

# THE STORY OF LETSEMA

A CONTRIBUTION TO  
REDUCING GENDER  
BASED VIOLENCE  
IN THE VAAL

MAIA MARIE AND LETSEMA



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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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 people off.

From the doorway, I saw that there were many people already in the hall. I was amazed and 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.

## *Jabulile Masetle, 'Learning is a Journey' in Our Hearts are Joined: Writings from Letsema*

This passage gives a feeling of the Letsema open space meeting in Sebokeng in June 2014, a key moment in the initiation of Letsema as a response to GBV in the Vaal. Letsema emanated out of an emergent process facilitated by Gender@Work and Labour Research Service<sup>1</sup>, which supported community members in the Vaal to define what they wanted to do in response to Gender Based Violence (GBV) and how they wanted to go about doing it.

This paper comes out of a participatory research process with Letsema and tells part of the story of how they have contributed and continue to contribute to reducing GBV in the area. It can only tell part of the story because the work of Letsema is rich with many connected threads. This paper looks at how Letsema contributes to changing norms in the Vaal that reproduce GBV and how the group of people who are Letsema have worked the soil from which violence emanates.

This response has been shaped and led by around 30 Letsema members, whose work has gone on to touch a much larger group. It is a group which includes old, young, men, women, LGBT, heterosexual, soccer players, traditional healers, gardeners, parents and counsellors.

This paper illustrates that Letsema is an innovative initiative which responds in diverse ways to the complex interlinking causes of violence in the Vaal, and is held together by commitment, passion and an approach which cultivates non-violence.

By creating a process, or holding space for community action as opposed to a predefined programme, the facilitators allowed for a response which was innovative, diverse, relevant and held close to the hearts of those most affected by violence. It has brought together people from different backgrounds, genders, sexualities and classes to work together and towards creating a collective response to GBV in the Vaal.

Letsema has created shifts in a number of ways. It has changed the hearts and minds of many individuals in the Vaal, planted seeds in a variety of contexts and built a capacity for collective action in different ways. It has cultivated new norms amongst its members for how to respond in the face of violence.

*We would like to thank Joint Gender Fund for the support to do this research and all the participants involved in it.*

<sup>1</sup> Gender at Work is an international network committed to ending discrimination against women and advancing cultures of equality. The LRS specialises in research, dialogue-building, and developmental projects with the broad aim of strengthening civil society with a particular focus on the world of work.

## 2. METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

This research has followed a participatory action approach. Hence the process included Letsema members in key aspects including defining the research question, identifying questions and giving feedback in the analysis process.

Our aim was to use this research process for Letsema members to develop their understanding of and skills in research, which they could then apply in improving their own data collection. At the same time the process aimed to support Letsema members in developing insights which they can take forward to improve their practice. As noted in the initial proposal, “with this research project participants will engage in a more in depth and rigorous exploratory process – searching for new discoveries, patterns and gaining new insights”.

The research process was, however held by myself as the lead researcher, with support and input from the G@W and LRS facilitators. This meant that key and final decisions were made by myself in relation to the research design (for example the questions asked in focus groups and who was interviewed) and the final writing in terms of the framing and content. The initial research design was defined by G@W and LRS.

Letsema’s story has been previously captured in Michel’s Friedman’s paper *Transforming Cultures of Violence: Ploughing the Soil, Planting the Seeds of New Social Norms* as well *Our Hearts are Joined: Writings from Letsema*, which is a compilation of writings by Letsema members. This research has drawn and built on these works by broadening the evidence base and including new voices. It has also importantly been led by an outsider to Letsema who could provide a different lens to the story. It has created more nuance and context to what already exists, so that we can better answer the question of HOW Letsema has contributed to reducing GBV in the Vaal.

The participatory process helped “socialise” the research, in the sense that Letsema members will be able to recognise themselves and the process in the report as opposed to it being something separate from them. In one on one interviews, some of the participants have reported feeling more confident with the idea of doing research as a result of the process. Research for these participants has become less mystified.

THE METHODOLOGY INCLUDED THE FOLLOWING STEPS:

### 2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

At the beginning of the project and throughout the process I reviewed Letsema’s minutes and reports from meetings, the book *Our Hearts are Joined: Writings from Letsema* and the article *Transforming Cultures of Violence: Ploughing the soil, Planting the Seeds of New Social Norms*. I also undertook a limited review of writing on the prevention of gender based violence to provide a context for engaging with Letsema’s work.

### 2.2. WORKSHOPS AND MEETINGS

**Introductory meeting, 20th of May 2016:** The researcher and facilitators met with Letsema members to introduce the research project.

**Research Planning workshop, 8th and 9th of June 2016:** At this workshop, we introduced the concept of research and the research process to participants. We developed the core research question with Letsema members to ensure that it spoke to their common interests and concerns. This was: **How has Letsema contributed to reducing GBV in the Vaal?** Action groups then started exploring which of their activities contributed to reducing GBV and how it managed to do so.

**Methodology Workshop, 7th and 8th July:** At this workshop, we presented and discussed the methodologies we would be using for the research project including who would be working on each area.

THIS INCLUDED:

- Focus groups: designed and implemented by the researcher, facilitators and Letsema members
- Research diaries: completed by Letsema members
- One-on-one interviews: completed by the researcher
- Action groups then selected a topic and participants for a focus group on an area of their work and brainstormed questions for this. The workshop also included some training on observation and listening skills.

**Reflection Meetings August – December 2016:** 4 reflection meetings were held in the last part of the year. The meetings were designed to create a space for Letsema to reflect on and analyse their ongoing work and explore the research question collectively. They also provided the researcher with an opportunity to experience Letsema action reflection meetings as a participant observer.

At the first meeting on August 11th we documented and collectively analysed how Letsema is responding to violence in the Vaal and why they are choosing the specific strategies they have chosen.

