I have learnt at

Letsema. I now talk to my children without shouting at them and there is a pleasant atmosphere in the house.

I am now able to resolve matters among people before seeking help. In the past when my neighbour told me about her problems I would get irritated and ask myself, 'why is she telling me this?' I would think to myself 'this is none of my business, she is irritating me'. Even when I heard a neighbour fighting with her husband, I would think, 'it's fine, let them fight'. But now, after attending Letsema workshops I help my neighbours when they have problems. I am even able to help my community.

We have soccer grounds where tournaments are held in December. It becomes festive and the children have a lot of fun. The tournaments keep them off the streets and away from mischief. One day at the sports grounds my neighbour and I saw some men selling nyaope (a street drug). We informed the community. This was very dangerous because our children play in those grounds and the men would use children to sell their nyaope. As a community we decided to call the police. The police were helpful and worked with us to address this problem, because it is such activities that bring violence to our communities.

With the help of the police, everything is now back to normal and those men are gone. Our children can now play safely. The police also sent the Community Policing Forum to patrol the area and so we are all safe now.

Nnete eo ke ithutileng yona ho Letsema

Flatta Mqwati

Lebitso la ka ke Flatta Violet Mqwati. Ke hlahile ka 15 July 1978, ke na le dilemo tse 37. Ke hlahetse tulong e bitswang Sebokeng. Ke ngwana wa ho qetela lapeng. Ke na le bara ba babedi.

Re dula Evaton. Ke tulo en ntle haholo. Ke na le dilemo tse ka bang nne ke dula tulong eo, ha ke so utlwi ka botlokotsebe bo teng. Tulong eo ke dulang ho yona ho dula mefuta e mengata ya batho. Ke tulo e nang le matlo a fapaneng jwale ka mekhukhu.

Ke ne ke dutse hae ka tlung e lefifi ho sena motlakase ka hore ho hlola ho ba le loadshedding ke ne ke nahana hore ke yona hobane yona e nka dihora tse ka bang nne empa ho ile ha feta dihora tseo ya e ba matsatsi le dibeke. Hantlehantle ho ile ha qetella hose ho entse kgwedi. Seka ha bana ba ya dikolong ho ile ha ba le bothata ha hore re sebedise dikerese e leng seo e le kotsi baneng ba rona le ho sebedisa ditofa tsa paraffini. Diaparo di nka paraffine le mehala ya rone re ne re sa kgone ho e sebedisa hobane re sa kgone hore re charge-e mehala ya rona e ne e le kotsi hobane ha o ka etsahala hore ho bane le kotsi re tlo etsa jwang ha re sa kgone ho sebedisa mohala.

Re ile ra nka bohato re le baahisane hore re founele Eskom empa re sa thole thuso. Re ne re founa letsatsi le letsatsi, ba re tshepisa ho tla empa letsatsi le be le dikele ba sa tle.

Ke ne ke se ke ithutile tse ngata ho Letsema; ho buisana le batho, hore ha o na le bothata o kgone ho jwetsa moahisane wa hao le tlo buisana le community e haufi le wena ka bothata bo leng teng hara community. Ke ile ka etsa kopano le community ra buisana ka bothata boo re shebaneng le bona ba ho hloka motlakase.

Re ile ra buisana ka hore re etse peaceful march ho ya Eskom empa ke ile ka ba hlalose tsa hore march ya rona e be e sa kopantshe maponesa re tlamehile hore re etse kopano re buisane hore ho tla ea boMme ba ka bang 20 ka palo.

Se ka Sesotho se re, “Mmangwana o tshwara thipa ka bohaleng,” ho bolelang hore Mme o kgona ho buwa hantle. Jwale, re ile ra dumellana, ra etsa letsatsi ho ya dikantorong tsa Eskom.

Re ile ra ya jwalo palo e baduweng ya bomme ba yang moo, re ile ra tsamaya dihora tse kabang pedi ho fihla teng. Re ile ra kopa ho buisana le moetapee le ka lehlohonolo re ile ra mo thola ra buisana le yena ra mo hlalose tsa bothata ba rona. O ile a bo utlwisisa ebile a re tshepisa ho romella batho ho tla re lokisetsa motlakase. Ho ile ha ba jwalo ba tla ho re lokisetsa motlakase. Hobane ho hloka motlakase ho kotsi haholo bakeng sa bana ba rona le batho ba yang mosebetsing hoseng ha ho le lefifi ba tshwaruwa poho ba nkelwa dintho tsa bona. Ho etsa march ho re thusitse haholo hobane kajeno lena ntse re na le motlakase.

Ho kopana le Letsema

Ke leboha haholo Letsema hobane le nthusitse haholo. E mong wa metswalle ya ka o ile a mmema hore ke tle Letsema. Ke ile ka sebeletsa Company ya security e bitswang Safe-Guard e neng e sebeletsa Shoprite. Ka moraho ha dilemo tse nne mosebetsi o ile wa fela ka dula hae.

E ‘lare ke dutse hae ka tlung ke le maphathephate ha fihla e mong motswalle wa ka e leng Lindiwe a mmemela ho ya le yena workshopong ya bona e bitswang Letsema. Ke ile ka tsamaya le yena ho ya bona hore moo ho etsahalang. Ke ile ka iphumana ke le tulong eo ke sa e tsebeng ho kopana le batho bao ke sa ba tsebeng empa ka moraho ha dihoranyana tse itseng ka iphumana ke seke tseba hore ke ho kae ebile ke se ke tseba le batho ba neng ba le moo workshopong.

Ke tsamaile ho ya hae ke na le tsebo eo ke neng ke sa e tsebe ka lentwe le bitswang gender-based violence. Ke ne ke sa le tsebe lentwe leo hore le bolelang empa ka moraho ha matsatsi le dibeke ke ile ka le

tseba ka be ka le utlwisisa.

Pele ke ba mo Letsema ke ne ke na le hokwata, ha ngwana a ka etsa phoso ke ne ke mo shapa ke bona e le tsela e hantle ya ho mo kgalema kathe ha ho jwalo ho kgalema ngwana ke ho buwa le yena ka tsela e nepahetseng. Ke seo ke ithutileng ka sona ho Letsema. Ke se ke kgona le ho buwa le bana ba ka Ka tlung ho se ho dula ho le monate.

Ke se ke kgona ho rarolla ditaba pakeng tsa batho pele ke kopa thusa. Pele ke ne ke le motho ya nang le ho kwata feela, ke omanya le bana ka tlung le moo ke dulang ha moahisane wa ka a na le bothata ha a njwetsa ke ne ke teneha ke re, “wa ntena ha se taba tsa ka ke tsa hae hobaneng a njwetsa?” Le ha ke utlwa moahisane a lwana le monna wa hae ke ne ke re ho lukile ha ba lwane. Empa ka moraho ha hore ke tsamaye workshop ya Letsema, le moo ke dulang teng le baahisane se ke kgona ho ba thusa ha ho na le bothata. Ke kgona le ho thusa community ya rona.

Tulong ya rona ho na le lebala la bolo ya maoto moo ho tshwar-elwang ditournaments tsa bolo ya maoto. Ditournament tsena di tshwarwa ka diholiday tsa December. Ho ba monate le bana ba kgona ho intsha bodutu teng ebile bolo e ntsha bana diterateng hore ba seke ba etsa botlokotsebe. Ka letsatsi le leng, lebaleng la bolo le pela mo ke dulang teng ho ne ho na le bo abuti ba dulang moo ba rekisang nyaope. Ke ile ka ba bona, ke ne ke tsamaya le e mong wa baahisane ba ka, re ile ra buwa le community ra ba tsebisa ka seo re se boneng se etsahala ra ba hlaloesetsa hore se o se etsahalang moo se kotsi haholo bakeng sa bana ba rona hobane ke moo ba bapallang teng qetellong ba tla be ba sebedisa bana ho ba rekisetsa nyaope eo ya bona. Re ile ra nahana hore re founele maponesa.

Re ile ra thola thuso ho tswa ho sepolesa ra sebedisana le sona ka bothata boo re shebaneng le bona hobane batho ba jwalo ke bona ba re tlišetsang violence tulong eo re dulang ho yona. Ka thuso ya mapolesa dintho di se di le hantle ebile ha ba sa le teng bo abuti bao le bana ba rona se re bona ba bolokehile ho bapala lebaleng la bolo ya maoto. Mapolesa a ile a re romella maCPF ho dula a patrolla ka moo le rona re se re bolokehile.

A stepping stone

Khethiwe Matumelo

I was born in Soweto at Orlando East. We lived in a two-roomed house with my family. There were 12 of us living in that house. Life was hard as my parents were not living together. I grew up with anger, more especially when other children would call their daddies. Knowing that mine is living somewhere without taking care of me and my sister. In Orlando my mom and her sister used to fight. My aunt would swear at me and my sister and call us names. We would be chased away and we would sleep outside, or sometimes in the toilet. But I was not aware that this was abuse.

As time passed we moved from Orlando to Mshenguville, a squatter camp in Mofolo Village which is where my mother erected a shack. Although life was hard I kept telling myself that one day everything will be okay. We stayed there for full three years - from 1986 to 1989. After that the government moved us to Orange Farm. That's where my mom got a stand. It's where we got a place called HOME.

As time passed I got myself a stand and built a house for my three beautiful children. I live there with my husband. So, one day I was sitting at home listening to the radio. I heard a lady saying there is a school in Evaton for unemployed people to do sewing, beadwork and tapestry. She gave her phone numbers and address. To my surprise it was right next door to where I live. The following day I came to register to do beads. That lady was Mamma Thandi from Vukani. I started to understand about different forms of abuse at Vukani because every Thursday we would chat with staff members about abuse.

2013 was the birth of Letsema. I am a member since then. I am

also in the Letsema Core Group. I joined because it is not like other organisations. Letsema is a safe space for women. People can share their ideas and learn different things. We teach people about how to create 0% gender-based violence (GBV). We get love and support from members. We have workshops where we teach one another about how to deal with these issues of violence. In other organisations you do not have a chance to talk. Here everyone is free to talk. There is no right or wrong answer. No one dominates. There is no one who is the boss. Men and women are equal. We are a family. We do things together. We are one!! What keeps me in Letsema is that I get knowledge and skills that I share with my community.

The first big Letsema event was the Open Space at the Saul Tsoetsi Sports Centre. People of all ages, NGOs, different organisations, participated. Everyone was free to talk their mind. Even the grannies took part and this made me proud. Our young brothers and sisters were free to talk to the grannies. Nobody was afraid to ask questions. We talked about how we can bring GBV to 0%. We also talked about teenage pregnancy, drugs and peer pressure. Some teenagers felt their elders must talk to them about sex. Others felt in our culture it is not the right thing to talk about sex.

After this, we had different World Cafes in different places - where we brought people from the community together to hear different opinions. We held these in Orange Farm, Evaton, Bophelong and Driezik. We then shared our experiences as Letsema.

At the Orange Farm World Café we invited the community, NGOs, teachers and police. We talked about GBV, drugs, alcohol and peer pressure. We shared our stories about GBV, bringing these stories from our daily lives into the open. Some were not aware that they were in abusive relationships. Letsema was an eye opener for them. We talked about how we can bring GBV down to 0% in our community.

Along the way as we were planning our meetings we were disturbed by the brutal killing of my friend Sarah, a lady known to the Letsema members. Sarah was brutally killed by her partner. It was Sunday the 10th May. It was Mother's Day. I was at home celebrating the day of

being a mother. At around ten to eight I received a call that my friend was brutally killed by her partner who had stabbed her 19 times. He had chased her out of the house, but he still followed her and brutally murdered her. I could not believe this because I had been with her earlier that day. Everything just turned sour. How could a woman be killed like that with 19 holes? It was as if he was opening imbawula (a brazier). How could this man do this to the mother of his children? She has left four small children behind. What type of monster is he?????

It was important for me to share this at our meeting as the Letsema Core Group the next day. Everybody was touched. We could not continue with our workshop because it was tense and painful for the rest of the day. As a mother and member of the community working in Letsema for 0% GBV I felt I am not doing enough. We took a moment and talked about Sarah as she was known to all of us at Letsema. We decided to organise a memorial walk for Sarah. To mourn her loss Sifuna ukuthi akuphele ngokuhlukunyezwa kwabantu besifazane kanye nezingane. Uma kukhona nobaba abangaphethwe kahle omama abaphumele obala (We want violence against women and children to end. If there are any men who are abused by women, they must come out into the open).

On the day of the walk, the Community Policing Forum joined the walk because Sarah was working in the youth desk of the Policing Forum. We were also joined by the community. We told people that our theme is black so that everyone could see we were mourning for our sister. We started our walk at SPAR and we ended at the spot where she died. The feeling was bad, it was tense.

This man is behind bars. Magogo and I managed to go to court. The case was postponed to 21 May. We plan to picket the court that there should be no bail for Sarah's partner. I have since learnt that he had stabbed Sarah not 19 but 45 times. What kind of monster does this?

Being in Letsema has helped me grow, to be the person I am today. I have changed a lot. Before, I was bitter and angry. Now I see myself as a responsible and powerful leader, a motivator. I know how to talk to other people. I know who I am and what I want from life. I stand tall to talk about GBV within my community. I can stand up and say enough

A stepping stone

is enough – no more women abuse!

I am now a leader in my community. I share the knowledge I get from Letsema workshops. I get women together to share ideas. We have opened a neighbourhood forum where we share our stories and teach our children about abuse and drugs.

Awareness campaign after a young mum's brutal murder by her husband

Sipho Boo

I am a resident of Evaton. I was born and schooled here. I played football in the surrounding locations and in some of the provinces. Gardening was one of our school activities, and after my last employment I kept myself busy with my vegetable garden.

I was told of Letsema by Magogo Zwane from the Veg garden group in Letsema. When I first came to Letsema I was impressed by the honesty, openness and free running of the organisation. I was attracted by the knowledge I gained every time I attended a workshop.

During Easter this year Letsema had an awareness campaign for 0% gender-based violence at the football grounds. We gathered at our centre with our flags. Then we marched to the soccer field. We were welcomed by the screams of the spectators. The fans of the contesting teams were dressed in different colours, blowing their Vuvuzelas, and cheering their teams. The atmosphere was tense and filled with excitement as everybody was expecting a win for his team.

Around the field was the smell of braaing, and the smoke of firecrackers. We unfolded our flags and walked around the ground for the crowd to see our flags for our campaign for non-violence. As we led the final contestants into the soccer field we heard the rumbling sound of applause from the crowd around the stadium. The fans were blowing their Vuvuzelas, playing drums, some were blowing whistles and others were ululating. We took our flags to the centre of the ground for everyone to see the message of our campaign for non-violence.

When the final moment came and the winners took the cup, we led them to the dressing rooms. We were happy, exhausted, excited and

satisfied at a job well done.

During one of our Letsema workshops in May this year, one of the Core Group members reported the brutal murder of Sarah. Sarah's partner had stabbed her nineteen times at an open field in the dark – at the time Orange Farm had been without electricity for weeks.

Sarah was in an abusive relationship. She had left her partner and was staying in her own place. Still, her partner abused her. Sarah reported several times at the police station. The police warned him and issued a protection order, but still he persisted with his abuse.

The man hunted Sarah and caught her at a spaza shop. He delayed her on the way until dark and took her to an open field. There he stabbed her while she cried out begging not be killed for the sake of their four kids, the last born only one and half years old.

The brutality of the murder touched Letsema members. Letsema and its Orange Farm members discussed ideas for an awareness campaign and decided on a peaceful march. The SAPS traffic department, ambulance services and others were also brought on board.

We Letsema members and our facilitators, coaches and community members gathered at our Evaton Centre. A convoy of three cars and a bakkie took us to Orange Farm. We turned from the Golden Highway into Palm Springs Mall where we grouped again with our Orange Farm colleagues and their community.

As we sang and preached peace, condemning the brutality of violence and GBV, some of our members organised apples and the final touches to our flags with the slogan “0% gender-based violence”, and red dye to symbolise the blood of our dear sister and mother Sarah.

The march started, led by the police and traffic officers. The community joined to support us. What touched me was the support of some foreigners – there was no xenophobia. The next memorable thing was the cutting of apples with a knife by Letsema members to remind the community that a knife was made for cutting an apple and not for stabbing and killing.

As we came to the scene of the attack where our sister and mother Sarah's life had ended, I was shaking, my heart beating fast from the

anger and sadness I felt through my whole body.

Messages of condolence were read and passed on in a sorrowful manner. Wreaths and stones were gathered by our honest and hard-working Letsema hero members. A police officer explained the delay of the Justice System in arresting the culprit before he killed Sarah. They could not arrest the man without any act of violence. The same officer addressed the community on how to go about dealing with violent and abusive relationships. Scriptures from the Bible were read by our fellow pastor Mokete, and there were some motivational speeches. After words of thanks from the family we said the Grace. We left with the crowd singing and ululating.

Letsema is my home and I am happy here. Letsema has taught me to be a free thinker, to see, think and analyse in different ways. To be patient and a good listener. To look forward to more information and different strategies. To communicate better.

Letsema gives the community social development. It brings people together to share information for the betterment of our country. It teaches different tactics and strategies of new improved methods. Letsema improves our freedom of expression and information.

Overcoming obstacles

Magogo Zwane

(translated from isiZulu by Jackie Mondli)

I am Magogo Zwane. I live in Evaton in the Vaal. I was unemployed, when through my stokvel I met a woman whose name is Jerita. We were chatting when she told me about Vukani, a sewing school. I told her I would be happy to be taught sewing skills.

I did the sewing course and received a certificate. I was one of the members who stayed at the school after completing the course. But two years later Mam Thandi Mthimkhulu, the person in charge of the school, passed away. I was heartbroken because I had found in her a mother who had taught me how to sew so that I could make a living and feed my children. But, through God's grace we were not completely lost. Mam Thandi's daughter, Nosipho, took over and continued teaching.

In 2013 Vukani was one of the organisations that formed Letsema. As Letsema we are trying to reduce the rate of gender-based violence to get to 0% GBV by creating awareness in the community.

One of the issues we are trying to address as Letsema is the widespread violence in the Vaal, which happens as a result of children being forcibly taken to illegal initiation schools without the consent of their parents. A woman whose child had gone missing came weeping to one of our meetings to ask us to help find her child. The child had been kidnapped on his way from school. I felt her pain because it is painful when your child has gone missing. You don't know whether the child is dead or alive. This was not the only child missing. There were many others. This woman was really traumatized and imagined her son was dead.

Fortunately, we have people in Letsema - Radikeledi and Jabulani - who are involved with these matters of initiation. As soon as they heard about the missing child, they left the meeting, went to the police and returned with the boys. All of us were happy and started dancing, even the child's mother danced with us.

We as Letsema found a counsellor for this mother and her child because they had experienced mental trauma and needed urgent help so that they could heal.

On another occasion, we were invited to a meeting in Evaton Extension 11 to discuss this issue of missing children. There were parents of children who had been to the initiation schools and other members of the community. It was good to see us all united sharing ideas. The meeting was attended by traditional healers, teachers, senior SAPS Youth Command officials who help with providing skills to those returning from the initiations schools.

There were some disagreements but we arrived at a solution. One of the parents had sent her son to an initiation school in the proper cultural manner and when he returned the appropriate ceremony, complete with slaughtering and dancing and jubilation, was held. Thereafter, the initiation schoolteacher took him, without his parents' consent, to teach others. That boy was 18 years old. He was not authorised to be an initiation schoolteacher because you have to be 40 years and above to be a teacher. The boy ended up being assaulted and killed in gangster wars.

It was heart-breaking because the parents were never told what had happened. They only got to know about their son's death through rumours. And when they went to ask the initiation schoolteacher, who lives in the same street, they never got any answers.

Through Letsema's intervention, the initiation school teacher got to understand that they have to work with parents and they should not force initiates to join gangs because this leads to children being disrespectful towards their parents and towards the community.

As Letsema we also suggested that all initiation schoolteachers regardless of their cultural background form one body and ask the government to provide a place where they will conduct the initiation to

avoid conflict among the various initiation schools. We also suggested that there should be nurses who can attend to the children in case of complications with the circumcision and that the children should be provided with nutritious food. Also, there must be parental consent before the children go to these schools so that the proper cultural requirements are met such as informing the ancestors about the initiation and the necessary ceremonies.

On the 11th May 2015, we were at a Letsema Core Group meeting. During the discussion Letsema member Khethiwe shared the story of a lady who had been stabbed to death by her husband and left in the veld in Orange Farm. The husband was not aware that some people had seen him. He went home and changed his clothes as if he knew nothing. So the community of Orange Farm saw the woman's dead body in the veld and called the police. When the police arrived they found that she had been stabbed 19 times. So, the police went and fetched the husband to identify the body. That's when the community pointed out that he was the one who killed her. The police took him to his house, searched the place and found the knife that he had used and his clothes with blood-stains.

I was emotionally touched about the killing because she was killed on Mother's Day which is when husbands are supposed to give their wives loving care. I then heard on radio that the culprit was going to court on 13 May 2015. I called Khethiwe and told her about the court day. Khethiwe and I went to the court on the 13th and he was remanded to the 21st May 2015.

I like Letsema because they taught me to love myself first and have respect for the community. They taught me to listen when a person is talking and respond in an appropriate manner without criticising or judging.

I love Letsema because it builds us. When life gets tough or when we encounter difficulties, Letsema gives us space to exhale without being judged, you leave the meetings feeling better.

Letsema gives me inspiration because we work with the community. Letsema is important to me because at first I was not confident to speak

among many people in meetings. Now I am able to speak. Letsema showed me the light and it gave me the space to be open about my problems and speak out. Letsema taught me about GBV, now I know what it means.

I have learnt a lot and my eyes are open. Letsema taught me to be a leader in a different way, to listen to other people's problems. I now know how to answer their questions in a polite way. Since being in Letsema I see myself as a role model to help the community in the Vaal to get to 0% GBV. The community is now coming out of silence, they speak out. I am hoping to see Letsema moving forward and helping the community.

With Letsema we are going forward. Viva! Letsema Viva!

Ukunqoba ubunzima engadlula kubo

Magogo Zwane

Mina nginguMagogo wa kwa Zwane. Ngihlala eEvaton eVaal. Ngangingasebenzi ngihleli nje ekhaya ngingenzilutho. Ngokuvakasha kwami (stokvel) ngasengihlangana nomama uJerita. Sazixoxela nje ngempilo wasengitshela ngesikole sokuthunga iVukani. Ngiyengabanogqozi lokuthi nami ngingathanda ukufundiswa ukuthunga.

Lesisikole umphathi waso kwakunguMrs Thandi Mthimkhulu. Ngafunda ukuthunga ngazengathola isitifiketi kepha uMama Thandi eminyakeni emibili wasesishiya emhlabeni. Inhliziyo yami yayibuhlungu ngoba ngasengizitholele umama owangifundisa ukuthunga ukuthingizokwazi ukuziphilisa ngondle izingane zami kodwa ngomusa weNkosi sasingalahlekanga. Ingane kaMama Thandi ogamalayo linguNosipho Twala saqhubeka naye esifundisa.

Ngo2013 iVukani yayiyenye yezinhlango ezabumba iLetsema. SiyiLetsema sizama ukwehlisa udlame ngamafuphi, 0% gender-based violence (GBV) ngokuhamba sikhankhaselele emphakathini.

Enye inkinga esibhekene nayo la eVaal yindaba yodlame ngengxa yezingane eziyiswa entabeni ngaphandle kwemvume yabazali. Kwakunomama oyelahlekelwe yingane yakhe. Ngoba yena wayesemsebenzini kepha ngokuzwa ngeLetsema weza naye emhlanganweni ezokhala ukuthi naye asizwe ngengane ukuthi itholiwe. Kwakubuhlungu nakimi ngoba ukulahlekelwa yingane kunzima ngoba awazi ukuthi iyaphila noma isifile. Ukuzwakala kwengane elahlekile kwakungeyona yodwa kepha zaziningi. Lomakhelwane wayezile e mhlanganweni wayekhala esebona ingane yakhe isifile.

Ngenghlanhla kwakukhona othishela abakwaziyo ngezindaba zasent-

abeni esinabo lapha eLetsema. UBaba uRadikeledi noJabu. Ithe bezwa bashiya umhlangano phakathi balanda amaphoyisa babuya nabantwana. Sasijabulile sonke kumnandi sigiya kanye nomama wengani ingathi akwehlantalutho.

Ithe umama esethole ingane yakhe thina njengoba siyiLetsema samtholele ikhansela kanye nengane yakhe. Ngoba ukuhlukumezeka kwakhe engqondweni kanye nengane yakhe kufuneka usizo oluphakeme ukuthi baphole engqondweni.

Siyesamenywa futhi emhlanganweni eEvaton extension 11 ukuyo dingitha izindaba zokulahleka kwabantwana. Kwakukhona abazali bezingane ezibuya entabeni abahlukumezekile kanye nompakathi. Kwakumnandi sibona sihlangene endaweni eyodwa sinikezana ngespace sokukhuluma ngendlela izingane okufanele ziziphathe kanjani. Kwakukhona izinyanga, othishela, abaphethe phezulu kwiSAP Youth Commander osiza izingane amaziphuma entabeni ukuthi zibenaskills.

Kwakunokuphikisana kokunye kodwa safinyelela kwisixazululo ngoba kwakunomzali owahambisa umntwana wakhe ngendlela yosiko. Wabuya kahle ekhaya wahlatjelwa kwagidwa kwabamndi. Into eyenzeka kwamaviki ambalwa ukuthi lengane yathathwa nguthishela wakhe ngaphandle kwemvume yabazali ukuthi ayofundisa ezinye izingane entabeni. Leyongane yayineminyaka engu-18. Okungafanelanga ukuthi ingane ibe uthisha ngoba kuvunyelwe iminyaka eyi-40 ukuyaphezulu nomakube amakhehla ngendaba yamagenge yayisishawo lengane ibulawa.

Bekuwusizi ngoba abazali abazange bazisiwa ngento eyehlakala noma kwenzeka njani ngengane yabo ngoba uthisha nengane babehlala esitradini esisodwa abazali bezwa ubuhlungu ngoba bezwa ngamahemuhemu mabayobuza uthishela akabanika impendulo.

Abazali babengafuni ukuxolela kepha ngeLetsema liyakwazi ukuthoba amangxeba. Nabo futhi bathola usizo lwamaCounsellor. Thina manje kwiLetsema siyakwazi ukulandela ukuthi abahlukumezekile baqhuba njani. Ngendaba yeLetsema othishela bazwisisile ukuthi bafanele ukubambisana nabazali bangaphoqeleli abantwana ukuthi babengama gangsters ngoba yiyo into eyenza ukuthi kungabikho ukuz-

wana nokungahloniphi abazali ekhaya nomphakathi.

Thina siyiLetsema sacela ukuthi kungabanjani ukuthi bonke othishela noma behlukene ngamasiko bahlangane babeyinto eyodwa bacele kuhulumeni ukuba abaphe indawo kuzokwazi kugomeke ingxabano. Kube nonesi uma ingane ibaxaka bathole nokudla okunomsoco ezimpilweni zabo futhi kufanele ingane uma iya entabeni kube yimvumo yomzali abikwe edlozini aphahlelwe.

On the 11th May 2015, we were at a Letsema Core Group meeting. During the discussion Letsma member Khethiwe shared the story of a lady who had been stabbed to death by her husband and left in the veld in Orange Farm. The husband was not aware that some people had seen him. He went home and changed his clothes as if he knew nothing. So the community of Orange Farm saw the woman's dead body in the veld and called the police. When the police arrived they found that she had been stabbed 19 times. So, the police went and fetched the husband to identify the body. That's when the community pointed out that he was the one who killed her. The police took him to his house, searched the place and found the knife that he had used and his clothes with blood-stains.

I was emotionally touched about the killing because she was killed on Mother's Day which is when husbands are supposed to give their wives loving care. I then heard on radio that the culprit was going to court on 13 May 2015. I called Khethiwe and told her about the court day. Khethiwe and I went to the court on the 13th and he was remanded to the 21st May 2015.

Ngiyalithanda mina iqembu leLetsema ngoba langifundisa ukuthi ngizithande mina kuqala ngibe nenhlonipho emphakathini ngizwe ngilalele umuntu uma ekhuluma nami ngiphendule ngendlela efanele ngingaxeki noma ngim-judge.

Ngiyalithanda iLetsema ngoba liyekhana umakunzima nomakulikhuni linekezana nge-space ukuthi uphefumule ungangxekwa ngoba uphuma upholile emhlanganweni wakhona.

Iletsema linginika ugqozi ngoba sisebenzisana nomphakathi. Bengingazi ukuthi ngingkwazi ukukhuluma phakathi kwabantu. Manje

sengiyakwazi ukhukhuluma. ILetsema lingibonise indlela ngazwisisa ukuthi umuntu akafanelanga ukuvalela izinto ngaphakathi enhlizweni njengokuhlukumezwa.

Ngangingazi lutho kodwa yathi ngihlangana siyimbumba ngafunda okuningi ngavuleka amehlo. Letsema taught me to be a leader in a different way, to listen to other people's problems. I now know how to answer their questions in a polite way. Since being in Letsema I see myself as a role model to help the community in the Vaal to get to 0% GBV. The community is now coming out of silence, they speak out. I am hoping to see Letsema moving forward and helping the community.

NgeLetsema siyaqhubeka siyaphambili. Viva! Letsema Viva!

A long way with Letsema

Millicent Phillips

(translated from isiZulu by Jackie Mondli)

I am Nomvo Millicent Phillips. I was born in 1947 at number 1497 Tshomela Street in Pimville. The hospital where I was delivered was called kwaNokuphila and it is now known as Garden City Clinic. I was raised by both my parents. I am the second daughter born after my brother Zakade who is now late. He died from an illness that troubled him throughout his life. I went to school and when I completed my schooling I started working.

I met MaTladi at a meeting in Orange Farm. She asked me what I was doing with my time at home. I told her that I attend women's meetings where we build each other and share knowledge. That was when she told me about Gender CC. I got in touch with them. They welcomed me warmly. I joined them and started attending their meetings.

In October 2013 Letsema opened and going to meet other women from the Vaal was great. Some I had worked with previously, we had parted ways for various reasons, but were now together again.

At some point we came together as elderly people in Orange Farm and we had a conversation about what we could do with our hands. There was a suggestion that we should ask the school principal for a spot to grow vegetables on the school premises. But, this was like seeds blown by the wind. The principal said he did not want anyone on the school premises as this could lead to burglaries. We thanked him and left.

Gogo MaThuso then came to me and said we should come up with another idea. I suggested that we introduce Tai Chi for the grannies and asked her what she thought of the idea. She was surprised and asked

what this Tai Chi was. I told her I would come on Wednesday to start Tai Chi exercises with them.

On the Wednesday I went to the meeting place and I was well received. I started showing them Tai Chi. They found it very difficult in the beginning but after a while they started enjoying themselves. They even did Tai Chi when I was not there. We also play soccer because there are mkhulus (grandfathers/ elderly men) who know soccer very well and they are a great help to us gogos (grannies/ elderly women) because there are certain things about soccer that we do not know.

I have found that you have to be patient when working with the elderly because some of them never had the opportunity to go to school when they were young. During those days, girls were only taught how to do housework such as cooking, fetching firewood, and applying cow dung on the floor. This was to prepare them for wifely duties as they were expected to get married. Boys had to go herding, as they were responsible for the livestock of the homestead.

When Letsema hosted the World Café in Orange Farm, where community members came together to discuss issues affecting them, I invited the elderly group to come and see the good work Letsema does. They were quite happy to have been invited.

I learnt Tai Chi from Michel. When we have workshops we always start with Tai Chi. Even after lunch, we do Tai Chi to aid digestion. Tai Chi helps when you have pain in your soul and in your mind. When you do Tai Chi the pain subsides and you get back to feeling like your usual self. When you have stiffness in your body, get up and do Tai Chi. You will feel better. Tai Chi gets rid of stress, tiredness and headaches.

Had I not been part of Gender at Work and Letsema, I would never have known about this Tai Chi, which has become a great help in my life. You can do it even when you are on your own. Just get up and do Tai Chi and you will feel the difference in your body.

It is interesting to be in Letsema meetings. I have learnt a lot and wish Letsema can grow bigger and reach more people. I have learnt to be passionate. I can express myself confidently. Letsema polished me and now I can share with other women. I am somebody that my com-

munity is proud of. I am proud of Letsema.

Letsema is important to me because it has built me up as a human being. I was a tiger that stayed in the jungle. I couldn't share anything with anyone, not even my mother. When I started attending meetings with Gender at Work, I had four champions who were passionate about me - Nina, Fazila, Michel and Nosipho. I will always adore my four champions. You have saved my life for the rest of my years. They used to tell me, "One day everything will be over, Millicent, you will be okay like everybody else because God created you for a purpose." It was during the time that we had to write stories about ourselves. I started writing about my abusive marriage and this helped get everything out of my mind. The anger I had was gone.

I thank Letsema coaches for teaching me to love myself first so that I can love others. I have learnt to be a role model and leader in my community. I am grateful to Letsema for raising my stature in my community.

When I think of my mother who was crying about my behaviour, I feel very, very sorry. I keep talking to myself asking for forgiveness from my mother. I tell her about my champions who helped me with that sickness of anger in my life. Keep it up in every workshop and help everyone as you have helped me and God will bless you all for your entire life. Long live my champions! Long live! I will always remember you in the good and bad times of my life. Hail! Letsema, I thank you for healing me! Today I am confident in whatever I do and I know that I am a leader no matter what.

Uhambo lwami neLetsema

Millicent Phillips

Mina nginguNomvo Millicent Phillips, ngazalelwa e-1497 Tshomela street ePimville ngonyaka ka 1947. Isibhedlela engatetelwa kuso sabibizwa kwaNokuphila, namhlanje sesibizwa ngeGarden City Clinic. Ngikhuliswe abazali bami bobabili ubaba nomama. Ngiyintombazane yesibili ngelama umfana ogama lakhe lunguZakade. Usewangishiya, washona ngokugula okwakumhlupha emlilweni yakhe yonke. Ngifundile ngaqeda isikole ngayosebenza.