In the meantime, Letsema had the possibility to organise a soccer tournament as an event under the 16 Days of Activism against Violence against Women and Children. We decided to bring this into the research process and use this event as an opportunity to reflect on their way of working and to document this.

On October 12th, we held the second reflection meeting where we thought through the 16 Days of Activism event and how it would contribute to Letsema's work to reduce GBV in the Vaal.

The 3rd reflection meeting on 23rd November was used to plan the event.

On the December 12th, the fourth meeting was used to reflect on the event.

**Analysis Workshop, 5th and 6th April 2017:** During this workshop, I shared action group stories from the research process, which participants could respond to and use to develop insights for their future work. We also discussed recording information and data collection.

### 2.3. LETSEMA 16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM SOCCER TOURNAMENT, 10TH DECEMBER

As part of the 16 Days of Activism against VAW and Children, Letsema organised a soccer tournament in Evaton to profile their work and bring it into what is usually a male dominated space. They had a banner calling for the creation of 0% GBV, gazebos, stalls for different Letsema action groups and distributed copies of their book, *Our Hearts are Joined*. The programme included a match where girls and boys played together in mixed teams.

The tournament was meant to be a joint initiative with Kaizer Chiefs, where the Vaal youth teams would play against the Kaizer Chiefs Youth. However, this did not materialise as the person liaising with Kaizer Chiefs for Letsema failed to follow through on their commitments. This was disappointing and demotivating for Letsema members and the players. It also meant that they were not able to attract a big crowd, as the appearance of Chiefs, including a procession from the shopping mall to the grounds was depended on to attract people. Nonetheless the Letsema members manage to continue the day. Unfortunately, the mixed gender game was rained out 15 minutes into starting.

5 Letsema members were asked to fill in research diaries on the day, recording what happened. Their diaries reflect that much of what was planned (including discussions with spectators and the procession) was not possible given the reduced numbers at the stadium.

At the post-reflection on 12th December Letsema members unpacked what went wrong, and what they could learn from the experience.

My participation in the planning meetings for the tournament as well as the event allowed me to experience how Letsema works first hand. It also gave me a better understanding of the context they work in. This added a richness to my understanding of their work.

### 2.4. FOCUS GROUPS

Between July and August 2016, I conducted 6 focus groups with the support of two facilitators from LRS and G@W. Each focus group covered an aspect of one of Letsema's six action group's work. The topics, questions and selection of participants were developed with the groups.

The focus groups included a mixture of Letsema members and people who participated in Letsema events. They covered the different strategies that Letsema's work has covered: dialogues with women, a meeting with victims and perpetrators of violence, vegetable gardening, a world cafe and Letsema's intervention at a soccer tournament. We also used them to identify possible people for one-on-one interviews. The focus groups were conducted in English with translation to and from seSotho and IsiZulu where necessary.

## 2. 5. ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

I selected 12 individuals including facilitators, current and previous Letsema members, as well as people who have been affected by Letsema's work for one-on-one interviews. These were conducted between December 2016 and March 2017.

## 2. 6. RESEARCH DIARIES

The aim of the diaries was for Letsema members to explore a key moment of change in their work through writing and drawing in their own time. Diaries were handed to 22 Letsema members but only 9 were received back and only 3 were fully completed. While a few members had lost their diaries, the majority either found it difficult to commit the time needed, or did not understand the task

well enough and did not feel confident to undertake this. In part this reflects a limitation on us as facilitators of the research process in that we were not able to give the necessary support to participants to complete their diaries. While it was on our agenda to provide support on the diaries in the reflection meetings, in actuality there was no time to do this given the overfull agendas of these meetings. It also highlights that Letsema members need an organised and supportive space when it comes to writing.

During the 16 Days of Activism soccer tournament, 5 Letsema members were asked to fill in research guides with prompts to record their experiences. They found this task easy to complete in comparison, possibly because of its time bound nature.



Letsema Open Space – June 2014

## 3. THE SEED FOR LETSEMA:

### ENVISIONING A COMMUNITY BASED COLLECTIVE IMPACT RESPONSE TO GBV IN THE VAAL

The process which led to Letsema was started by a group of facilitators from Gender at Work and Labour Research Service who had been working together for a few years through action reflection peer learning processes. These processes helped participants navigate social change in relation to gender in various organisational and social contexts.

The idea for a new branch of their work emanated from an action learning process that they facilitated and which addressed the links between gender based violence, women's economic empowerment and HIV/AIDS. They were inspired by the way in which working across diverse organisations helped people come up with new ideas for action and changed the way they saw GBV<sup>4</sup>. They also saw the value in having people from different locations in the same space: construction workers, domestic workers, health sector workers, home based care workers and LGBTI youth. This experience made them wonder what would happen if you brought together different actors from different organisations in one community to work on GBV, and how it could deepen the work.

The time was 2012 and 2013, when GBV was a national discussion point after the rape and murder of Anene Booysen, and the statistics showed that violence against women was high and seemed to be increasing in South Africa.

The facilitators were conscious that much of the work on GBV has historically focused on awareness raising campaigns and the important need for services to support survivors of violence. They were also conscious of the fact that people in working class communities who bear the brunt of violence are seldom involved in developing the strategies that development industries fund in response to violence. They started imagining an initiative which put creating new social norms<sup>5</sup> at the core of the work and centered those who are most affected by violence as the chief designers and owners.

They wanted to explore work that could "make a difference in ordinary every day social relations that have become normalised as violent" and were "mainly concerned with the question of how we could help to create new norms that are not so violent at heart."<sup>6</sup>

An opportunity arose through Gender at Work's access to the Dutch FLOW fund to support a Gender Action Learning process and the Vaal appeared as a natural choice for this work given their previous work with partners in this area. One of the facilitators was also born, raised and continues to live in the Vaal.