Ngahlangana noMatladi emhlanganweni eOrange Farm saxoxa wangibuza ukuthi ngenzani uma ngihleli ekhaya. Ngamtshela ukuthi ngihamba izinhlangano zomama siyakhulisana siphane nolwazi. Kulapho angitshela ngeGender C.C. Ngacela ikheli labo ukuthi ngizokhona ukuzihlanganisa nabo. Ngempela ngabathola bangemukela kahle ngaqala ngahamba nabo ezinhlanganwenin zabo. Ngangijabula kakhulu umangihlangene nabo.

Ngisebenzisane nabo kakhulu kwaze kwafika isikhathi sokuthu kuvulwe iLetsema ngonyaka ka2013 ngo-October. Nakhona kwakumnandi ukuya khona ngihlangane namanye amakhosikazi aseVaal abanye esasinabo sehlokana ngezizathu ezahlukene.

Sathi sihleli siwogogo nomkhulu sixoxa sabonisana ngokuthi sengezani ngezandla singahlali nje kungekho lutho esilwenzayo. Saqala ngokuthi asicele esikolweni senze ingadi ngaphakathi egcekeni lesikole. Kodwa kwabantlanga zimuka nomoya, umphathi wesikole wasiphendula wathi afakafuni bantu egcekeni lesikole ngoba kuzogqezwa. Sabonga sahamba.

Ugogo uMaThuso weza kimi wathi asicabange elinye isu, ngathi

kuye kungabanjani ukuthi ngifike lapho uma ngingena msebenzi engiwenzazo nginifundise ukuzivocavoca nge Tai-Chi? Wamangala ukuthi yini iTai-Chi. Ngathi ungamangali ngozofika ngoLwesithathu ngizoqala unkunifundisa ngokuzivocavoca.

Ngempela lwafika usuku engangilibekile ngaya bangemukela kahle. Ngaqala ke ngabakhombisa iTai-Chi. Kwakunzima besaqala ngokuhamba kwesikhathi bayijabulela, noma ngingekho bayazenzela, badlala nebhola lezinyawo ngoba kukhona nomkhulu abalaziyo ibhola lezinyawo bawusizo kakhulu kuthina bogohgo ngoba okunye asikwazi ebholeni lezinyawo.

Kufuneka ubenesineke uma usebenza nabantu abadala ngoba abanye ablalitholanga ithuba basebasha lokuya esikoleni. Intombazane yayifundiswa umsebenzi wasendlini ukupheka, ukutheza kanye nokusinda ngoba phela kubhekwe ukuthi uzogana umfana kufuneka ayokwelusa ngoba nguye obheke imfuyo yalapha ekhaya.

Uma iLetsema lenze iWorld Café eOrange Farm, ngiyabamema beze bazobona umsebenzi omuhle owenziwa yiLetsema. Babuya bejabule kakhulu emphefumleni yabo.

ITai-chi ngiyifunde kwiLetsema ngiyifundiswa nguMichel. Uma sizoqala i-workshop siqala ngayo iTai-Chi, noma sesidlile sehlisa ukudla ngayo. Ngiyabong ama-coach eLetsema ngokungifundisa ukuzithanda kuqala bese ngizokwazi ukuthanda omunye umuntu. Ubeyisithombe nenkokheli emphakathini ophila kuwo. ITai-Chi iyaku uma uzwe ubuhlungu ngaphakathi emoyeni nase ngqondweni kuyehla uzizwe usubuyela kubuwena. Bengingathanda nezinye izinhlangano esisebenzisana nazo zingathatha isibonelo lapha kwiLetsema bayobona umehluko ozokwenzeka enhlanganweni yabo. Uma uzwa iminjunju emzimbeni wakho, sukuma wenze iTai-Chi uzozizwa ungcono kakhulu, iqeda i-stress, ukukhathala nekhanda elibuhlungu.

Ukuba angihlangananga neLetsema ne Gender at Work kube angazi lutho nangeTai-Chi kanti iwusizo kakhulu empilweni zethu nomangabe uwedwa endlini sukuma wenze yona iTai-Chi uzozwa umehluko emzimbeni wakho.

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wish Letsema can grow bigger and reach more people. I have learnt to be passionate. I can express myself confidently. Letsema polished me and now I can share with other women. I am somebody that my community is proud of. I am proud of Letsema.

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Maye! Letsema ngiyakubonga ngokungipholisa namhlanje ngiyazethemba noma ngabe ngenzani ngiyazitshela ukuthi ngingumholi noma kanjani.

Let bygones be bygones

Moeketsi Lehlaha

Let me tell you my story. I was born in the Vaal in the year 1982 on the 6 July. I never had a good life like other children. My suffering started when I was seven years old, when my mother divorced my father because of domestic violence. I had to walk 20 km to school every day on an empty stomach. In winter, while other kids in the neighbourhood were still sleeping, I would wake up at 4 a.m. to prepare for school. I bravely walked to school never thinking I could be kidnapped or attacked.

This life continued until I was twelve years old. That was when I decided to commit suicide. I drank acid on two different occasions because I could not take it anymore. Simply because I never had a happy moment in my life. It was not easy. Sometimes we would sleep without eating anything. Sometimes we would have nothing to eat for three to five days. So to me it was like what am I living for? Was I born to be the ambassador of poverty, or am I being punished for the sins of my parents, or was I not conceived out of love?

But my neighbour was the angel of light who saved me twice from this terrible mistake of my life. When I was sitting in my hospital bed I asked God why did You not let me die so that I can be free from these sorrows that are drowning my life. When my father visited me in hospital I did not even want to see him because of my foolish mistake of blaming him for why we are so poor that we can't even afford a loaf of bread like our neighbours. Why can't I have new shoes? Why can't

I have transport to collect me from the doorstep like other kids? Why is mother not around? Why did you chase her away? At that time tears were coming down from my eyes. Even my father's too. At that time I hated him like nobody's business, thinking of running away. To where? I don't know. Just to be away from this misery or childhood life of hell.

There was a preacher who used to visit a patient next to my bed. The patient, Vusi, introduced me to this preacher. When the preacher looked at me he could see the pain I was going through. He said to me, 'this is not the time for blaming anybody. Focus on what God wants you to be or do.' He gave me a Bible instead of money. I looked at him with anger-filled eyes. Wondering how will I survive with a Bible, and not money. He could see that I was very angry and he said, 'God has a big purpose with your life. Read the book of Psalms 23.' The first words I met when I opened this Holy Bible were, 'the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.' Then I said, 'where was this shepherd when I was starving?' The preacher said, 'God works in mysterious ways. That is why he sent your neighbour to save your life.'

After I was discharged from hospital my father was called back to work. He was worried that I would try to kill myself. But my neighbour promised my father that they would take care of me. In 2002 I had to drop out of school while doing grade 11. I was very clever and the principal and teachers did not support my decision to drop out of school. But I had to survive.

One of my father's friends introduced me to a group called the YMCA. That was when I met Vusi again. He was doing traditional dancing and other activities such as drama, gumboot dancing, Sarafina dance and poetry. I chose to do drama. It was fantastic to express my feelings without telling the story of my life to anybody. One of the facilitators saw potential in me and made me director of drama.

In September 2003 we went to Garankuwa for a youth club competition. We won first prize and I was awarded best outstanding performer. I started working with community organisations in Evaton West Ext

15 Small Farms and in Sebokeng, teaching gumboot dancing. In November I was introduced to a group of young men and women at Mafatsane Police Station to work as community policing forum volunteer. I volunteered for seven years, and in 2010 my sector manager inspector introduced me to an NGO called Emthonjeni. I started as a security patroller for this NGO and worked in this job for one year. They saw that I loved working with kids and had good communication so they trained me to be a caregiver. After work I would help children with homework and teach them different activities. We worked with people who had social problems – such as not having identity documents, orphans and vulnerable children, child-headed households, children who do not receive grants, elderly people, bedridden people, and people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. I started to get a stipend of R 1000 a month. That was when my life started to change. I was the best in doing my job and by December that year I was nominated and awarded a certificate of best outstanding performer. In December 2011 my contract was terminated. They asked me if they could renew my contract. I said no because I believed it was time to move on.

Then in 2013 I was sitting at home in between hunting for a job, when I met Magogo and she introduced me to Letsema. At first I thought why should I be involved in all these boring meetings. I felt I was wasting my time that I had better things to do with my time. They were talking about gender-based violence.

What irritated me at first was that I found young and old people playing with markers, crayons, books, flip charts, and they were doing something like a Chinese dance – they called it Tai Chi. I said to myself, ‘this is unbearable for me’. As I was about to leave the space I heard the words ‘gender equality’. Then my mindset changed for a moment, and I became anxious to know more about gender equality. For me it was like I am a man and the head of my family. I am the one who will decide whether anything goes or not. I felt what they were talking about is for ama-Western culture, that they were trying to invade our traditions,

morals and values. But thanks to Magogo being very persuasive and believing in me, I attended the second session.

Then to my surprise came the Saul Tsotetsi Sports Centre Open Space. Three hundred people attended – elderly women and men, and young people. After hearing the sad stories of different people who were helpless, defenceless, clueless because they were dependent and bound by customary law my mindset shifted to be more vulnerable.

The six activity groups formed at the Open Space at the Saul Tsotetsi Sports Centre work to achieve the goal of 0% GBV. These are the Vegetable Garden Group (which I formed with Magogo), Initiation Group, Alcohol and Drug Group, Core Group, Sports Group and Dialogue Group. In all these groups men and women, young and old come into one space, working as equal partners, creating a safe space to talk about issues that involve our communities in the Vaal, and seeking solutions to fight gender-based violence. The groups are doing well.

To my knowledge poverty was a disaster in my community so I decided to start the Vegetable Garden Group in order to alleviate poverty and to bring 0% gender-based violence in the Vaal. We know that poverty and unemployment play a big role in increasing the rates of violence in our society. Our Vegetable Group works as a platform for recruiting community members and for sharing our personal issues without judging or discriminating. Whatever we discuss stays in confidence. We now have twenty-two members working on the garden. We believe in the art of working with the limited resources we have.

I am now able to network with a group called Men on the Move – a group of men from St. Matthews Apostolic Church, consisting of four pastors and eleven congregation members. Another group I am working with are men from the taverns and there is a lot of positive impact with both groups.

It did not take long since first meeting Letsema for me to feel I belong here. The hospitality in Letsema is very warm and special. Everyone seems nice and comfortable with each other. At the start of each

session everyone asks, ‘how are you feeling this morning?’ That connected me with the Letsema group. Letsema hooked me because the relationship between coaches, facilitators and action groups is one where we are working hand in hand to achieve a common goal of bringing 0% GBV in the Vaal.

Letsema is the only umbrella I know that when you are under its shade nothing is impossible. Every time I attend the Letsema space I leave a newborn creature. Even if I arrived with a heavy burden on my shoulders, at the Letsema space I feel light, warmth, love, respect and I am free to express my feelings with nobody judging, discriminating or undermining me.

For me it is a rebirth. Because at Letsema I have a wonderful family who have eased my pain and changed my mindset. I now see things in a different way. Since being in Letsema I see myself as a compassionate role player in my community. I am trying to bring changes— not only by planting vegetables, but also by helping people come out of the closet and break the silence, helping them to report different crimes or violence. I can see a change in people’s behaviour. People want to know more about Letsema and about GBV.

My thinking as a man has changed a lot. I used to think that as an African man I should be in charge and my wife should obey my orders. I now know that gender inequality is not the best option to raise a family. Not just for me but also for my community members and neighbourhood. The greatest enemy is being scared to break the silence and not believing in transformation.

When I first saw the group of elderly and young people doing Tai Chi I did not know the reason why they were doing it. But I became inspired to see even grannies doing Tai Chi and really enjoying it. I just went with the flow, joining in the exercises. Now I know why Tai Chi exercises are so important – they refresh your mind, body and soul.

Letsema is important to me because it helped me to be myself. I have swallowed my pride and my insecurities about not caring about

others. Letsema helped me to see the importance of other community members, to see other people's problems and it helped me to handle issues no matter how big, with confidence.

I am a leader, I am a preacher of the gospel of ending GBV. Letsema taught me to be a leader in a way that I can bring people together, bridging the generation gap, bringing women and men together. It taught me to be a leader not a boss. This means earning people's respect as the first step. Because leaders are not born but are made and we should be able to lead by example.

My last words are, you can start by being nobody but if you dig deep inside your heart there is somebody special in you. That is the story of my life. From zero to hero.

My Journey with Letsema

Mazet

I live in an informal settlement called Orange Farm, south of Johannesburg. My community is made up people who speak different South African languages such as IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, Sepedi, as well as people from neighbouring countries.

I am a 32-year-old mother, raising a lovely 7-year-old daughter by myself. After I broke up with the father of my child, I was angry and blamed him. My anger developed to a point where I was not able to talk to other people. My daughter became the victim of my anger. I would beat her and shout at her. When people around me were trying to show me my mistake, I would not listen to them on how to discipline my daughter.

One day when I shouted at her and beat her, she cried and said to me, ‘Mama don’t you see that you are abusing me?’ I had told myself that by beating and shouting at her she would be disciplined. I was not aware that I was setting an example my daughter would follow. When my daughter started beating other kids I was at first not aware that I was the cause of her behaviour. It happened several times that she beat other kids while they were playing. I started to get worried about why my daughter was behaving this way.

Slowly but surely, through attending Letsema meetings I started changing the way I spoke to my daughter. I gave myself space to listen to other people’s views.

Attending Letsema meetings I realised that it was time for me to open up and I got courage from the space and from people in Letsema. It is a safe, comfortable and respectful space to talk about anything.

One day there was a two-day Letsema workshop where I shared my story with my colleagues. In my group they gave me guidance on how to deal with my emotions and anger. I practised humbling myself towards my daughter and talked to her about beating other children. I learnt that I must apologise to her for taking my anger out on her. I started self-introspection and I know that it takes time to change.

I am still learning and practising the healing process. It is not an easy thing or a one-day process. It takes time to heal and Letsema gives me the strength. I am able to listen and talk to young people in my community today. I communicate with my friends and family in a good manner. I am able to talk to my daughter without beating her. She has the courage to talk to me about anything because she sees that I am no longer the mother who beats and shouts. I listen to her. Letsema helped me a lot and teaches me to heal inside so that I can carry on with my life.

Perseverance is the mother of success and alone I was not going to heal. But through Letsema meetings I have managed to defeat the anger I had and I have forgiven myself. Through the Letsema family I am a grateful and happy mother with a smile on my face. Letsema is a family of all.

How I met Letsema

In September 2013 I was working as the Acting Administrator in an organisation called Let Us Grow when Nosipho Twala invited us to attend a meeting in Evaton. Let Us Grow was working with Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVCs), Home-Based Care, Men Calabash, Support Group and young people doing an outreach programme.

I came to the meeting of Letsema on a lovely spring day. I met different people, young and old with different beliefs, style, culture and behaviour and the people were bright and beautiful as flowers, showing life and happiness.

I had never met such people in my life and they showed a lot of love, encouragement, and warmth and spoke the same language of 0% gender-based violence (GBV) in the Vaal. I told myself, 'baqadile, (they

are starting with nonsense) how will they create 0% GBV?’ I was sceptical because many NGOs and other initiatives have been trying to fight GBV. I wondered how they would defeat GBV. But through attending meetings I realised that there was hope and we could achieve the goal. Through the passion we have, we can change our mindset and thinking.

I am still part of Letsema and we talk about 0% GBV in the Vaal because it is a problem that needs a solution. Through the World Café, Letsema listens and hears about community problems and we help each other on how we can build a safe, protected and 0% GBV Vaal. We look at GBV holistically, that is, physically, emotionally, psychologically, sexually, etc. and Letsema accommodates everyone who is interested in fighting the monster that is GBV.

Even though there is no payment in Letsema, because of my passion, love and being brave to help yourself and the community at large, I am still involved in Letsema. Even though money is needed, I want to see a change because not everything is about money. Happiness and safety come first. In Letsema there are also people who are employed in companies and NGOs but they are still part of Letsema because GBV is happening everywhere and affects everyone.

Through Letsema meetings I acquired skills and motivation from the facilitators and coaches. Letsema meetings built my self-esteem and my confidence. As a young woman I will be part of Letsema until we reach our goal and see that the Vaal is a safe and protected place where everybody understands GBV issues.

Coming out of the closet

Nathi Zwane

One morning my mom, Joyce Magogo Zwane, was on her way to a Letsema workshop, and asked me to go with her. Letsema is an open space where all genders gather together working for 0% gender-based violence in the Vaal.

I went to see what the workshop was about. I found different groups of people and genders. To my surprise there were gay people in the room. That made me comfortable and confused at the same time. I wondered why these gay and lesbian people were in this workshop.

The atmosphere in the room was at peace and it felt like I was in heaven, full of love and respect. The workshop was in progress. I introduced myself to the group. I got a nice welcome. I chose to be in a group of people of my calibre, which is gay and lesbian people.