#### 3.1 THE VAAL

The Vaal triangle is an area of Gauteng south of Johannesburg. Letsema's work covers a number of townships in the Vaal including Evaton, Sebokeng, Bophelong, Sharpeville and Orange Farm. These townships are home to a diversity of people, who speak many of South Africa's national languages as well as people from other parts of Africa and Asia. As with many other parts of South Africa the levels of violence are high, now and historically. Sharpeville is most often remembered for the protests against pass laws in 1960, where 69 people were killed and 180 people seriously injured. Letsema members describe the social issues in these areas as follows:

"Women face higher unemployment rates, sexual violence, and domestic violence. Men have trouble finding labour as well and this leads to negative stigmas and alcohol abuse. Young girls have a high pregnancy rates and face higher rates of sexual assault and rape. Boys face numerous problems in the traditional initiation process, deaths, gangsterism, and high dropout rates from school. Problems in the area are mainly dealt through NGOs, government departments, and faith-based organisations."

However, the Vaal is also home to many other realities and experiences – there is a wealth of talent in soccer and music, with festivals and tournaments seeing people working together to find solutions to their problems.

One Letsema member wrote about her area:

"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. 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."<sup>7</sup>

4 By GBV they had a specific focus on violence against women, LGBT people and people of non-confirming genders.

5 Norms refers to ideas and practices that exist at a collective level.

6 In Michel Friedman's (2016) *Transforming Cultures of Violence: Ploughing the Soil, Planting the Seeds of New Social Norms. A Story of the Letsema Collective Impact Process* she

focused on the question: "How Can We Create 0% Gender Based Violence" in the Vaal, Gauteng, South Africa, page 6.

7 Flatta Mqwata (2016) 'The Truth I Learned at Letsema', in *Our Hearts are joined: Writings from Letsema*, page 58



### 3.2 THE APPROACHES

Through Gender at Work the facilitators had access to two frameworks which helped them organise the process which lead to Letsema: emergent learning and collective impact.

A collective impact approach “is a structured approach to collaboration that aims to achieve substantial impact on a large-scale complex social problem”<sup>8</sup>. The thinking behind this approach is that you are more likely to create large-scale and lasting social change if you have many actors from different social locations working together as opposed to actors working in separation.

It provides a framework for organisations to work together, and includes certain conditions: developing a common agenda, measuring systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous learning/communication and the presence of backbone organisations. The backbone organisation plays the key role of supporting the collaboration by bringing everyone together. It is an internationally used approach that has been mainly used by established and formal organisations<sup>9</sup>.

The emergent learning framework provides a process for social change work which emphasises reflection, learning from our actions, and changing actions in accordance with this learning. It allows for actions to develop out of a process as opposed to pre-defining them. It is based on guiding social change with a question that you want to explore, and using hypotheses that you test out and reflect on after action. It is a way of working that emphasises that we don’t have ready-made answers on how to create social change and that this is something we are continually exploring and learning about. “It helps keep the process alive and participants more conscious of how they learn as well as responsive to what is emerging”<sup>10</sup>.

Feminism has also been a key lens that the facilitators have brought into this work. This includes an understanding and challenging of patriarchal gender roles and relations and ensuring the inclusivity of people from different race, gender, class and sexuality backgrounds. The facilitators use methodologies, such as storytelling, which have a grounding in feminist principles and are designed to bring personal stories and emotions into reflection spaces.<sup>11</sup>



Letsema Research Planning Workshop – 2016

8 Michel Friedman (2016), page 8

9 See <http://tamarackcommunity.ca/> for more on the collective impact approach

10 Michel Friedman (2016), page 7

11 Michel Friedman (2016), page 30

## 4. STARTING: THE JOURNEY TO LETSEMA

To start, the facilitators brought together their previous partners in the Vaal with some strategic partners who were based outside of the Vaal. This included, women and feminist organisations – Vukani and Remmoho Women’s Forum; community based organisations (CBO’s) - Kganya Women’s Consortium and former members of the Gay and Lesbian Equality Project and Trade Unions - Building Construction and Allied Workers Union (BCAWU) and the Health and Other Service Personnel Trade Union (Hospersa).

The facilitators created space for individuals from these organisations to connect and share on GBV and the work they were doing. They wanted to test their desire to work together in the Vaal. From these initial meetings a steering committee, or core group emerged, which chose the name Letsema, a seSotho word for when women come together to work the soil. In this context, it referred to women and men coming together “to work the soil of creating new and more equal social norms; non-violent relationships between women, men and non-conforming genders and to effect maximum collective impact.”<sup>12</sup>

At the start the facilitators chose the phrase “violence against women and people of non-conforming gender” to frame the discussion. The steering committee chose to rather use the term GBV given some of the members’ familiarity with this framing in their work. However, the focus on violence against women and LGBT people was clearly upfront in this.

They also developed the core framing question to guide Letsema’s work: “How can we create a Vaal with 0% GBV?” The steering committee then came up with ideas for stakeholders they would like to involve in Letsema and a series of community dialogues were held to broaden participation in the process. These dialogues included 6 world cafes and one open space meeting. The world cafes were held in the 6 areas or districts that the core group members came from: Evaton, Sebokeng, Orange Farm and Orange Farm extension and Bophelong. The open space meeting brought together participants from all areas.

Following the emergent learning approach, when the facilitators started, they had mapped out the process leading to the open space but did not know what would happen after that. Their idea was that the initial meetings with a core group of committed individuals from relevant organisations plus the community dialogues would

create a container for relevant and innovative actions. They had little idea what these actions would be or how they would be sustained afterwards. However, they trusted that by getting the right people into the room something important would emerge. Although the team had previous experience with action reflection processes which were left open to some extent, these were in the more contained contexts of workshop spaces, with individuals from organisations who had already defined work areas. Facilitating a process to create entirely new actions, as well the container that held them, was a new experience for all of the facilitators.