My mom was the loudest in the workshop. The people there did not judge and they treated each other with respect and love. As I was trying to understand what the workshop was about and what was expected from me, a facilitator, Jabulile, with long hair and dark in colour, explained that Letsema is not an organisation, it is an open space where different individuals share their feelings and ideas in fighting gender-based violence in the Vaal.

I joined the Drug and Alcohol action group in Letsema. As members of this group we have raised awareness through talking to members of the church. We attend church services and after the service we address the congregation which includes youth, old women, and men, the pastor and the choir. We talk about how to fight drug and alcohol abuse.

Letsema is important to me because it is a space where different

people – different genders, cultures - express their feelings and are free to speak about everything. No one will judge. Also we share and learn from each other.

Being part of Letsema taught me different things because within the space no one is wrong. Everyone is treated with respect and is given a chance to share his or her story with the outside world. Letsema taught me about being a leader in a different way – how to listen to different voices in discussion and dialogue. Letsema has taught me how to work for 0% GBV and how to work together with women and men in my community.

Since being in Letsema I have changed in many ways. I have learnt about different people and different cultures. I do not judge other religions because now I have a better understanding. I have taken ownership into my own hands of fighting against violence and crime in order to build a better future.

Letsema has made me realise that respect and knowledge is the key to success and taught me to respect each and every one. I love and live my life as a gay person without fear. I am proud to be gay.

Growing up Gay

I was raised by a single parent in a four-roomed house in Meadowlands, Soweto. I am the second born of two kids. Growing up gay was a little scary and at times you feel bad about yourself. Even though you excel in schoolwork, housework and in playing with other children, people start asking questions about you and your sexuality and this becomes a problem. You have to explain your sexuality. Seeing the reaction of others to your sexuality you start not to feel free.

The community does not understand about homosexual people and gay people get killed or chased from their homes because of this lack of knowledge and understanding. Living the gay life is not easy. It might seem at first like living life on the edge. You have to explain yourself to the community and your family. Secondly, your life is compared to the Bible. Lastly, you are not taken into consideration.

When I was in primary school some boys were confused about me and started to mock me about being a sissy and wanting to play with girls. School was never nice because of this.

When I did well in my schoolwork and in sports I was compared with the boys. I was neat and clean all the time. At home I got all the support and was never called ugly names. I loved playing with dolls and playing 'house'. My house used to be beautiful. Everyone around me wanted to be around my house so that they could copy my style. I always played the mother of the house. My house would have fresh roses from my mom's garden and I would cook really good food. The boys would be scared to share the house with me. The only time a boy wanted to share the house with me was when I bought nice sweets.

I started high school in 1996. By then I did not have to explain about being gay. There were many different gay friends around. There was no need to worry. We even had a netball team and we competed with girls.

I started dating in high school. I did not know what was happening and what was acceptable. I thought we were just friends. He started helping me with my schoolwork and joined me at afternoon practice. He was older than me and had a better understanding than me. I never felt so good. I felt wanted.

I was with my boyfriend on our date at the Carlton Centre. It was a Saturday morning. We met at the Wimpy, waiting for the 1 o'clock movie – Titanic. We had lunch at the Wimpy and I enjoyed the lunch and desert. We then went to the cinema. The movie started. The cinema was dark. He held my hand and told me that he loves me. I felt like I could jump out of the cinema and tell the whole world I am in love. He kissed me on the neck and I felt his heartbeat. We were seated at the top row. In the half dark there was the reflection of the movie, the smell of popcorn and the sounds of wrapping papers of sweets. He called me babes. I was all smiles, with a joyful heart inside me. It felt as if it could not end. He offered me something to drink. He went to get refreshments as the movie played. He came back, kissed me and told me he loves me. I was a bit shy because the people sitting next to us were watching. He saw I was uncomfortable and he said I should imagine we were the only

two in the cinema.

After the movie we went to his place, an open plan flat, not far from the Carlton Centre. He offered me a glass of water. I sat on the couch and took off my shoes. I was welcomed with a glass of water and juice. He made me feel special. I was happy to be treated that way. He sat next to me and started telling me about his parents and his childhood. I also shared my story, and we kissed and we kissed and we kissed. Until the room temperature changed.

Empowered to care

Simon Bull Lehoko

I am a football-oriented sportsperson. I have been involved in football from the early 1970s to the year 2005. Even when I had the opportunity to be a schoolteacher after qualifying at the Wilberforce Teacher Training Institute in 1972, my life revolved around football.

My involvement in football taught me many life skills such as teamwork, communication, how to cope with loss or defeat. Most positive was the lesson in how to succeed in anything you do through hard work, dedication, focus and self-sacrifice. This helped me to grow up as a fair, disciplined and dedicated person. Football allowed me to know my limits and to learn from my teammates. It helped me communicate and share experiences with others.

After I retired from football as manager-coach, I went into youth development football. I attended coaching clinics and seminars on grass-roots level football and on coaching children.

In 2013 my colleague at Sebokeng Legends (an organisation of retired footballers), Mr Bricks Mokolo, invited me to a workshop at the Evaton Roman Catholic Church. As we came to the church building he introduced me to a lady by the name of Nosipho and explained that her organisation dealt with gender-based violence (GBV) in the Vaal.

Nosipho invited me to a Letsema meeting and I met with women who opened their hearts and talked freely about gender-based violence and its results in the community. It really touched me and made me support this good cause not only for women, but also for men, children and society in general.

As a person I had always known and seen this type of violence but I

had never thought of any way to help stop it from happening. At Letsema I met people dedicated to end gender-based violence and my involvement was requested as a football person. At first I thought this was a really difficult challenge as I regarded the matter too personal and that it would be invading other persons' private lives.

Soon after my first meeting, I attended the Letsema Open Space. This was the most amazing and controversial gathering. Many people from different community structures in the Vaal attended. The theme was 'How can we bring gender-based violence to 0% in the Vaal?' Perpetrators and activists were brought together to discuss issues to bring about change. Policewomen and policemen, traditional healers, initiation school teachers, taxi owners and officials from the health and child welfare departments were all in attendance.

What was most touching and beautiful was the level at which the topic was discussed under the leadership of Letsema. It was incredible to hear people talking about their experiences of GBV across different communities. They discussed the real causes and how to stop the continuing occurrence of gender-based violence. Most inspiring was the will of the people to see an end to the violation of women and children as well as men and other community members, like gay, lesbian and transsexual people. The community spoke of violence as a consequence of the abuse of alcohol, drugs, and other substances. And of how social and economic status influences abusive behaviour towards each other. The Open Space gave people a chance to share difficult situations encountered in daily life.

To my surprise, I was asked to be part of Letsema and to attend regular meetings on a monthly basis. My attendance at these meetings led me to meet many people who came to empower and teach Letsema members valuable lessons.

The meetings at Letsema changed my outlook on gender-based violence. I began realising how it affects communities and the horrifying results in human rights violations amongst our people. The Letsema workshops became a valuable experience for me because those who coordinated the workshops were very professional and knew how to get

through their aims of making it easy to understand the subject matter. To me it became a regular source of gaining skills in dealing with everyday happenings in our society. Especially gender-based violence. It also made me more deeply aware of the right to human dignity of other persons and their right to life.

What really amazed me was that most attendees at monthly Letsema meetings were women. This did not go well with me and led me to raise this as a concern. I was told that many men were not interested. This made me invite some of my friends and acquaintances from the Vaal and today there is more of a male presence than when we started and had only three to four males among fifteen to twenty women.

At Letsema I learnt a lot about gender-based violence. I have shifted from seeing this as a private, family matter which needed police intervention, to being made aware of my contribution in helping affected families, and not to be a passive bystander when this is happening.

The skills we developed at Letsema enabled us to help, to preach, engage and open discussions on gender-based violence with the community. The empowerment programme at Letsema has opened a way of advocating for 0% GBV in the Vaal.

In Easter 2015 Letsema got involved in the Pooe Easter Tournament as a partner to advocate for 0% GBV. On a day regarded as the most important in the Vaal football calendar, football teams from the Vaal take part in this tournament. Men and women football clubs compete in their respective categories in this very popular tournament, attended by many community leaders, celebrities and government officials.

Letsema members prepared pamphlets, banners, and activities. Our plan was to distribute pamphlets carrying messages of 0% GBV. More importantly, we saw this as an opportunity to have personal discussions with individuals to get their views about GBV.

From as early as 8 a.m. that morning the football ground began to fill with excited teams, supporters and community members. Teams arrived with Vuvuzelas, singing songs of motivation, moving around the grounds confident that they would be winners at the end of the tournament. The grounds were properly prepared for the day. Match officials

were ready to start the games. Many hundreds of supporters were in attendance. It was a bright sunny day – a lovely day for football.

Teams entering the field for every game carried our banner with the Letsema call for 0% GBV in the Vaal. This was the most visible message. At the intervals in between the games Letsema members talked to young players and adults about GBV. The discussions were sparked by the question, ‘can men and women play together as team mates?’ Men and women raised many views on the subject but in the end all concluded that there is need to create a good relationships with each other as this could ease and finally end gender-based violence that affects men and women, and that destroys families, where children suffer most. We extended invitations to some of those we spoke to, to attend Letsema meetings and become Letsema members.

In the players’ interval we engaged young boy and girl players around their career as football players. Most felt it was important to relate in a warm and respectful way, that attitudes and treatment of teams must be equal and that there should be no discrimination based on gender. They agreed that football rules should demand that every player should comply with and adhere to this code of conduct.

The discussions were held under a very happy mood whereby everyone raised most valuable information. People expressed themselves freely and with respect for others. People were pleased and thankful to us for having raised these issues. The day came to an end with all those around the sportsground satisfied with the events of the day.

It was an achievement that Letsema took the initiative to get involved. The organisers of the tournament requested Letsema to partner in future tournaments at the Pooe annual programmes. The tournament opened a way for Letsema to be known and acknowledged as one of the groups that can assist in community development programmes. Government officials noticed the potential that Letsema has to bring 0% GBV in the Vaal.

Members of Letsema became known by the community and this opened the community’s access to information. Letsema identified places and communities in the Vaal where further world cafes – gather-

ings for community members to share their experiences and ideas - can be held as new members join Letsema to learn and strengthen their efforts to end GBV.

Football playing men and women were made aware of their role in as far as gender-based violence is concerned. They were made aware to practice 0% GBV, and to make rules and regulations that prohibit gender inequality in football.

For Letsema it was a learning curve on working in a sports-oriented environment. The glamour, excitement and spirit of football bring people together to share. The popularity of football in our communities has the capability of positive results and changing lives.

Constant dialogue through World Cafes has allowed Letsema to reach more people and further community awareness in remote areas of the Vaal. Letsema has enlisted partners like schools and clinics. Those engaged in discussions realise how GBV can lead to broken families, affecting single mothers, orphans, street kids and drug addicts roaming the townships.

Another issue raised was women's leadership. We discussed cultural upbringing and the present situation of women's rights – of women as equal to men. We encouraged relationships of respect, tolerance and non-violence between women and men.

It was encouraging to hear in these discussions that the community was aware of what was happening in their immediate surroundings and how prepared and willing they were to be involved in addressing gender-based violence on a daily basis.

In some discussions held by Letsema, enemies have confronted each other and talked face to face without any violent reactions. Discussions have touched on many uncomfortable topics that the community associates with fear or starting a war of words. But these discussions have taken place in a manner that showed maturity and understanding of the aim of coming together to stop GBV. It was unusual, for example, to see police and traditional healers coming together to share ways of solving problems.

Letsema has empowered members in the community with self-de-

velopment strategies whereby they can facilitate and act on their own in community awareness campaigns, for example on drug abuse, initiation schools, food gardening and child abuse.

Letsema has given me the opportunity to meet and know people from most of the communities around where I live. The discussions about our different social problems in our societies empower me to try and help with some of our societies' illnesses. I am now more aware of the issues faced by our people.

Letsema has taught me to be involved in discussions, allowing all to express their own ideas, accepting all views and building confidence. I can engage with community members on matters that affect them and find solutions. As an activist I can help curb further violations. Letsema has changed me from being a silent observer of community problems.

Being part of Letsema allows me to be part of a progressive structure of importance to the people. My hopes and dreams are to see Letsema as one of the main advocates of 0% GBV in South Africa. Letsema has the most informed members on this subject and can change communities. A stable Letsema can achieve its goals and aims, but only if Letsema is able to capacitate its programmes and enhance its visibility in towns, villages and cities.

True initiation is about responsibility not criminality

Radikeledi Letuma

(translated from Sesotho by Jackie Mondli)

I am here at Letsema through my involvement in the Sedibeng Initiation Traditional Surgeon Committee. Letsema is a group of people who have come together to fight against the abuse of women and children in their homes. As a traditional healer I saw that it was good for me to join Letsema in the fight against domestic violence and the abduction of children who are forcibly and unlawfully taken to initiation schools.

As a person who follows traditional practices I saw that it was worthwhile to work with Letsema in preventing the problems where a man says, "I am the head of the family and my word is final," No! That is not the way. Women are also human beings. I want to see my brothers and sisters, and especially men, ending violence in their homes.

Another painful thing, especially here in the Vaal, are these illegal initiation schools that are springing up. The importance of my being here at Letsema is that I get information on the boys who have been abducted and taken to the initiation schools without the consent of their parents and I can get to help them very quickly.

Before I came to Letsema I used to struggle in the Sedibeng Initiation Traditional Surgeon Committee to find the abducted children but it is now much better because I get information very quickly and in time. I have managed to help many people through working with Letsema.

Letsema has credibility in the community and is able to provide education and raise awareness to reduce the rate of violence by initiates from illegal initiation schools towards schoolchildren who have not been to initiation schools.

I have deep love for our heritage. I am proud of our heritage and the

practice of initiation but the death of children at initiation schools, the illegal initiation schools and the abduction of young boys is very painful and breaks my heart. That is why I am writing this story to make this call, "Oh! Nation of Africa, let us be proud and protective of our culture."

True, initiation is part of our culture, tradition or rituals but it would be better for children to get an education first. Only children who have finished school should be initiated. And, this should not be done in winter because it is too cold and we do not want them to die from the cold.

If we come together as Letsema we can overcome problems especially the abuse of boys due to this initiation. If we all work together we can easily eradicate these illegal initiation schools. I want to see these troubles of gangsters at initiation schools coming to an end. What I like about Letsema is coming together to share ideas and to advise each other. We are saving the lives of children in our community, things will work out and we will eventually reach our goals.

I think it will help if we could have a knowledgeable initiation instructor from Lesotho to come and train us on how they do initiation in Lesotho. He could come for one year together with his colleagues to help us eradicate these gangs that children get involved in.

Through this story I am also looking for ideas on how we can help with these difficulties. I believe that many people in the Vaal know me, Radikeledi Letuma, especially with regards to matters of initiation. I love this place and I live happily here. I do voluntary work in the area of initiation because I have been through initiation myself. I have been volunteering in this area for thirteen years. I will be happy once people follow the laws that guide initiation.

We as the Sedibeng Initiation Traditional Surgeon Committee have been fighting for recognition and legitimacy with regards to matters of initiation. Unlike before when there was no regulation, a by law was passed on 21 July 2015 and those who transgress this law will be charged. The importance of regulating initiation is that the police can now arrest transgressors and charge those who open illegal initiation schools. We achieved this through the power of our committee and the

municipality. It is important for us to do things according to the law.

Now, I hope everything will go well. I am saying to the youth, “Do the right thing. I am now 62 years old, I hope you will choose the right path.” I am grateful for all that we have done with Letsema to fight crime related to young people taking nyaope and forming useless gangs.

Light, Shine!

Lebollo la nnete le ruta boikarabelo e seng botlokotsebe

Radikeledi Letuma

Ke mona ho Letsema ke tswa tlasa Sedibeng Initiation Traditional Surgeon Committee. Lebaka la hore ke be mo ho Letsema ke bone hore Letsema le kopane ho lwanela ditokeloo tsa bomme le bana tlasa tlhekefetso e ka malapeng. Jwalo ka nna ngaka ea setso ke bone hore ho molemo hore ke ikopantshe le bona ba Letsema re kgone ho hlola bothata bona ba dintwa tse ka malapeng hape le ho utswa hwa bana ho iswa mabollong ka kgang ka ntle le ho latela melao.

Jwalo ka ha nna ke le motho ya sebedisang setso ke bone ho le molemo hore nka tsamaisana le Letsema ho ka thibela bothata bona ba ntate a re, “Ke hloho ka hara ntlo, ha ke bua ke buile ke phetho,” Chee, hoo ha se yona, ke hore le bomme le bona ke batho. Jwale ke re ke rata hore ho bana beso he tlohelleng tsela tsa tlhekefetso malapeng haholo ho lona bontate.

Taba e nngwe e bohloko haholo mona Vaal ke ya bana ba bashanyana ka hare ho dikolo tsa mabollo a bulwang ka hara dikolo mona Vaal to Orange Farm. Bohlokwa ba hore ke be ho Letsema ke kgona ho fumana kapele mathata a bana ba nkuweng ntle le tumello ya batswadi e be ke etsa mosebetsi o motle ka thuso ya Letsema.