### 4.1. THE WORLD CAFÉ'S AND OPEN SPACE

The world cafes were open discussion spaces which used Letsema’s core question as a starting point. The methodology included creating a relaxed environment with tea and snacks where people could sit in small groups and discuss the questions presented. The groups rotated with someone remaining behind and feeding back to the new group what the last group discussed. A key aspect of this method is that the participants control the discussion as opposed to a facilitator<sup>13</sup>.

Core group members invited others in their community to attend. They aimed to get a diversity of role players from different backgrounds and locations to hear what issues were important to people in the different areas. The fact that the Letsema members are rooted in their communities meant that they were able to gather a diversity of people.

Participation in the world cafes was a moving and inspiring experience for many involved, who said it felt good to talk to people they would not normally talk to. Though there was diversity amongst participants. Women, men, LGBTI, HIV positive and disabled people, health workers, church pastors, shebeen queens, taxi associations, traditional healers, hawkers, were all represented. However, there was a higher representation of women than men. The representation from government stakeholders was also lower than hoped for.

After the 6 district dialogues, Letsema organised an open space meeting which brought together participants from all the districts. The meeting was held in Sebokeng at the Saul Tsotetsi Sports Centre and around 280 people participated. The core group built on lessons and

<sup>12</sup> Michel Friedman (2016), page 6

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.theworldcafe.com> for more on the world cafe method

reflections after the world cafes and managed to invite stakeholders from government and educational institutions that were not present in the world cafes.

The open space once again used Letsema's guiding question but then asked participants to suggest topics or questions on the theme that they felt passionate about for conversation. On the first day, the initiator of the topic chose a time and space for it to be discussed and participants were free to choose which discussions they would like to sit in on. On the second day participants had the chance to suggest action plans, which were again discussed in small groups<sup>14</sup>.

The organisers were amazed at the responses, in terms of the number and diversity of people that attended, as well as the level of energy and engagement. One core group member said, "I have never seen a meeting where you bring the church, LGBT, traditional healers and the union together and they have a discussion with respect."<sup>15</sup>

The organisers also found it remarkable to have participants of different ages engaging with each other. For the facilitators and organisers it was a challenge to organise a meeting of this size while letting go of control over what happened. It was a learning experience that a process like this could work.

As one core group member noted, "I had doubts about whether we would be able to control people and how we would make sure that people discuss. It was an experience to let go of power and control to allow people to flow."<sup>16</sup> One participant said after going through the process, "You start now realising that the solution is within yourself."<sup>17</sup>

Members of the steering committee also found the process empowering:

"Workshops can make us feel stupid. The facilitator stares at you, waiting for you to open your mouth. But here you are discussing with people at your table. You are discussing your thoughts."<sup>18</sup>

"For the first time, I did not feel that I am representing an organisation, but that I could speak about what I can do. The questions were asking me and not my organisation and if I had known this was the approach I would have brought more people."<sup>19</sup>

The topics raised were wide ranging including drug and alcohol abuse, the role of religion and tradition in dealing with GBV and discrimination against LGBT people. On the second day, around 20 people put up topics for action. They were asked to share at the end of the day what their next steps would be. These groups were invited

to a three-day workshop to support their work. Only 6 of the groups committed to doing this.

This next workshop saw the start of the Letsema action groups. From this point on, the facilitators' role changed to one of supporting the action groups to develop and implement their actions through holding regular reflection meetings. Each group was also assigned a coach, someone who had experience with community based social change work from a feminist perspective. The action groups met with their coaches at a monthly meeting. The larger reflection meetings continued for another year, every 3 to 4 months. From June 2015, the action groups were also assisted with developing their skills in fundraising. This was with a view to Letsema becoming more independent. The idea was for Letsema to develop the capacity to find their own funding and possibly then hire G@W and LRS facilitators when their support was desired.

THE ACTION GROUPS THAT ARE NOW STILL ACTIVE IN LETSEMA ARE THE VEGETABLE GARDEN GROUP, DIALOGUE GROUP, SPORTS GROUP, TRADITIONAL HEALERS GROUP, DRUG AND ALCOHOL ABUSE GROUP AND THE CORE GROUP.

14 A video of the Letsema open space meeting can be seen here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L\\_AGxCurGIw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_AGxCurGIw)

15 Letsema minutes (2014) Open Space Reflection Day, 4 July

16 Letsema minutes (2014) Open Space Reflection Day, 4 July

17 Letsema Open Space video (2016) 'Whoever Comes is the Right Person'

Letsema Open Space, 18 - 19th June 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L\\_AGxCurGIw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_AGxCurGIw)

18 Letsema minutes (2014) Open Space Reflection Day, 4 July

19 Letsema minutes (2014) Open Space Reflection Day, 4 July

# 5. THE METHODOLOGIES AND APPROACH OF THE LETSEMA REFLECTION MEETINGS

**This section outlines the methodologies and facilitation style used in the Letsema reflection meetings. Following this I will look at some of the key impacts which emerged from this space in relation to how Letsema has contributed to reducing GBV.**

## 5.1. THE REFLECTION SPACE

The action groups are brought together through reflection meetings that have been held every 3 months when possible. The reflection meetings are usually attended by 25 to 30 people and the meetings are usually held over 2 days. The venue is a hall at Vukani in Evaton, one of the CBOs which were part of the initial steering committee. The catering is done by Letsema members using the kitchen at Vukani and the space has become a home for Letsema. There is sense of ownership of the space given that some of the Vukani members are part of the core group.

Participants travel from across the Vaal to get to these meetings and receive a transport stipend. The meetings are facilitated in English, though participants often speak in seSotho and isiZulu in plenary spaces, which is then translated into English.

The participants are the key members of the action groups. All the groups have other members or people they work with closely that do not attend these meetings. Therefore, the regular participants in work that emanates from Letsema extends beyond these 30 people.