Ke ne ke sokola nako enngwe le komiti ya ka ya mabollo ke sa fumane bana ba nkuweng ka ntle ho tumello ya batswadi, empa jwale ho batla ho ba betere haholo hobane molaetsa ke ke kgona ho o fumana ka pele ka nako. Jwale hona tjena ke kgonne ho sebetse hantle ka thusano le Letsema. Haholo Letsema le kgona ho ema ka matla ho ya sechabeng le ho ya dikolong ho fana ka thuto ya hore ho theohe tlhekefetso dikolong ke bana ba mabollo ho ba sa bollang.

Ke na le lerato ka bochaba ba rona haholo. Ke ya boulela ka bochaba le ka lebollo le ho hlokahala ha bana mabollo ke yona enkutlwisang bohloko. Ke ka hoo he ngolang moqoqo ona hore, “Wee sechaba sa Afrika ha re ke re bontshe poulelo ka moetlo wa rona.”

Ke nnete ke setso sa rona kapa moetlo kapa maseko. Ho ka ba molemo thuto ha e ka tla pele ka morao ha latela lebollo. Ha ho bolotswe bana ba qetileng sekolo hape e seng mariha hobane ho a bata. Tabakgolo ke hore ba se ka ba hlokafatswa ka lebaka la serame. Le nako e nyane hore ba ka kgutla ba na le tsebo e bohlokwa kapa thuto e felletseng hobane nako e nyane mariha. Jwale ke nahana hore ha re ka kopana re le Letsema ra fana ka molaetsa ona sechabeng re ka hlola mathata haholo a tlikefetso ya bashanyana ka taba ya initiation. Hape bothata ba illegal initiation school e ka ba bobebe haholo ha re kopane hantle re thusana kaofela.

Nna ntho ena e etsahalang mona tsa mekgatlo dikolong mephathong ke re e fele haholo ha hone ho ya ka nna nka be ke re ho ke ho tle mmolotsi ho tloha naheng e ka ntle Lesotho a tlo fana ka tsamaiso kapa morena ya tswang ka ntle hore a tlo thusa ka tsela ya e ba sebetsang ka yona ka Lesotho selemo se le seng feela a fuwe basebetsimmoho le ena ho fediswe mekgatlo ena ea bana ba banyane.

Mona ho Letsema ke rata haholo ho kopana ha rona le ho fumana dikeletso. Chee le ha re sa thole patala feela maphelo a bana ba sechaba re a thusa chee ho tla loka re tla be re fihle moo re batlang ho ya teng.

Ke kopa qaqiso ka moqoqo ona hore re ka thusana jwang bothateng bona na. Nna Radikeledi Letuma ke kholwa ba bangata ba ya ntseba mona Vaal haholo ho tsena tsa mabollo. Ke hore nna ke rata haholo jwang ka mona ka Vaal ke dula ka boitumelo ke moithaopi ho tsona tsena tsa mabollo hobane ke bolotse. Ke na le dilemo tse 13 ke le mabollo ke sa patalwe. Ke tla leboha ha re ka ra boloka molao wa mabollo.

Jwale, re kgonne ho lwana le ho tlisa botsitso ka hare ha lebollo. Re se re fumane molao-tsamaiso o tlilo tsamaisa mabollo eseng jwalo ka nako e fitileng mo honeng hosena molao. Jwale molao o teng o pasitse ka 21 July 2015 o tlilo tsamaisa dikolo tsena tsa thaba. Ho na le kahlo-lo ha eba o ka tlola o mong wa melao ya mabollo. Bohlokwa ba hore

botsitso bo tla ba teng mabollong hobane maponesa a se a tla khona ho tshwara haeba o tlotse molao le charge e teng ebang o butse lebollo ka ntle ho molao ona wa mona. Ke matla a masepala le komiti ya rona. Ke bona ho le bohlokwa haholo hore re ka latela molao.

Jwale ke dumela hore tsohle di ka ba ntle. Nna ke se ke re, “bacha sebetsang hantle ka hobane ke na le dilemo tse 62. Ke dumela hore le tla nka tsela e ntle haholo.”

Ke leboha tsohle tseo re di sebeditseng le Letsema haholo tlasa botlokotsebe ba bana ba ntseng ba etsa mehlolo ka nyaope le ka dithlopa tse senang molemo.

Lesedi, Kganya!

The Vaal Triangle

Mokete Lepholletse

(translated from Sesotho by Jackie Mondl)

I am a pastor at the Apostolic Faith Association in Ekuthuleni in Evaton. I was born in Schweizer-Reneke and came to the Vaal Triangle in 1979. I am 50 years old. I would like to give thanks to God for bringing me together with Mr. Simon ‘The Bull’ Lehoko because I have learnt a lot from him. He used to train us at Vaal Professionals in the 1980s and today I am a member of Letsema because of him.

Letsema provides opportunities for me to fulfil God’s desire for me to help people. I am really happy that we as Letsema are addressing the issue of violence and abuse against children, women and men because I have seen this happening in some families. It would be great for our families if we lived in the manner proposed by Letsema. With regards to abuse and GBV, even in my church I talk about it. I say we should reduce abuse in our homes. Our Father, who created us, wants us to live in peace, get along well and support each other when there is a need.

Evaton and the Vaal Triangle are Blessed

God has blessed Evaton. Here in Evaton we have the headquarters of many churches. We have the Wilberforce Ministry SA, Methodist, the headquarters of St. Paul church and the headquarters of St. Johns or 12 Doors St. John, with Mrs. Mmanku, Mr. Ramoipone and Mrs. Khambola as their prophets. That is why evil spirits attack here first, and when it comes it comes very strongly.

The Vaal Triangle is disparaged and labelled as rural by most people. However, this is a leading region in the history of our country. For ex-

ample, the 1913 Peace Treaty was signed in Vereeniging and the 1960 demonstrations against pass laws took place in Sharpeville.

There is abundant talent in the Vaal Triangle – in soccer, music, boxing as well as in the political arena. We have many more football players compared to other regions under the South African Football Association (Safa), the greatest being Mr. Simon ‘The Bull’ Lehoko who played for the first SA XI against England where they won 4-2 and they also played against Rhodesia and won 6-2.

In boxing we have an international welterweight champion of the 1960s, Mr Guitar Man Motlathledi, also known as ‘The Brown Bomber’ who went to England and said, “I have an educated left hand,” and many others.

God has really given us talent. In music, we talk about Nana Motijoane (Coyote The Wild Dog), Zakaria Hlatshwayo (Spokes H), Thabo Nhlapo (Tizzer), Senyaka Kekana and others.

This region was the first to have the largest steel factory in Africa, which is USCO (The Union Steel Company of South Africa), established in 1911 by Mr Horace Wright and Sammy Marks. USCO was a giant steel company but today it has shut down and left many unemployed. Other companies such as Samancor are also closed. Cape Gates and Arcelor Mittal are retrenching workers. This is going to raise stress levels and lead to violence and abuse. I foresee danger and sorrow.

Bringing awareness through football

Letsema plays a critical role in football because football brings together all people, young and old. It draws more people than boxing or music. Soccer speaks all languages and 95% of 1 billion people worldwide love soccer. Therefore, as Letsema we decided to partner with the Pooe Tournament.

This soccer tournament was an initiative of Mr. Pooe. The tournament has four phases: the Last 16, Last 8, Last 4 and the Final. It is held in December and draws many people. It is always festive, joyful with ululations. On the day of the final, you would think it is Christmas Day,

or a celebration ceremony where many cows have been slaughtered.

The Coach, Mr ‘The Bull’ Lehoko assigned me to talk to Mr. Chip-pa Vilakazi the tournament director to request a spot on one day of the three-week tournament. I informed the various teams about Letsema and the work we do and they welcomed us. We started by meeting with the teams to educate them on gender-based violence. They welcomed me warmly with the words, “Greetings, honourable Pastor,” and this made my work very easy. For the spectators we held a march with a Letsema banner and took pictures with some of the spectators. Many people asked questions and said they now understand what abuse is. When we talk about abuse, we advise people about unity and working together instead of kicking or boxing your partner.

Our plan is to decrease the rate of GBV to 20% by 2030 with our ultimate goal being to achieve a situation where there is no weeping and gnashing of teeth. The reason why we speak so confidently is that even on the streets people are now talking about GBV and about how Letsema has helped to bring peace in their homes. Young women between the ages of 19 and 20 thank us for helping them resolve their conflict with their partners. We are talking to the residents of the Vaal Triangle and to the government to consider building a shelter for abused children. As Letsema we are planning our own tournament in the future where we will invite a big team like Kaizer Chiefs to participate.

What I like about Letsema

I am encouraged by the work we do as Letsema. There is incredible respect. Letsema is like a university or college of education. I have got to meet people like Shamim, Michel, Nina, Nosipho, the beautiful Nancy Castro and ‘The Bull’ Lehoko.

Letsema provides space for us to talk about our emotions, express our feelings, and remove stress. Letsema restores self-confidence and pride. The exercises we do clearly demonstrate the greatness of our Heavenly Father. There is amazing love at Letsema. I wish this were the case in all workplaces, homes and schools. As a pastor, I call for unity,

love and peace.

Letsema taught me to accept life as it comes. We help each other with our problems. Since I joined Letsema I have improved my communication skills. I have learnt to think positively and that makes me happy. Thinking positively leads to growth, you begin to see life in a positive way. Now I see the importance of us coming together and being united.

Letsema encourages everyone to write about their lives or what is happening around them, it is possible that some of us can end up being authors and journalists. Writing and playing keeps you healthy. Also when you exercise you forget about your problems and hardships. There is a verse in the book of John in the Bible which says, 'Even when people of this earth say it's over with me, God says no you will achieve all your dreams.' Amen. That's all from Mosia Mokete Lepholletse. Joy and happiness!

Khutlotharo Ya Lekoa

Mokete Lephalletse

Ke moruti wa kereke ya Apostolic Faith Association in Ekuthuleni in Evaton. le lemo tse 50. Ke hlahetse kwana Schweizer-Reneke ka tla Vaal Triangle ka 1979. Ke rata ho leboha Ntate Modimo haholoholo ka ho nkopanya le Mr. Simon ‘The Bull’ Lehoko hobane nna ke ithutile dintho tse ngata ho tswa ho yena. Ebile nna hore ke be karolo ya Letsema ke ka baka la Mr. Simon ‘Bull’ Lehoko ebile ke ne ke kwetliswa ke yena ho Vaal Professionals ka di1980s.

Happy Happy Letsema, ke rialo hobane ke ntshetsa tabatabelo ya Modimo pele bakeng sa ho thusa batho. Ho hlekefetsa, GBV, le kerekeng ke bua ka yona hore a re fokotse tlhekefetso malapeng a rona. Ke hopola hore le ka malapeng a rona re phele jwale ka Letsema le re eletsa. O tle o lemohe hore Ntate wa rona ya re bopileng o rata re ka phela ka khotso re utlwana re fana tshehetso moo e hlokehang.

Evaton and the Vaal Triangle are Blessed

Rona mona Evatone Morena Modimo o re blesitse hobane Evatone e feta region efe kapa efe naheng kaofela. Re na le Wilberforce Ministry SA Moruti Methodists, Kereke ya St. Paul Headquarters, St. Johns Headquarters or 12 Doors St. John eo Baprofeta ba yona e leng Mrs. Mmanku, Mr. Ramoipone le Mrs. Khambola. Joale ke ka hoo moya o mobe ha o qala o tla kwano pele le hona o tla ka sekhahla se very strong.

Vaal Triangle e nkelwa fatshe haholo ke batho ba bangata ba re ke mapolasing. Empa ena ke yona region e tswang pele ho history ya naha ya rona. Batho ba khutlotharo ea Lekoa moo talente e leng matletsetle-

tse. Teng mona re bua bolo ea maoto, mmino, boxing le sefala sa dipolitiki, mohlala ke hore Peace Treaty ka 1913 e saenetswe Vereeniging le mokoloko wa boipelaetso ho lahla dipasa o etsahetse Sharpeville ka 1960.

Bolong ea maoto re nale dibapadi tse ngata ho feta di-region tsohle tsa South African Football Association (Safa). The greatest ke Mr. Simon ‘The Bull’ Lehoko, ea bapetseng the first SA XI gahlanong le Englane ba wina 4-2, hape ba bapala le Rhodesia ba wina 6-2.

Ho ditebele re nale champion ya international ka early 60s, Mr. Guitar Man Motlathledi “The Brown Bomber” eo ene e le the first welterweight champion o ne a ye Englane a re, “I have an educated left hand,” le ba bang ba bangata.

O bona hantle hore Modimo o re file. Mminong re bua ka Nana Motijoane (Coyote The Wild Dog), Zakaria Hlatshwayo (Spokes H), Thabo Nhlapo (Tizzer), Senyaka Kekana le ba bang.

Hobane rona mona re region e qadileng pele ho ba le fektri kapa company ya tshepe naha le Africa ka bophara. USCO e qadile ka 1911 ke Mr Horrace Wright le Sammy Marks ka 2010 e ne e qeta 100 years. USCO ke giant steel company empa kajeno e kwetswe batho ha ba sebetse. Ebile le tse ding di a kwalwa Samancor, Arcellor Mittal, Cape Gates di fokotsa basebetsi jwale stress se tlo pahama le tlhekefetso e a qala, ke bona kotsi ke bona mahlomola.

Bringing awareness through football

Letsema lona le bapala karolo e kholo ho rona ka bolo ya maoto ke moo ho tlang mang le mang teng ho feta boxing le music. Empa le tsona di kopanya batho. Jwale re kgetha soccer hobane yona e kopanya kaofela batho; bana, batho ba baholo. Jwale rona ha re thotse re sheba ra bona hore bolo ya maoto e bua maleme kaofela ebile 95% hodima 1 Billion ya batho ba rata bolo ya maoto. Jwale re le Letsema ra bona hore re sebedisane le Pooe Tournament.

Tournament ya bolo e ne e entswe ke Mr Pooe, e bitswa Pooe Soccer Tournament, hopola hore e ba mekhahlelo e mene e leng Last 16, Last

8, Last 4 and Final. E bapalwa ka December ebila ka mehla ka tournament ya Pooe ho tla batho ba bangata. Monyaka, thabo, medidietsane yona ke monate. Jwalo ka ha e ka ke keresemose kapa ho hlajuwe khomo tse ngata, e ne e ka letsatsi le se dikele ka makhaolakhang.

Mr Coach 'The Bull' Lehoko ke yena a ileng a re re ka khona ho bapala karolo moo e be ho romellwa nna ke sebetsa le Chippa Vilakazi jwalo ka motsamaisi wa tournament.

Jwale rona re kopile ho ba karolo for tsatsi leo fela bekeng tseo tse tharo. Nna Mokete Lephollitse ke ile ka tsebisa di-team ka Letsema hore ke eng, le etsa eng mme ba re amohela hantle. Kwana Pooe Event re qadile re kopana le di-teams pele ho ba hlaba malotsana ka GBV. Ba ile ba nkamohela ka diatla tse mofuthu ebile ba re dumela hle moruti ya khabane, jwale le yona taba eo e entse hore mosebetsi wa ka o be bonolo. Nna ke ne ke etsa presentation ho di-teams empa ho sechaba re entse mokoloko ka banner ya Letsema ra ba ra nka dinepe le ba bang ba di-spectators. Batho ba bangata ba botsa potso ebile ba re ba utlwisisa ha bonolo ka tlhekefetso. Ha re bua ka tlhekefetso re bontshana ka kopano, ho ba mmoho e seng ho raha kapa ho boksa molekane wa hao.

Re hopotse ho theola tlhekefetso ena ho fihla ho 20% ka 2030 hore qetellong ho se be le sello le mehau le ditsikitlano tsa meno. Lebaka le etsang hore re bue jwalo ke hore batho le ka ditrateng ba qala ho bua ka taba ena le lona Letsema hore le thusitse ba bang jwang ho ba le khotso ka malapeng. Banana ba ka bang dilemo tse 19-20 batla ho nna ba leboha ka moo re ba thusitseng ka teng mathateng a bona a ho qabana le balekane ba bona. Jwale hantlentle re ngolla baahi ba khutlotharo ya lekhoa mmoho le mmuso oa naha ka taba e ho be me moo ho behoang bana ba hlekefetswang teng. Jwale re le Letsema re emetse ho etsa tournament ya rona re kenya big team Kaizer Chiefs ka nako e tlang.

Tseo ke di ratang ka Letsema

Ke khotatsoa haholo ke tsela eo mona Letsema dintho di etswang ka teng. Tlhompho e makatsang. Ho nna Letsema ke e tshwantsa le university or college of education. Ho kopana le boShamim, Michelle,

Nina, Nosipho, Nancy Castro, including The Bull Lehoko.

Letsema le fa mang le mang sebaka sa maikutlo a hae, to express our feelings and remove stress. Letsema restores self-confidence and pride. Wa tseba exercises tseo Letsema e di etsang pele ho qala mosebetsi wa letsatsi di bontsha hantle boholo ba Ntata rona ya mahodimong. Di a phedisa jwalo ka ka lentsoe la Ntate Modimo le phedisa. Ntho e nngwe ka Letsema ho na le lerato le makatsang e ka re ho kabe ho le jwalo hohle mesebetsing, malapeng, dikolong. Jwale ka moruti ke re kopano, lerato le khotso.

Letsema taught me to accept life as it comes. We help each other with our problems. Since I joined Letsema I find that I have improved my communication skills. I have also learnt to think positively and that makes me happy. Thinking positively leads to growth, you begin to see life in a positive way. Jwale nna ke bona mona ho na le bohlokwa ba hore re be ngatana e le nngwe.

Letsema le kothalletsa emong le emong ho ngola ka bophelo ba hae kapo ho ngola buka ho ba mongodi ebang ho etsahala mohlomong ho ka etsahala hore emong wa rona e be moqolototsi wa ditaba qetellong. Wa tseba hore ka ho ngola le ho bapala o fumana bophelo bo botle le ho ikwetlisa e be o lebala maima le mathatha a ho tshwenyang. Ho na le lengolo Bebeleng ke Johanne o re le hoja batho ba lefatshe ba re ho fedile ka nna, Modimo o re tjhee o tla tswella ho toro e nngwe le e nngwe, Amen.

Ke tsa Mosia Mokete Lepholletse. Ke thabo le monyaka.



Letsema Open Space, June 2014.



Letsema Open Space, Saul Tsoetetsi Sports Centre, June 2014

Part Two

Writings by Letsema Coaches



Michel Friedman



Nina Benjamin



Nosipho Twala



Fazila Gany



Jabulile Masetle



Bongani Dlamini



Letsema Open Space, Saul Tsoetsi Sports Centre, June 2014

Memories and new connections

Michel Friedman

Reading THE MOTH book, stories about powerful moments that forever changed people's lives, got me thinking about Letsema and why it's got such a deep hold on me, even though I spend so little time there these days. My first thought is because of how central story telling has become to its existence and how somehow we have also created a space where people learn to "open themselves to others" even in the most extreme circumstances. Suddenly there is new meaning for me. I see with greater clarity how Letsema falls outside the realm of 'the development industry' – and into the realm of pure humanness.

The repeated claims of how this space makes participants feel – whole, healed, happy — remains very touching to me and somehow hopeful in the midst of all the corruption and mayhem going on in the country right now.

I feel like my early training in politics and Marxism in the 1980s somehow sharpened the intellectual side of me, the part that knows how to remain detached, how to analyse away emotion – and that Letsema is somehow returning me to a deeply grounded humanness. Something has shifted for me. My perspective has somehow forever altered.

I remember what a sense of paralysis we all had in the first program meeting leading up to the formation of Letsema and how I had to use a processmind exercise to shift the energy in the room. My image was on the Transkei coast - that wild ocean crashing against the rocks and the gentle slope of the mountain on the side. The waves represented the violence, the hill the possibility for healing or peace.

Somehow the way we have worked has defied all odds, all tradition-

al ways of working, all formal approaches. We have ended up working in a way that is close to life, close to an unfolding of something – emergent in the truest sense of the word. That is what keeps me wanting to be involved and the growing love for the people there.

The Vukani hall in which most Letsema meetings happen, had already become familiar to me. From the earlier Gender Action Learning process and especially from those incredibly memorable Jin Shin Jyutsu weekends that Mama Thandi organised. Despite its darkness and incredible cold in winter, I realise now how much my experience of that space has changed. How when I first arrived to do the Vaal FLOW work, I felt strange, alien, wondering what I was doing there so far away from my current life in Cape Town. What had brought me there I wondered to myself. Yes, my commitment to the work, but I wondered what else.

Parys, Vanderbijl Park, the Vaal River - were places I had gone to as a child. Places I remember as clean, well-kept and organised. Now I was spending all my time in Sebokeng, Evaton and from time to time visiting the other areas, where Letsema members come from – Sharpeville, Bophelong, and Orange Farm. Places that have more dusty roads than tarred ones and which are often strewn with litter. They are areas that have their own stories of everyday violence, rape, intimate partner abuse, murder, violation of young male initiates and large-scale massacres.

Sharpeville is remembered for that fateful day in March of 1960 when the South African police murdered in cold blood 69 black African people who were protesting about having to carry the *dompas*. Boipatong, an area that Letsema has recently been asked to work in by the police, is notorious for the 1992 Massacre of 45 local residents by armed men. Sebokeng is remembered for the killing of more than 30 people in 1991 who were attending an all night vigil for community leader Chris Nangalembe. When we were planning the project, Nosipho, our colleague who lives in Evaton – told us there is now so much violence people only respond to the most extreme forms of violence.

In the first Letsema session when we asked people to tell stories of

violence - of something that had touched them and made them interested in being involved – I was powerfully struck by my own memory of Vaal violence. One I had forgotten about and not consciously registered when we as the Gender at Work team chose to and agreed to work in the Vaal. The story of Cherry Feldman’s murder jumped into my mind and shook me awake. Suddenly the “Vaal violence” had direct and personal meaning for me too, my sense of ‘outsider’ status totally transformed in that instance of memoir. Supporting this work was tangibly woven in and deeply connected with my own life in a way I had not at first realised.

As a youngish girl I would go with my family to Parys and to the Vaal River to visit the family of my second oldest brother’s wife, Hazel. Cherry Feldman was Hazel’s mother. They were, I suppose, what we could call typical white farmers. They lived in a large house in the small town of Parys with a really big garden. I remember the garden most because it seemed like a magical fairyland to me. We could play there for hours – far from the adults and in a world far removed from our inner urban Johannesburg life. Sometimes, Perry, or Abe, her father would take us to see their endless wheat fields and cattle farms. I remember them both as ‘farmer’ men – often bronzed – very tanned – always wearing shorts and very earthy, grounded. Not intellectuals or professionals or businessmen like my older brothers and father. They also spoke Afrikaans. Cherry was always knitting some very colourful jersey.

Then in my early twenties, when I was in the Biyela area, KwaZulu-Natal doing some work at a Rural Service Centre my mother called one night to tell me that Cherry had been murdered in the most gruesome way, by the son of the gardener who worked for them. He and his accomplices had stolen the family car, beat Cherry and Abe, put them in the boot of the car and drove off. Lying there in that car-boot Abe could feel Cherry’s life force give way. He survived to tell the tale but was a broken man. Violence against white farmers was now in my own life, my own bodymind. It scared me. I remember going to the funeral and being impressed with Hazel who spoke during the evening prayers.

That was the first time I'd seen or heard a woman speak at a Jewish prayer service. Not only was I touched by that, but also by her courage to speak in the face of the horror she had to face.

I wondered what it must have felt like for that gardener's son to have grown up watching his father work in that big house with so much wealth while he lived the impoverished life of a farmworker's child – what would have caused him to feel so angry that the only way he could express his feelings was to kill the source of that relative wealth?

This is the meta-structure of the Vaal area. White farming land of wealth and opulence and massive sprawling informal settlements with extremely high levels of poverty and unemployment, mixed in with conventional urban townships. It is also the meta-structure of our country.

I have walked through too much of my adult life, numb – internally frozen by what goes on around me in South Africa, unable to adequately deal with the massive inequality, the violence, the inhumanity, impotent to do anything substantial in its wake. Frozen as a way of surviving. And now simultaneously with working in Letsema, that ice is unfreezing. I see a bigger pattern for my involvement. A chance for me to both learn from and give something back to the people living there.

I always knew what we were doing was important but often that nasty critic sitting on my shoulder would devalue it – “it is so little” = “it is not really addressing the structural causes” – “we aren't teaching people 'overt' feminism” – “we aren't addressing the causes of poverty and unemployment”. I would carry so many doubts even whilst continuing with the work and holding the value with the participants.

Slowly I started to see how people's participation in Letsema changed, how their body language shifted, how much life and energy and love and connection was growing in this gently held relatively open space where the participants themselves are sole decision makers about what actions they want to take and what direction they want to move in. I learned how powerfully penetrating is a gentle touch, a container that enables people to listen to each other, to tell their stories of pain and get comfort and support from each other. The meetings are often bubbling

with positive stories of change both small and larger scale.

Participants share how they are bravely facing violence in themselves and in others in new ways. People feel hopeful and encouraged and intensely committed to what they are doing, despite the ongoing high levels of violence all around them. Letsema is enabling people to respond in real time, with courage, hope, honesty, love and commitment.

Like when we were all shocked to hear how on Mother's Day, May 2015, Sarah Mogwera was brutally murdered by her husband. 19 stab wounds later this vibrant woman who was active in Letsema and a volunteer police reservist, lay lifeless. The pain of her untimely, death ripped a hole through all of us. Some of the most active Letsema women were not only angry but also felt like failures, like they were not doing enough. As if our efforts in such a short time could entirely stop the horror that has taken centuries to create. Letsema organised a memorial march through the field where she was killed to honour Sarah's life, helping to transform the rage at her death into a creative act of resistance.

I too have my own story of change. The Vukani hall is now for me a warm welcoming space. I no longer feel alien there – it feels as much like home to me as to the rest of the participants. The lights twinkling in people's eyes and the bright smiles on their faces, the humour with which they tell their stories, the camaraderie between the women and men, the gays and straights, the ease with which this new norm is being created – feels like a mini revolution of its own. It is a live demonstration of the non-violent democracy in action that Raymond Suttner talks about. I know that as a facilitator, I have to hold all the oppositions inside myself and in the group - the pain and laughter, the joys and sorrows, the economic wealth and the poverty, the women and the men. The double-sided Vaal, like the country, lives in me, in my memories, and in the present, in the connections between all of us working in Letsema. Mostly I am now supporting the work from a distance, unable to let this remarkable process go.

Choosing non-violence: a Core Group response

Nina Benjamin

White paint on black cloth! This is what caught my attention when I arrived at the Sarah Memorial Walk on 22 May 2015. We all gathered at the Spar in a dusty and dry section of Orange Farm. Dressed in black a few women were carefully painting a message on the black cloth which lay over the bonnet of a car. From where I was standing I could see the faces of the women etched with lines of concentration as the words

‘IN LOVING MEMORY OF SARAH’

emerged in white letters on the black cloth. The dust and dry Orange Farm sand blew softly against the edges of the cloth and covered the sombre black shoes the women wore.

As we stood in the warm autumn sun more Letsema participants joined us and the group around the car grew. A police van came cruising down the road and for a moment my heart skipped a beat. As they slowly approached us I saw a group of young people dressed in what looked like police uniforms. Police youth desk members were arriving, all of them part of the local community policing forum. Sarah sometimes volunteered at her local police station and had been a member of the youth desk. Sarah, it would seem, had at heart the safety and security of her community.

I wondered how little security we have in this country, how a young mother of four children, a woman portrayed by friends and neighbours as both strong and willing to take action to stop the domestic violence she was experiencing in her home, could become another victim of the most extreme form of intimate partner violence – murder.

On Sunday the 10th of May, Mother’s Day, Sarah was followed and

brutally stabbed to death. From those who knew her we learnt that Sarah had felt threatened by her partner's abusive behaviour. She had got a restriction order against him and she had left the home she shared with him. She returned that Sunday to fetch the belongings she had left behind. When she left, her partner followed her. As she approached an isolated spot he caught up with her and stabbed her to death. But the spot was not as isolated as he imagined and a passer-by witnessed the attack and was able to identify him to the police.

Sarah, who had participated in Letsema gatherings, who had committed herself to the Letsema goal of bringing 0% gender-based violence to the Vaal, who had bravely spoken out of her own experience of abuse at community wide gatherings, lay dead, brutally murdered by her partner, the father of her children, a member of the Orange Farm Community – a man who I assume once loved Sarah.

As Letsema we had not let Sarah's death go unnoticed. The group gathered around the car lifted the black cloth and started the memorial walk singing and dancing with a mixture of sadness, pain, anger but also hope that our presence on the streets of Orange Farm would send out a message that Letsema remained resolute to creating a Vaal free of gender-based violence.

My thoughts went back to the day I first heard of this tragic event. It was on May 11. The Letsema Core Group had planned a discussion on fundraising. We had started the meeting with the usual Tai Chi. When we got to the check in where people shared how they were feeling as they came into the meeting the mood shifted very quickly. Core Group member Khethiwe spoke and I could not read her expression. 'My friend was stabbed nineteen times by her partner,' was how she started. 'Yesterday on Mother's Day my friend Sarah was stabbed nineteen times'. The room was silent and I felt myself go cold. It was not only what Khethiwe was saying, but also the way she was speaking – slowly, deliberately with such pent up anger and with eyes filled with tears.

I tried not to look at anyone around the table for fear that they would see how totally lost I felt. I was facilitating. I felt I needed to say something to help, to do something about the mood, to find a way of opening

up a space that would allow us to support Khethiwe, to express our own fear and anger, to ask questions, not only because a story like the one Khethiwe was telling us left us horrified, but also because our sense of curiosity led us to want to know more, to understand all the details, to try to make sense of what all of us fear most.

The details were soon bubbling out of Khethiwe. Others in the group were each holding their mixed emotions in their own way.

It was Radikeledi's response that shook me back to a more conscious state of 'do something! You are the facilitator'.

Radikeledi who is usually part of the Traditional Healers Action Group, a Letsema group focused on the role of traditional and cultural practices in working towards 0% gender-based violence in the Vaal, was today attending the Core Group discussion. He had tears in his eyes. He struggled to speak. Through translation of his Sesotho words into English this is what I heard, 'It was Mother's Day and I thought everyone would be happy. Such brutality. Where is our Ubuntu? It is like men are pigs. This is making all men look bad. If he was tired of her why did he not take her back to her family?'

Radikeledi's last statement, 'why did he not take her back to her family?' brought another twist to what we were discussing. I shifted a little in my seat as I thought about what we were trying to do in Letsema. Not standing afar, criticising and figuratively throwing stones at the patriarchal, abusive practices that undermined, but rather including traditional healers - the custodians of culture, custodians who had joined Letsema because they saw how some of these practices, initiation schools in particular, could become a means of entrenching abusive and violent forms of patriarchal power. The traditional joined Letsema to be part of a broader community focused on changing the Vaal, changing the lives of men, women and children in the Vaal. But change is slow and for everyone touched by Letsema, change is most of all about starting with one's own practices and working towards a community of practice that is characterised by respect, deep listening, and questioning to understand, learn and change.

So when Radikeledi said through his tears, 'if he was tired of her

why did he not take her back to her family?’ I knew I was part of our journey as Letsema, where through respectful conversation people were willing to bare their soul, to cry openly and show the pain they felt for the death of a woman they barely knew, a woman murdered because she was a woman, a woman whose movements, thoughts and ultimately whether she lived or died, the murderer believed he should control.

If a man could so clearly feel this injustice so deeply as to cry publicly, then we were on the road to recognising that no man should ever control another person, a woman, without causing extreme pain to both her and himself – the pain of dehumanisation.

So as my thoughts settled on Radikeledi’s words I realised that my folded arms were a sign that my body was sending out a message that I needed to protect myself from the pain surrounding me and if this is what I was experiencing I felt sure the rest of the group was going through similar emotions.

By now everyone had focused on supporting Khethiwe. And had left their own emotions raw, circling the room in dark clouds. My thoughts were ‘where are Michel and Fazila to help me to do the body work I had seen and experienced as very effective in shifting the mood in a room?’

The clouds above were thickening and it felt like a storm might be approaching. I quietly asked everyone to start holding their fingers. I so wished I had paid more attention to the role each finger plays in dealing with different emotions. We slowly and quietly started holding each finger. This action alone seemed to bring a different mood into the room. I noticed how each person’s breathing started shifting. How we were able to look up and into each other’s eyes. It seemed that the finger holds were acting as a trigger to remember where we are, how we came together as a group, how we feel when we do Tai Chi, and how being part of Letsema is about bringing all of ourselves into this very special space at Vukani, a room physically constructed not to allow a lot of light in, but when Letsema members entered, filled up with a bright light.

The clouds started lifting ever so lightly and now it felt we could start talking again. With a lighter note I reminded everyone to hug themselves both as a way of feeling protected and contained and as rec-

ognition that we are present in all our beauty and joy. As we came out of the hug Core Group Member Noxolo was the first to speak. Feeling more settled and confident that we could now shift to a lighter more engaging space, Noxolo articulated what I suspect everyone in the group was feeling, 'Khethiwe sounds dangerous. We need to deal with this in a safe manner. If you do anything to the man or his family you will be wrong in the eyes of the law. You cannot try to influence the family, you need to contact POWA'. (People Opposing Women Abuse an NGO working in the area).

Now that the mood had lifted Core Group Member Simon joined in, 'Violence breeds violence. Maybe we can have a prayer meeting, write something on a stone. Crimes are committed by men – perhaps we should establish a forum for men, men who speak out against GBV'.

Both Noxolo and Simon were responding to what they understood as Khethiwe's extreme anger and from this place of deep pain and anger her need to respond in a way that came across as vengeful.

I could see the value of the body work we had done. While everyone remained with a great deal of pain and anger, they were starting to transform this anger into an energy that allowed some sunshine through. It seemed we were able to go back to our Letsema energy, an energy of working from a deep sense of humanity we felt for ourselves and others and were able to speak of responding non-violently.