In these meetings, Letsema members connect, reflect, develop skills and draw inspiration from each other. One member described it as a “filling station”: “And what I like about this filling station, it’s a filling station that don’t wait till you don’t have oil or you don’t have petrol. As soon as it makes half tanks, it refills it.”<sup>20</sup>

The meetings are set up as a peer learning space, where members draw from each other. The space is consciously created through the exercises and the set-up of the room. People sit in a circle to illustrate that everyone is involved.

From the initial meetings until the end of this research process

the facilitation approach by G@W and LRS has been defined by consciously involving the head, the heart and the feet: the head being analytical thinking work, the heart our emotional self and connecting with others and the feet, meaning there is a direct link to taking actions.

### 5.1.1. EMERGENT LEARNING ACTION REFLECTION TOOLS

Facilitators used a set of tools to help participants be clear about what they do, and to define their own work areas. As one of the facilitators describes the basis of this way of working:

“We started asking a lot of questions, asking people to brainstorm, draw pictures and say what they think they need to do instead of pouring ideas into people. People are not empty, people have brilliant ideas and in the space you would come with questions but the facilitation was done in a way that you [as a participant] would not be given an answer to your questions but you would struggle and come with your own answer. That is key. I remember Mam’ Rose saying: *Oh, I am the manual*. People come to these meeting and ask: *where is the manual?*”<sup>21</sup>

Each action group is given the space to think through actions they’ve done and share this with others to develop lessons. Through this process, participants clarify the problems they are seeking to address and the strategies they are choosing to address these with, including thinking through why they chose these problems and strategies in the first place.

A key methodology in this analytical work is asking questions. Through guided exercises participants asked themselves and each other questions, and were asked questions by the facilitators relating to what, why and how they did their work. This questioning has been coupled with what is called “deep listening”: “By questioning without giving advice, participants are brought to listen deeply to their comrades, surface the assumptions behind their thinking and help their comrades to find a solution to their problem by themselves... Powerful, open-ended questioning and deep listening aims at helping the owners think about, analyse and see their issue from different perspectives.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Letsema member (2017)

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Letsema facilitator (2016)

<sup>22</sup> Letsema minutes (2014) Letsema Gender Action Learning Training, September

An aspect of the emergent learning framework used by the facilitators is to develop a guiding question (such as the core question which guides Letsema's work) as well as hypotheses that your planned actions are based on and will test. Each action group developed a framing question and a hypothesis which they continually worked on with the help of their coaches.

An example of this is a hypothesis that illustrates the thinking behind the decision to use coaches:

"If we use the Action Learning coaching model on a monthly basis with the action groups, then: We will see groups thinking more deeply about what they are doing, acting, reflecting and improving their practice towards achieving the long-term goal of 0 percent GBV, based on their learnings."<sup>23</sup>

Along with developing the hypothesis action group, members listed their assumptions - for example: "The coaches' way of working will help participants to grow their own capacity to solve their own challenges and in the process, cultivate ownership and leadership"<sup>24</sup>.

Reflecting after action, allowed members to think through whether their hypotheses played out in ways they expected and based on this to adapt their hypotheses and strategies in future. Another set of tools, the before action review (BAR) and after action review (AAR) was used to make explicit the groups' hypotheses before they implement an activity and to reflect on what actually happened afterward.

Facilitators encouraged Letsema members to not see whatever happened through the frame of success and failure. As one facilitator put it "Just because something doesn't work it doesn't mean that nothing happened, that there were no results"<sup>25</sup>. Hence, they paid attention to unintended consequences and continually learnt from what did happen.

This methodology was challenging for Letsema members as well as the coaches. Firstly, it was not a way of working that they were used to. The language the methodology was framed in was a challenge, particularly when it was necessary to translate – for example there is no word for 'emerging' in isiZulu and seSotho. However, the underlying logic of asking and answering questions and exploring different possibilities is universal and in line with everyday experience.

Although participants may not use the methodology without the support of a coach or outside of the context of a reflection meeting (they mostly do not), their experience of emergent learning has certainly illustrated the importance of analysis and reflection and the importance of gaining clarity about the changes they want to make.

My experience in interacting with Letsema members in focus groups and one-on-one interviews was that they could articulate their work very clearly, in terms of why they were doing it and how.

HERE ARE SOME QUOTES FROM LETSEMA MEMBERS ON THESE METHODOLOGIES:

"At first, I say these people are making us do stupid things but when I get used to it, I saw that the hypothesis actually gives you the outcome. It's what gives you the outcome. If I do this, this will happen. But if you just do things and never use the hypothesis, you will never know that if I do this, this will happen. Before you take a decision, you can think clearly."<sup>26</sup>

"It looks easy, but it's difficult. After your answer, your answer has a question also. It feels like it will never end. I present my answer, then Michel will ask a question based on my answer. Keep on, it never ends. Its challenging. I think you have to be specific. It teaches you how to be specific"<sup>27</sup>

This methodology is firmly linked to action. All reflection is done with a view to developing actions and actions are the material that are explored in reflection to create new actions.

## 5.1.2. CREATING SPACE FOR CONNECTION WITH SELF AND OTHER

A key aspect of Letsema is that the methodology has allowed for participants to be present, with their minds, hearts and bodies. The facilitators have consciously created spaces where emotions are allowed to exist and where the presence of each individual is noted. For example, each reflection meeting starts with a check in where each participant has an opportunity to share how they are, what they hope to get from the space or affirm why they return to Letsema.