It was in this spirit that my co-facilitator, Nancy started asking the group to think about actions that could convey this sense of humanity and non-violence. The group was now more open to being gently challenged and the initial idea of a march to call for bail to be denied slowly shifted to a remembrance walk. Noxolo summed up the feeling of the core group, 'Usually we march to the police station but I like the idea of rolling a stone and writing something in memory of Sarah. I think the idea of a remembrance walk and rolling a stone to the place where Sarah died is a good idea and something we can do in Bophelong as well.'

As our meeting drew to a close the group finalised the practical arrangements for the walk. I was left feeling unsure of what had just taken place. It felt like a mix of the old and the new. How many times have we

not heard of a Sarah, a young woman punished for being a woman? But this time it challenged the very heart of Letsema's vision of creating 0% gender-based violence in the Vaal – the intimate space and the violence between partners, a violence we all knew about but now the victim was one of us, a young woman committed to being part of Letsema's vision. As Letsema at that moment we were all Sarah.

On 22 May we walked instead of marched. We proudly carried knives in one hand and apples in the other – symbolically showing how the very same tools used to kill are the tools we use to eat with. We dug deep into ourselves and tried to clear ourselves of vengeful and violent responses. But we are still Sarah moving through a maze of legal actions, individual empowerment, struggling with getting support from government institutions and knocking our heads against deeply held cultural beliefs and practices.

It is our very intimate beings that are being violated and where do you find ways to stop that? So we continue as Letsema to knock on the doors of the powers, inviting them in. Nudging and speaking to our neighbours about the possibility of a different world, allowing ourselves to question and be questioned, sharing our hopes and tears and ultimately working toward our own collective impact – our Vaal free of GBV. Let's make sure that the change we make goes to the heart, to the intimate spaces where two sets of eyes meet and, in Sarah's memory, we are able to move to a Vaal free of GBV.

Sarah's death has not left anyone of us untouched and as we go back to our daily business we carry new insights and lessons. The Core Group is planning a memorial in different communities as part of an awareness campaign. As a facilitator the experience has been an opportunity to reflect more deeply on my role in the growth and development of the Core Group. Using the Harvest Moon Consultants description of the work of the core team as

1. To hold the deep core of the work, the shared purpose and translate this into an invitation for action
2. Learn about and incorporate new ways of doing and to lead the

way in this learning

3. To pay attention to relationships between people in the system, looking to create a system of accountability based on trust and respect

Learning new ways

Learning new ways of doing often takes place in moments of urgency, anxiety and pain. The Core Group's initial reaction was to demand that the perpetrator be refused bail. This came from a place of mistrust and suspicion of the police and the courts in addressing cases like this. Even as this was being proposed there was a sense of unease in the group not so much about the action but about the intention behind this action.

The Core Group was intuitively questioning their intention for revenge and reflecting on whether revenge would get us closer to the vision of creating a Vaal with 0% gender-based violence. Our work as coaches over the past few months has been to support Letsema action groups to be in a constant state of reflection so that while an action is being planned or carried out there is also a process of reflection. With the broad framing question of, 'how do we create a Vaal free of gender-based violence' as a check – the Core Group was reflecting on their initial responses and as coaches it was in this moment of 'checking themselves' that we were able to pose questions that reminded them more explicitly of our vision as Letsema. The very immediate nature of Khethiwe's pain made it necessary for her peer Core Group members to remind her of our vision and this reflection moment offered the opportunity to use questions to support the group in articulating an intention closer to the vision of Letsema. From this followed the idea of a remembrance walk as an action to convey a message of firm non-violent resistance to gender-based violence and the senseless dehumanisation of the act of murder.

As I reflect back through the lens of the Harvest Moon Consultants, I see a group with a deep sense of shared purpose, conscious of the need

to draw broader layers of community stakeholders closer and to engage with this shared purpose. With very few resources the Core Group works from a passion and commitment bringing the Letsema Action Groups on board. As the Core Group organised the memorial walk, relations were strengthened with the Youth Desk, church members, police, media and concerned members of the community – broadening Letsema’s vision of a Vaal with 0% gender-based violence.

Using conversation to overcome barriers

Nosipho Twala

The Dialogue Group organises activities contributing to achieving zero per cent gender-based violence in the Vaal. The group has nine members, seven women and two men, between 20 and 45 years old. As the group's coach I observed that despite their successes, group members appeared to lack confidence as facilitators of community dialogues.

I vividly remember the first dialogue the group organised during condom week in February 2015 to help women advocate for safe sex. The group invited a speaker from LoveLife, and decided to ask the local clinic for female condoms.

Feeling intimidated at the thought of approaching clinic staff, group members decided to go to the clinic as a group. They were excited and surprised that the nurse at the clinic took them seriously, was interested in their activity, gave them condoms to distribute at their dialogue, and asked to be invited to the event. But even this positive response did not give them confidence.

During our coaching sessions we spent time looking at why they were struggling to trust themselves. I discovered that most group members had dreams to further their education but their parents could not afford tertiary education. Two group members had dropped out of school because they fell pregnant and they now felt inferior among others who seemed to have more information. Dialogue Group members were young and easily intimidated by the experience and knowledge of others. They have not interacted with people in the NGO or CBO sector. Letsema was their first experience of working with CBOs and the community. Some have worked in retail and the security industry. They felt

they needed training, support and confidence to believe in themselves.

Over eighteen months I worked with Dialogue Group members in monthly coaching sessions designed to support them in running dialogues to contribute to the goal of 0% GBV in the Vaal. In addition, the group met once a month with other action groups and with the Letsema Core Group. The Dialogue Group seemed to be the weakest as compared with other Letsema groups.

Creating reflection spaces and the opportunity to learn by doing seemed to give members confidence to try new things. Over time Dialogue Group members were able to deepen and strengthen their ideas around ways to decrease gender-based violence. Through monthly reflections, group members understood that our methodologies give space for them to experiment and try new things. If something does not work, you reflect on the insights and lessons from your last actions to experiment with something new. The language of failure is not used.

The check-in before group meetings worked well in allowing participants to debrief and offload issues they were struggling with and to celebrate their highlights. This allowed us to identify next steps based on what was emerging, draw new insights from our learnings and develop new hypothesis.

As facilitator I held the space and attempted to create a safe space for group members to feel supported and to ask questions which assisted them to reach agreement on next steps. They also began to clarify their intentions, and appreciate the role they were playing in their community.

Members shared experiences in their roles as parents, on why children become bullies based on their own upbringing, and the challenges that cause us to neglect our children or our responsibilities as parents. From these discussions the group decided to work with men and women as parents.

In monthly coordination meetings with the other Letsema groups Dialogue Group members shared their experiences, learnt from each other, planned collective actions and assessed the collective impact they were making in the community. As facilitators we brought a feminist

commitment to these processes, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected. It was important that since reducing violence is our goal, our methodologies should be non-threatening, embracing, inclusive and peaceful even when confronted with difficult situations.

The joint meetings were structured in a way that encouraged everyone to speak. Even if a person would not say much during the meeting, every individual had to say something during check-in and check-out. This meeting role modelled the importance and value of having others listen empathetically without interrupting. This helped Dialogue Group members to gain confidence. Yet, they still felt shy and had fears about public speaking. They needed affirmation and reassurance after these meetings.

An 'Aha' moment for me as facilitator happened when I decided to pay the Dialogue Group a visit to find out why they had not attended the coaching meeting in June 2015. This was strange because they never missed a meeting without an apology. I tried phoning group members to make an appointment but all their phones were off. I started to panic wondering if everything was okay. I phoned a Letsema member who lives in the same area as group members and asked for her help in contacting the group to tell them I was coming, as I wanted to make sure they were okay. She set up an appointment for 09.00 on Saturday morning.

When I arrived at Dialogue Group member Lindiwe's yard I found children playing in clean surroundings. I was struck by how clean this yard was as compared to the other yards in the neighbourhood. I wondered if I was really in an informal settlement.

While we waited for other group members to arrive, I commented to Lindiwe about the clean surroundings in the yard. There were thirty-five tenants in this yard each with their own shack in addition to the landlord's house. There were only three toilets and they were clean and neat. Even the toilets in our shopping mall with full time cleaners in attendance were not that clean.

Lindiwe told me that to keep the yard clean without dripping taps, the mothers in the yard worked with the children on weekends and

school holidays, making them aware of the need to save water. Through poems and dramas the mothers encouraged the children to save water because water is a resource that we all need. So all the children now know we have to save water for our planet. Whenever they see a dripping tap the children come running to report this. When the parents get these reports they act immediately.

As Lindiwe was telling me this story, Flatta's twelve-year-old son walked in and Lindiwe asked him to bring his friends to perform the water poem. He returned with three friends and they recited the poem with gestures to drive home their point. Three other boys playing outside came in to join in the poem. Even the little ones attending kindergarten knew this poem and joined in:

*Water our natural resource
We wash with you
We cook with you
You water our plants
What can we ever do without you
We praise and love you
Our thirst quencher
Our swimming pools will not make us happy without you
We will always preserve you
We will guard you
We will make sure that we always have you*

When the other two Dialogue Group members arrived they told me that they had been without electricity for a month because their transformer had burst. They could not charge their phones and so they could not contact me.

They went on to tell me about the community meetings they were now participating in and how they were trying to organise parents. As I listened I noticed a picture of Dialogue Group members in school uniform. I asked about this and Flatta said, 'Oh this is an event we organised on 16 June to celebrate Youth Day. We wear school uniforms and

we engage youth in a dialogue about this monster called gender-based violence that has taken over our community. The school uniform breaks the ice and makes young people engage with us as equals. Surprisingly, wearing school uniforms makes us feel and act young and this makes us lose our power as mothers and adults’.

Lindiwe added, ‘this makes us as mothers understand how young people feel everyday in spaces controlled by adults. They feel powerless and small’. Dialogue Group member Mapule said what made her feel even smaller were the questions young people asked. Most questions were around relationships between themselves and adults. One young person had asked, ‘is it really necessary for our mothers to be ugly to us? Is there no gentle way of doing this?’ Lindiwe said this question made her freeze. She got a chill in her spine.

Lindiwe said she was happy to be part of Letsema because this showed her the value of being kind to others and even more to your family and children. She had worked hard at repairing her relationship with her son.

As I was about to leave I asked the group, ‘so when did your electricity come back?’ They giggled and said, ‘you know what. It did not just come back. We had to act. We used the same strategy we used for Sarah’s walk’ (a walk organised by Letsema to commemorate Sarah, a women from a neighbouring community, who was murdered by her husband).

Lindiwe who was very shy and used to lock herself in her house before participating in Letsema said, ‘I organised the walk. We walked to Palm Springs to the Eskom Office 10 km from our area before negotiating with Eskom. We wanted to find out more before taking action. We chose a walk over a march because marches sometimes become very violent and we would need to wait a long time for permission to march. So we walked silently on the pavements from Evaton. Police saw us walking and decided to escort us in case we changed our minds and started looting or destroying property.

When I heard this I stopped the women and emphasised that if we loot or become violent we will defeat our plan. They all agreed with me

and we all chose peace over violence and this was fulfilling.’

Lindiwe continued, ‘When we arrived at Eskom, I did not want to go inside and negotiate as I felt this was not my strength. I hate boardrooms and I did not want to engage with educated, intelligent people. Eskom officials and the security did not believe we had come in peace. They insisted on only three representatives as they could not negotiate with everybody. We chose three people from the group to go inside and negotiate’. Soon after this action Eskom restored their electricity supply.

The group said they had to take action because, ‘our shacks could burn as we were using candles, paraffin and gas to keep warm as this year’s winter was harsh and unbearable. We did not want what happened to our neighbour to ever happen again in our neighbourhood’.

‘What happened to your neighbour?’ I asked. ‘He burnt to death’. ‘His pillow caught fire from a candle while he was sleeping. We were woken by his screams, but it took us time to notice the fire. This man always fought with his partner and we had all got used to hearing screams from their shack and we would call the police. As usual we phoned the police, when the police arrived they realised there was a fire. But by this time the flames and blazing were high and out of control’.

‘What also confused us is that there was a lock on his door and the window was open. We thought that he had managed to escape. It took the fire department three hours to extinguish the fire,’ Lindiwe said, ‘as the community we felt guilty about this incident and cannot stop blaming ourselves.’ This incident, though sad, opened a space for us to talk about gender-based violence and this sent a message to partners who are violent.

During this visit I learnt things about the group that had not surfaced in all my sessions with them over the past months. This visit was a surprise as it revealed so much about the group that I had not known before. I wonder if I would ever have known what I learnt in this one visit had I not asked the questions that I did. It also raised the question of how to structure coaching sessions in a way that creates openness and does not close down space for sharing, and whether I needed to

rethink how to ask questions in the coaching sessions.

I asked the group members why they had not shared these experiences in our coaching sessions. They said, 'oh we forgot. Anyway it is just one of those things we do. We did not think it was important'.

The experiences the group related to me during this visit showed clearly how group members had developed over the past months of mentoring and coaching. I realised women were doing things in their communities but that they undervalued their contributions and still lacked confidence. I wondered if group members did not see their actions as important because as women they do not value their work and contributions. I wondered if the reason they had not shared these activities in Letsema coaching sessions was because they did not see these activities as part of Letsema. I also wondered whether their involvement in Letsema had contributed to these actions.

Dialogue Group members told me that their growth was purely linked to Letsema, that being in Letsema encouraged them to participate in other spaces such as school governing body meetings, community meetings and the church. Being in these spaces also contributed to their growth.

When I think of my journey with this group, three things come to mind, which can help with ongoing sharing, learning and confidence in order to grow community leaders.

Firstly, asking questions over a cup of tea on a Saturday when I came to visit got me to learn more about the group. This was surprising as I thought we related as peers. I now realise that it does not matter how you create the space, the role of mentor carries a certain power and this is something we have to take note of. Because I was visiting the group in their own space this gave them power to engage with me on more equal terms.

Secondly, I learnt from their actions that silence had a way of being loud. The message was very loud and clear when women walked to Eskom and the parastatal acted and responded before people lost their cool.

Thirdly, if we want to support women to lead change in their com-

munities we need to create enabling spaces to support them to learn. That is why using tools like the before and after action review is important. Women planned their walk and were clear on the results they wanted and on the message they wanted to convey. This is a learning that the group has internalised.

Cultivating leaders

Fazila Gany

This is the story of how a vegetable garden grew more than just vegetables. It is a story of how the vegetable garden acted as a catalyst to cultivate leaders. Not just any leaders. But leaders who use non-traditional approaches, working in a collective way for maximum impact, asking questions, reflecting and daring to go out and challenge social norms. Leaders who model a feminist approach which keeps women in the foreground and acknowledges women's challenges in society.

Meeting these leaders

The smell of coffee mixed with sounds of traffic wafted into the coffee shop. I sat, books strewn on the table, awaiting the arrival of Magogo and Moeketsi, key role players of the Vegetable Garden Action Group.

The Group is part of Letsema which aims to reduce gender-based violence in the Vaal to 0%. The vegetable garden is a platform to discuss gender-based violence and from which to launch actions to reach this goal. I first had contact with Magogo and Moeketsi eighteen months before and I had met with them over the past 10 months (since September 2014) as their coach, in monthly coaching sessions. But this was the first time I was meeting them outside their community area in the Vaal. I was aware of a slight tension in my body as I waited. I wondered if they would be comfortable in this set up at the Wits Arts Museum coffee shop in the Johannesburg city centre.

Ten minutes went by before I heard footsteps and shuffling. I lifted

my head to see Magogo and Moeketsi approaching. But I saw more than that. Their gait gave off an external confidence and contentment that I had not seen 18 months before. My shoulders relaxed. I stood to welcome them. The air around them shouted of newfound confidence and this was validated by the conversation that ensued over coffee.

I found myself introspecting on the changes in Magogo and Moeketsi, on what they brought to the Letsema process, what they had gained from the process, and how their personal growth added to the strength of the ongoing Letsema processes.

Magogo, a 59-year-old single unemployed mother, and Moeketsi, a 33-year-old father and husband, both from the small township of Evaton in the Vaal brought their passion for gardening, people and transformation of their community into the Letsema process.

Letsema coaching and mentoring created space for open dialogue and meaningful conversation – allowing for these two key role players to take responsibility and ownership. Through the use of Emergent Learning they were mentored to keep their finger on the pulse in order to keep track of what was emerging, to be aware of new insights and the results of their actions. Through the process of reflection they were able to refine their hypotheses and come up with new actions. The mentoring gave them a more personal space and an opportunity to stay focused on the issues that needed attention and this also helped to inspire them. Their confidence and courage sprouted a conviction to build and work with the most challenging issues. As much as I gave support as a coach with critical thinking and questioning, I learnt a new sense of humility from them.

My experience as a coach has been a journey filled with insightful learning. Coaching requires patience; it needs you to be present in your body, mind and spirit. As coach I was no expert but rather a medium to help with reflection, capture learnings and guide the group to change their ‘lens’ in order to see differently.