### STORYTELLING

Storytelling has been used as a methodology which allows people to bring their own life experience into the space and reflect on this. As Michel Friedman writes:

"Storytelling is a powerful tool that helps participants connect to each other, reflect upon and value their own experience and insight, grounds conversation in something real and touches their hearts."<sup>28</sup>

23 Letsema minutes (2015) Notes from workshop with Letsema coaches, 18 March

24 Letsema minutes (2015) Notes from workshop with Letsema coaches, 18 March

25 Letsema minutes (2015) Letsema Workshop minutes, May

26 Interview with Letsema member (2017)

27 Interview with Letsema member (2016)

28 Michel Friedman (2016) page 18

Storytelling was used in the initial meetings of the group when participants were asked to introduce themselves by sharing a story about GBV that was linked to their own experience or something that had deeply touched them. Members were also encouraged to share their work through telling stories at reflection meetings with coaches. In 2015 Letsema members and facilitators co-created the book, *Our Hearts are Joined* based on writing done through a writing workshop.

The book includes rich stories of the experience of Letsema members. These methods send the message that expressing emotions in the space is valued as much as rational intellectual thought. It also allows for the full person to be present, not just one aspect of themselves.

## BODYWORK

Bodywork is also a key aspect of Letsema meetings. The facilitators all use Capacitar, which is a program of energy-based healing. This includes Tai Chi<sup>29</sup> which every meeting starts with, to help people be present in their bodies. It also sets the tone and intentions for the meeting. One of the Tai Chi exercises asks participants to name the things that they want to let go of in the space (for example fear, hate, anger) as well as the things they would like to invite in the space instead (for example love, forgiveness, non-violence). Another exercise asks participants to recognise the wise being in themselves and others. The effect on participants is a positive one. They report feeling good and grounded afterwards. As one member noted, “we use it to relieve our minds and bodies”<sup>30</sup>, while another noted that “it makes you feel like you’re in another place with happy people”<sup>31</sup>.

The facilitators also use methodologies to deal with difficult emotions that arise in the space. One methodology used is finger holds, and another is the Big Hug<sup>32</sup>. The effect of these methods is softening. Rather than being overwhelmed by difficult emotions it helps people to acknowledge these feelings and to let them pass through, thus freeing space to act. One participant at the second core group meeting noted:

“The exercises liberated me from my pain and I will practice this at home and in my organisation. I learned the skill of handling sad stories and I learned to help myself when I feel sad, to know how to love and embrace myself.”<sup>33</sup>

These methodologies are a key cause for many of the powerful changes that members report through dialogue in the space. They allow for dialogue to happen in a way that is open and respectful and in a way that facilitates learning. They create a supportive holding space for this work to happen in. One young man who is part of Letsema shared that, “through Letsema I could even realise that it is

okay for a man to cry and ja it is not embarrassing for a man to cry. You need to share your feelings, you mustn’t bottle up the feelings inside because it is going to eat you”<sup>34</sup>.

This way of working is linked to the norms the work of Letsema seeks to create:

“What is different about Letsema is that we are doing the work with an awareness that our hearts need to be in it. So, when we engage, question and challenge it is with a lot of respect and an awareness that we are here trying to build something. As Letsema, we are aware of the different norms we are trying to create and we try to embody it in the work we do. Sometimes, when a new person comes into the group they tend to dominate and people within Letsema struggle but remain respectful.”<sup>35</sup>

## 5.2. HOW FACILITATORS HOLD THE SPACE

The facilitators play the role of holding the space for Letsema members. From the start, they have consciously sought to facilitate a space where the participants are able to raise and share what is most important to them and define their own strategies in response to the problems they see as most urgent to respond to.

In reflection meetings, the facilitators also play the role of bringing the group together to experience ‘the whole’. One focus of the meetings is to create an overall picture based on the reflections and experiences of the different action groups. The facilitators support the groups to see what they have in common, what is different and to understand that they are all approaching similar issues from different angles using different strategies and to identify what these are. This helps members place what they are doing in a larger context and re-affirms Letsema’s overall vision.

The work of creating a supportive space for listening and sharing, as described above, requires facilitators to do a certain kind of holding which can be difficult to put into words. It is supported by the methodologies that they draw on but also requires a willingness and intention on the part of the facilitators to allow difficult feelings to emerge and to trust that things will be okay. In order to this, facilitators are often required to face their own doubts and fears and remain open to whatever emerges. As Michel Friedman writes in *Transforming Cultures of Violence*, to facilitate the open space meeting, the team had to face their own anxieties and “to trust the process, trust the participants, trust that we had the ‘right’ people in the room and allow people to manage themselves.”<sup>36</sup>

29 Tai-Chi is a form of exercise or bodywork. See [www.capacitar.org/](http://www.capacitar.org/) for more information on how Letsema uses Tai-Chi

30 Interview with Letsema member 2017

31 Interview with Letsema member 2017

32 See [www.capacitar.org/](http://www.capacitar.org/) for more information. Also see the Core Group Story in

Section 8 for an illustration of how these methods work

33 Letsema minutes (2013) Core Group Meeting, October

34 Vegetable Garden Focus group (2016)

35 Interview with Letsema facilitator 2017

36 Michel Friedman (2016) 21

In order to do so she practiced letting go during meditation sessions prior to the meeting.

She describes the facilitator's role as this:

“Holding space is a quality of presence that makes it feel okay for participants to venture into unknown territory, to explore terrain that is uncomfortable or even scary and to let them feel sufficiently held to touch that which might be terrifying for them. It requires a stance of unconditional hospitality, non-judgement and radical friendship.”<sup>37</sup>

This attention to the participants also requires flexibility and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. As one facilitator described: “sometimes the check-in will change the whole meeting, because people would come with issues that they would share in check in and that would influence how we conduct our meetings. We put people and individuals and feelings at the centre of our meetings and not looking at the deliverables that must be met.”<sup>38</sup>

### 5.3. THE ACTION GROUPS

Letsema's action groups differ in size, with the smallest one having 3 core members and the largest one 10. However, all groups work closely with others in their community, so the regular participants in action group activities extend beyond these members. Most groups have experienced changes in members since they started with new people coming in and others leaving, however each group has a few core members which allow for continuity.

The action group activities have been mainly funded by the groups themselves, largely through their own resources. The FLOW funding which was used to start Letsema only covered the world cafes, open space meeting, the reflection meetings and the work of the coaches and facilitators.

Each action group developed a work area that was individual but linked to the overall guiding question – How can we create a Vaal that has 0% GBV?

#### ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE GROUP:

At the open space alcohol abuse and nyaope were identified as big issues in the Vaal. The people who joined this group knew that working on it would lead to important changes in their community. The group had a mix of men and women members, although women tend to lead the group. They view drug and alcohol abuse to be a

factor that contributes to GBV, as it makes people more likely to commit violence. The group began their work with a door to door campaign, starting conversations with people on drug and alcohol abuse. Through this they made connections, shared information and assisted some people with referrals to SANCA. The group also did talks at churches and schools. Although these talks were often spaces where participants were able to share openly their experiences with drug and alcohol abuse, the group also came to recognise the limitation of once off events. They recognised that without follow up meetings, people were not likely to make the choice to stop abusing drugs. They also started a support group with around 20 people and this group still meets. Although the focus is on drug and alcohol abuse the support group speaks about many other things as well. In June 2015, they held a world cafe on Drug and Alcohol Abuse to increase community support, and develop a clear program on the way forward with a larger number of stakeholders. They however have not been able to follow up on any actions from the world cafe, mainly because of a lack of funding.

#### VEGETABLE GARDEN GROUP:

The idea for this group came out of a discussion on poverty and unemployment as a cause for violence. One of the members of the core group had space in her yard and offered it for a vegetable garden. The founding members brought their own tools. All the members of this group, which include men and women, have a passion for vegetable gardening. Through the Letsema reflection meetings, the group was challenged on how a vegetable garden can be linked to reducing GBV and they decided to use the vegetable garden as a space where men and women members could discuss GBV and promote gender equality. They saw the garden as a pilot project with a view to moving onto a larger piece of land so they could include a larger number of people. The core members of the vegetable garden are all neighbours and live close to each other. They don't have fixed meeting times and are able to coordinate easily to meet.

The garden has gone through more productive and less productive times as members have left or been busy with other projects, including looking for employment. Seasonal climate changes have also impacted on their work, for example the drought reduced their productivity. But it has continued to be a space they come to and get support and a sense of family. The space is also open to others in the neighbourhood to visit. The vegetables they grow are used to feed their families and some are shared with the residents at the old age home. They grow a range of vegetables including cabbage, carrots, green peppers, onions, tomatoes, lettuce and cucumbers.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Letsema facilitator 2016

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Letsema facilitator 2016

### TRADITIONAL HEALERS GROUP:

The traditional healer's group in Letsema is responding to a critical issue which many people in the Vaal are affected by - illegal initiation schools and the gangsterism linked to them. Children are often kidnapped and forced into these illegal schools, and demands are made on their parents for money. Some boys end up in hospital due to unsafe circumcision practices, with some even dying. These illegal schools are also linked to gangs which cause public violence in the Vaal including bullying at schools and rape of girls. Although these illegal schools mostly target boys, there are some which target girls.

Two of the founding members of this group, a man and woman who are both traditional healers, began working on these issues in 1994. They worked in a committee to monitor illegal schools and aimed to ensure that they registered with the department of health. They want authentic schools which practice cultural activities. A key aspect of the group's work has been to respond to information on missing children, and together with the SAPS, rescue these children and disband the schools where possible. Besides this they have been raising awareness on initiation issues and violence by the gangs, in schools and other community spaces. They have also played an important role in the development of a by-law which lays down regulations for initiation schools and have engaged with gangsters leading to some of them being transformed into change agents. They have rescued over 100 children, the vast majority of them being boys. They supported 7 gangs to disband and through this helped three "no-go" areas to become safe for community members.

The group started working through Letsema after being invited to the open space and being asked to help one of the core members in Orange Farm to rescue some abducted boys. Being part of Letsema has assisted them to upscale their impact and has led to them to creating new aspects in their work. This has included the use of dialogue as a way of dealing with violence, a focus on non-violence and an emphasis on positive masculinity.

### SPORTS GROUP:

The sports group was started through the participation in Letsema of Simon "Bull" Lehoko a former soccer star who played for Kaizer Chiefs and South Africa at a national level. He was invited to participate in the Letsema open space meeting by one of the core group members and was touched by the issues and the work Letsema was doing. It was an eye opener for him on GBV. After the open space, he began to attend Letsema meetings, was concerned by the fact that few men were attending, and so invited other former soccer stars from the Vaal to join. These new members of the core group brought a focus on sports into Letsema's work. Soccer was their life's work and they saw the possibility of using it to work towards gender equality. Most of the members of the group are men though it did have a woman member at one point. Sport as they note, especially soccer brings people together. It can be a meeting place for men, women, girls and boys, because so many people love it. As the focus of this work developed, the sports group became a separate action group. Members of the sports group have promoted the role of



Letsema Open Space – June 2014



women in sports councils (which oversee the administration of sports in a community) and soccer committees (which are linked to soccer teams) as a way of creating gender equality. Another area in which the sports group has worked is through using sports tournaments to raise awareness on GBV including playing mixed gender teams.

### DIALOGUE GROUP:

The Dialogue group operates from Evaton which is made up of plots of land owned by landlords. They mostly live in shacks and basic services are a challenge. There are few recreation facilities in the area and 2 clinics with one police station which is far from where the members live. The group was formed after the open space meeting. Most of the members are women, though there are 2 men who have been involved. The group's aim was to break the silence on GBV and use dialogue to do this. It was based on the understanding that people in the community are already experiencing GBV but don't talk about it. The reasons for silence were seen to be fear: that people will tell others about their experiences and that they will be judged. They also recognised culture as playing a role in keeping this silence, for example when people say that a "good women must remain silent".