For both Magogo and Moeketsi the vegetable garden and the Letsema space were a catalyst for personal growth and the motivation to engage community members in unpacking GBV. When a bird needs to

take off it needs something solid beneath it, to spur its wings on, and this is what the vegetable garden and Letsema gave them. This was their space for engaging freely and openly. The vegetable garden gave them purpose to persist for a bigger cause.

As I worked with them over the months they began to demonstrate a different model of leadership – different from the normative leader as dictator – coming close to, or resembling, feminist leadership. They demonstrated and spoke of leaders as an example, not a boss. That leading is not about dictating or walking in front. It is about co-creating with commitment and passion.

Their emphasis on respect and trust formed a solid thread that ran through all their reflections. They felt that if you engage with self-respect then people respond with respect, and simultaneously trust you, and open up to you. These are elements of feminist leadership affirmed in the group's practice. They talk of walking the talk, that if my heart is empty how can I nourish my spirit and how can I nurture those around me. As Magogo says, there has to be 'an openness of heart' and this leads to trust which is key in collectively working together.

In every action Magogo and Moeketsi took, their ability to ask themselves and those around them compelling questions marked their quest for self-reflection and reflection on their actions. Their questioning of their own actions and their deep introspection planted the seeds of self-development.

They reflected on difficult personal relationships. Magogo reflected on her long-standing feud with her sister. She began to see the ongoing conflict as a specific form of gender-based violence – women oppressing women. This resulted in her approaching her sister and engaging in conversation, resulting in making peace and arriving at understanding with empathy. She felt, 'How can I go out there and talk to other women about GBV when I can't get my own house in order?'

Moeketsi opened up and made peace with an experience submerged in his consciousness. He shared in a coaching session how his first relationship was sabotaged by his partner's mother, who saw him as too poor to give her daughter a prosperous future and persuaded her daugh-

ter to break off the relationship. This robbed Moeketsi not only of the woman he considered at the time the love of his life, but of the chance to father the baby she was carrying. He now saw this as a form of gender-based violence against himself and his then girlfriend. While involved in the Letsema process Moeketsi made contact with his daughter from that early relationship - she is now a teenager.

Challenging Norms

Both Magogo and Moeketsi took on the challenge of raising awareness on GBV, in the process surprising even themselves with their tenacity and achievements.

Magogo approached two churches, asking the pastors for thirty minutes to address the congregation, and she engaged the congregations on GBV. Concerned about LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersexed) issues, she approached a church in a poorly resourced area of the township, referred to as ‘a forgotten area’ and initiated a conversation with the congregation on GBV and LGBTI awareness. She spoke from her heart. In a calm yet warm voice she shared her painful experience of discovering that her son was gay. The congregation was captured by her story. She left out neither her pain nor her difficulty in accepting this. The congregation hung their heads. Magogo asked, ‘what would you do if your child was gay?’ There was silence. Then one woman said she thinks her daughter is a lesbian. Magogo raised issues they were carrying in their hearts and this was welcomed. She left a message of the need to ask questions as opposed to judging.

Moeketsi, reflecting on his role as a pastor, became aware of the oppression and suppression of women through distorted understandings of the Bible and began to question his role in the church. He challenged other pastors on how the church was perpetuating GBV with their silence and by misrepresentations of women. I saw the unveiling of a new Moeketsi – challenger, engager, affirmer and the builder of relationships.

When Magogo and Moeketsi learnt that the reason for some wom-

en leaving the vegetable group was their partners' (husbands and boy-friends) unhappiness with the conversations on GBV, Moeketsi decided to dialogue with the partners of these women. He challenged them with respectful questioning of their relationships with their partners and how they saw their roles. He used Biblical references to make a point. He engaged them on the concept of equality and when these men became defensive unpacked further how equality can contribute to building a deeper relationship with their partners. After this engagement the men felt that their wives should go back to the vegetable garden.

Moeketsi's commitment to justice and bringing GBV to 0% found him informally chatting about LGBTI people with a group of men. There was an outcry from these men, but his persistence and resolve allowed him to share his own experience in the Letsema space with gay and lesbian people. He confessed he had initially judged gay and lesbian people, and felt uncomfortable with them. He related how he gradually started talking to gay and lesbian people and saw they were human. Just like him. Later he told me with great pride that one man from the group had invited a gay neighbour to a party at his house; something he would not have done before.

Magogo and Moeketsi's efforts at bringing people together show the strength of collective efforts. As Moeketsi says, 'Unity creates a better working space'.

Conclusion

In as much as the vegetable garden is still in the process of growing, it has sprouted community leaders committed to seeing 0% gender-based violence, and a new perception on LGBTI rights in the eyes of many people in the community. This will contribute towards eradicating hate crimes, and has sprouted many questions in the minds of men and women community members and in the minds of religious leaders.

Coaching, which drew on understandings of emergent learning, provided support to the two key role players to track their insights, affirm

their small victories, question their actions while ensuring a fluidity that eventually resonated with them as they found new ways to work with their own community.

Personal changes helped the two key role players to look at things in a new way, built their confidence and allowed them to approach their community with newfound conviction.

As a coach I have learnt that in order to work collectively there needs to be undying resilience, commitment, passion and continuous questioning. Building relationships and changing consciousness is key to personal development and behaviour change.

Dealing with GBV requires an approach that takes into account the whole person, a deep sense of humanity, empathy and constant reflecting on what is the best way to help people discover their own truth.

Warding off centuries of social norms that have been held together by the 'steely' patriarchy takes time, patience and newfound resilience as the Vegetable Garden Group discovered. I feel a profound sense of gratitude to the Vegetable Garden Action Group for allowing me into their space and also deep admiration for their courage in taking the fight forward to 0% GBV in their community.

Learning is a journey

Jabulile Masetle

In the rural environment of the Vaal there are cows, goats and hunting dogs on dusty streets. It was a cold winter's day in June. At the Saul Tsotetsi Sport Centre kombi taxis were dropping off people.

From the doorway I saw that there were many people already in the hall. I was amazed and I asked myself, 'how are we going to run a participatory process with such a large number of people?'

When I entered the hall I saw creative drawings of bees and butterflies. I saw paint tins filled with sand and in the tin a long stick at the end of which were colourful papers with letters of the alphabet. Gas heaters were positioned around the room but it was still cold.

A group of young people were singing as they came in. As I looked around I saw that there were women and men, young and old people, gay and lesbian people, traditional healers and leaders in traditional dress, and I thought Africa is beautiful!

A bell rang and as I looked up to see where the sound was coming from I saw a lady facilitator by the name of Michel. She was saying in a very soft voice, 'people let us start now'. She managed to get everyone's attention. The hall was now quiet and everybody – all two hundred people present- were looking at Michel. She welcomed everyone, introduced herself and explained that we were going to start with Tai Chi. People looked surprised and were asking, 'what's that?'. Now slowly she started swinging her arms and got people to follow the movement. She followed this with other exercises and as I looked

around I saw everyone was moving as she moved. It was so silent you could hear people breathe.

Michel then asked people to sit down. She explained the programme for the day. People were divided into smaller groups and each group was given a question to work on. My heart started to beat fast as I was worried that people would be out of control and not be disciplined, maybe they will go out and sit in the sun since it was so cold inside.

But when I looked at Michel and the other facilitators I could not believe how calm they were. As they moved around to different groups it looked like I was the only one worried about this. As part of the group that had organised this Open Space I was really not settled at all.

Eventually I decided to join a women only group and we started to discuss. Later, a man joined us and he cross-questioned everything and had a solution to every problem. There was a big debate between the women in the group and this man. I later learnt that he was a policeman and this helped me understand why he behaved like that – coming in late and taking over the group. But, I was also impressed with how the women in the group handled him.

By now everyone was in a group and the discussion was very heated. I moved to a second group - of young adults – women and men and gay and lesbian people. The discussion in this group was even more heated. It was a very exciting group.

Ding Dong, Ding Dong, went the bell again. A facilitator by the name of Nosiphlo told people it was lunchtime and that there were three stations from which food would be served. But even after that beautiful announcement people still continued their discussions – they were serious. Only when Nosiphlo assured them that they would be coming back to the discussions did people start to move. Some came back with their food and continued discussions while eating.

I was really surprised at the level of discipline and commitment that people showed. In no time discussions started again with people looking more relaxed and more comfortable than they had looked that morning.

An hour after lunch the meeting was closed. Before closing a facilitator by the name of Fazila asked people how they were feeling and what stood out for them. Everybody wanted to say something but people were told tomorrow was still another day.

As people stood outside waiting for their taxis they continued the discussions. Some were saying tomorrow we must start at 9 a.m. so that we have enough time. Now my heart was full of joy that people really enjoyed the space.

Day two was still cold but I felt better as I was not worried and just looking forward to a new day with exciting discussion. Most people arrived on time and we managed to start at 9.a.m. After Tai Chi we moved into new groups to discuss new questions. Individuals could choose the group they wanted to be in. Some groups took notes, others drew pictures of what they wanted to report. People were very creative. It was a fruitful session.

We had an early lunch and after lunch people briefly shared their group discussions in plenary. I was stunned by the discussions. People appreciated that the meeting was made up of different people who despite their differences (young, old, different backgrounds, etc.) were able to work together. This was a ‘wow!’ moment for me. Others were asked to report on the issue they wanted to work on linked to gender-based violence. There were many issues people were keen to work on – drugs and alcohol abuse, vegetable growing, sports etc.

I learnt a lot from this Open Space – the way things were set up so colourfully and creatively. How as a coach you should test what you want to do and remain positive about the goal you want to achieve. But most of all to let go of power to control things that you don’t have power over. But also in your work with people especially adults to just trust that they would do the right thing.

In this process I was also able to meet people from different organisations and I learnt new things from them. Most of all, the space managed to come up with action groups who are working on different

issues. One of these was the Drug and Alcohol Action Group.

A few months later I was given the opportunity to coach the Drug and Alcohol Action Group. The learning from the Open Space helped me and I am now able to coach with confidence and without fear. I understand my role very clearly - that is, I must help people find their own solutions. Also knowing it is not about doing things right or wrong. And not to give up when things don't work out. As we moved forward with the group it was interesting to see group members coming up with what they wanted to work on.

It has been a challenging experience and I have had to understand the individuals I was working with - what they like and what they don't like, what they expect of me as a coach. At the first group meeting the group felt that this was my group and the only thing they wanted was to listen to me. When I told them my role was to help them find solutions they started owning the group.

One day they suggested that they should go out to churches and talk about drugs and alcohol abuse and to my surprise the next time we met they had already done this. They presented a report to me and I was very excited indeed. Then they moved to planning a World Café – that is a large gathering where community members could share their experiences and ideas. I remember listening to them allocating the tasks, taking full ownership. One was saying, 'I will lead Tai Chi'. Another said, 'I will facilitate'. The World Café was a success. After the World Café one member took the chart paper on which the main points were recorded and I asked, 'where are you going with those?' And he said, 'to write a report'. That was a moment of people taking responsibility.

I have learnt from this experience of coaching that as a coach you must not impose programmes on community members but rather let them come up with their own ideas so that even if you are no longer there they are able to continue. I learnt that you needed to reflect on what you have done so that you are able to see if you are still going in the right direction. And everything you do must be done from the heart,

that there is no one way of tackling a problem. Also, everybody is important. Not to judge people is very key to me as a coach. Most of all you need to let go of the power to control things.

As a coach working on gender-based violence I must use every tool and the issue of gender-based violence is linked to many issues. It is not an island of its own. The process is unique. It is not a duplication of other processes and it is community driven. No one can claim the process except community members.

I am so thankful to Letsema and Gender at Work for giving me this opportunity. It really means a lot to be a part of this. It has boosted my self-confidence as a coach, and enabled me to be open minded and creative.

Dialogue to touch souls

Bongani Dlamini

When I was given the role of coach to the Letsema Traditional Healers Group I thought my role would be smooth, a walk in the park and very easy. I thought I am black, I understand these matters of tradition. People – including my family and community members - consult traditional healers for various reasons around healing, bad luck, businesses and other things.

But, I discovered in my interaction as coach to the team of two traditional healers that I was a novice in this field. There was so much that challenged me.

The two team members I worked with are Radikeledi and Betty. Radikeledi is a male traditional healer, 59 years old and based in Sebo-keng, a black township in the Vaal. He is a well-respected community builder, a hands-on person who works around the clock on matters relating to challenging the illegal initiation schools. Betty is a female traditional healer, 60 years old, handling matters of old and young women and also of men. Betty also works at the local clinic, planting flowers, vegetables and herbs. Because she is at the clinic the health workers call on her when faced with traditional matters and she assists at no cost.

Radikeledi and Betty were concerned about the kidnappings of boys by illegal initiation schools and the high numbers of deaths that result from these illegal schools.

In the past, initiation schools were held in villages to prepare young boys for adulthood. These ceremonies were conducted by mature elders assigned by the chief. But, in the Vaal initiation schools were set up illegally by self-appointed young men or boys who knew little about

traditional practice.

The credentials of these initiation schools are questionable. They are run by syndicates looking to make money, and are characterised by torture, beatings and starvation. They produce gangsters who are bullies in the townships and schools. They have their own field agents who kidnap and abduct young boys on their way to school or home. They take these kidnapped boys to these illegal schools. They then demand money from their parents before they release the boys.

The new initiates are feared in the community and in schools because they perpetrate more violence. The community becomes unsettled at the time of these initiations. The atmosphere becomes cold. On the day of their release from these schools the new initiates rampage the streets causing community members to lock themselves in their homes. The township becomes a dead area due to fear.

Betty and Radikeledi, together with other traditional healers and community members were working with the police to rescue kidnapped boys. Despite their working round the clock these kidnappings still take place and the kidnappers are not arrested.

Before I became involved with the Traditional Healers Action Group at Letsema I was not aware that such things were happening. I wondered what makes people feel they have the right to impose their will on others in this way. And they do this in the name of culture. This cannot go on, it is barbaric action and must be stopped.

As Letsema we were concerned about the violence and about the high numbers of deaths among the initiates at these illegal schools. Our role was to support each other and to encourage dialogue in the community.

A highly tense dialogue took place in May 2015 when the Letsema Traditional Healers Action Group decided to create space for discussion on violence in the community, and in particular to create dialogue among and with the gangsters. We brought together three or four different groups of gangsters with the police, churches, traditional healers, youth and Letsema to share their experiences. The gathering was held in a church in Evaton.

Group member Jabulani and I were requested to transport the gangsters from some 20 km away from the venue. We travelled in two bakkies following each other. As we got deeper into the township, close to where the first gang was waiting for us my body iced, I was cold. I was nervous that anything could happen, that I might not get out of that place. On our way back to the venue it was as if I was conducting a choir. In some places they were very silent and vigilant of the surroundings. As soon as we passed this area the silence was broken. We had to pick up one leader of a rival gang. He was very worried about his safety as he was now in the hands of other gangsters. Jabulani calmed him down and said nothing would happen.

Getting to the venue it was all smiles and joy. This was very surprising. Three gangsters in the same yard! No fight but greetings. I requested their permission to take a photo. They agreed with a big smile. They allowed Radikeledi to take a video of the session.

It was mind blowing that we had been able to bring all these gangsters, some of whom are usually at war with each other, under one roof, with no danger. It was unique that victims, perpetrators, the police, traditional healers, church leaders, youth, local and national radio stations were all at these proceedings taking this as their own.

What pained me was to see boys as young as 13 years old who were rescued by the police and a local traditional healer. We had to have a serious moment of silence. We could feel the trauma of all the mothers whose kids were taken away without their permission. The young boys were so traumatised and all of us who were there were shocked. Some of the young boys who come back from these illegal schools commit suicide.

What was hopeful was that the gangsters were willing to interface with the community. Some gangsters were willing to hand over their firearms to the police to be destroyed.

The following morning the national radio station Lesedi FM had people calling in to ask for more meetings such as this. These requests came mainly from other areas affected by gangsters linked to initiation schools.

Team members are proud of the job they are doing. The Letsema approach of training brought fruits to people to dialogue in a more positive, constructive, non-violent way. As a facilitator from outside of this community I don't think I would have managed to do this. But through bringing an understanding of the broad framework on zero per cent gender-based violence we had been able to influence and we touched some souls, we gave a voice where there was abuse and people became aware of how find their own solutions. The collective work was amazing and there are videos that captured the process.

"Coming together to work the soil"

words on pieces of paper



We are now
together ...
again ...

the tea



Light!



Shine!

the room gets warmer
when people share their
stones.



Community members from townships and informal settlements in the Vaal, Gauteng, South Africa write about how they led and directed processes which resulted in personal, familial, neighbourhood and community level change, and a passionate commitment to work for a violence-free Vaal. Through this collection of writings we see the remarkable changes that took place in less than two years as they came together in the Letsema process to search out answers to the question "how can we create a Vaal with zero % gender-based violence?"

Letsema Coaches write of their observations of this unique process and what they have learnt about supporting spaces for open discussion, new ideas and new actions. The writers hope that this collection of writings will inspire other community members in the Vaal and elsewhere to find hope and new ways of dealing with problems that seem so difficult to change.

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