Dialogue was seen as a way of getting people to talk freely and share their feelings. They wanted to create spaces where people felt safe to talk about uncomfortable topics. They saw this as a starting point for people to act together to end GBV. The group knew from the beginning that when a person shares a story of survival or change it gives strength to others to make similar acts in their own life. The dialogue group runs dialogues with women, parenting dialogues for men and women (though mostly women attend), holds after school activities with school children and have engaged in community action to create a safe community. This community action has included a peaceful walk to Eskom when their electricity was disconnected and engaging the Community Policing Forum on the fact that people were selling drugs on the playground which made it unsafe for children to play there. Both these actions led to positive outcomes.

### CORE GROUP:

After the open space, the steering committee that helped organise the world cafes and open space, became the core group with the mandate to "address the lack of coordinated approach amongst stakeholders". They wanted to bring together different groups working on GBV. They recognised that different stakeholders played different roles in the community and that linking them could help them to support each other and increase and improve the effort to reduce GBV.

They held a Heritage Day event, centred around the theme of culture and tradition while also challenging GBV, as a way of getting across their message and attracting more stakeholders. They also organised world cafes in Evaton, Bophelong and Orange Farm to deal with violence in these areas, including the violence linked to initiation schools and xenophobia. These events brought together members of the other action groups. After some time, the group became clearer that their role was to be the backbone of Letsema: to support the action groups to meet with each other and organise events where all action groups could work together. They had a plan to organise meetings for the whole group every three months, which would have meant playing a role that has been previously played by G@W and LRS facilitators. However, a lack of funding has not made this possible. The group has also decreased in number. At one point there were 16 members, including a mixture of men and women. Now there are only 5, two of whom cannot attend meetings easily because of their newly acquired jobs.



Letsema Soccer Tournament 10 December 2016 (16 Days of Activism)

## 6. LESSONS FROM LETSEMA ON REDUCING GBV

### 6.1. EMERGENCE CAN LEAD TO INNOVATIVE RESPONSES THAT ARE OWNED BY COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND LINKED TO THEIR PASSIONS

The emergent process that defined Letsema has led to a set of diverse innovative responses which could not have been anticipated by the facilitators. The process allowed Letsema members to organise around areas of work that people felt passionate about. As one of the founding members of the drug and alcohol abuse group said, she chose to work on this issue “because it’s a real problem in my area. So, if I ever got involved with this, I knew I would bring a difference in people’s lives”<sup>39</sup>. For the traditional healer’s group, this was an issue members of the group had been working on for a long time already, and Letsema gave them an opportunity to work in new and different ways and increase their impact. For the sports group members, Letsema gave them the motivation and inspiration to use something they had been involved in most of their lives to convey messages around gender equality. The dialogue group has activated members to work on issues that they are affected by every day. In this way, the participants own their work, because it is linked to what is happening in their own communities, and roles they already play. It is not separate from their desires for their families and themselves.

As one of the facilitators and coaches described it:

“I now understand that when people are passionate about something and they are doing what they are passionate about, like issues of the Action Group, people don’t see it as work or a project, they just see it as second nature – something that we love doing. Like when we meet with the dialogue group, it’s no longer about Letsema but a space we all love and that we come into as women who have an interest in changing their lives and the lives of the community.”<sup>40</sup>

The emergent process allowed for these links to happen, for the participants in Letsema to recognise where they wanted to place themselves and the kind of work they wanted to do through the space. The space acted as a vehicle, a match which initiated a spark that already existed in each member.

Given this, the process has led to diverse ways of working on GBV and the result is a multi-pronged intervention, within the ambit of Letsema. This includes: community dialogues, support groups, sports tournaments, policy discussions, a memorial walk, gardening, talks in churches and many individual actions.

Each group responds to a different aspect of violence in the Vaal, which reflects their own understanding of the cause of GBV and where they feel it is important for them to intervene. Participation in the Letsema reflection space reminds action groups of the interconnections between what they are each doing and that each of their strategies plays a role in getting to their vision. This further reaffirms a consciousness of the complexity of the causes of GBV and the need for a joint response.

The sense of ownership that Letsema members have of their work also means that it is more likely to be sustained. In actuality, the work has been sustained with minimal funding through the commitment and passion of the members.

### 6.2. DIALOGUE IN SAFE SPACES LEADS TO CHANGE IN CONSCIOUSNESS AND BEHAVIOUR

Being part of Letsema has led to many changes in the consciousness of the individuals in the group, in terms of how they see themselves and others but also in relation to how they feel about themselves and others. The testimonies of this kind of change are diverse and rich<sup>41</sup>. These changes challenge the culture that produces violence in a number of ways – through challenging silences that exist around violence and through challenging patriarchal and homophobic ideas and behaviour. Individuals describe going through this change and then wanting to share this with others in some way. In many of the examples people emphasise that the change they experienced has been made possible by relating to others simply as humans and by talking and listening in a way which includes their emotions.

For some of the women who have participated in Letsema, particularly through the dialogue group, the space has allowed them to experience the kind of change necessary to leave abusive relationships.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Letsema member 2017

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Letsema facilitator 2017

<sup>41</sup> See Transforming Cultures and Our hearts are Joined for more examples.

A woman member described how it was being able to be open about her experience in Letsema that allowed her to leave her abusive marriage:

“Do you know how the NGOs work? You must just sit and listen, you can’t talk, you must just listen. Through Letsema, you go and take out everything that is in your heart. That’s how Letsema helped me. I was always crying at the workshops. They helped me to be able to stand up, to shake these things out. They helped me to talk so that I could become healed.”<sup>42</sup>

She shares that this challenged the idea that she must be silent about abuse, which she grew up with: “I could not talk, I was quiet, because in our culture you don’t talk with other people about everything that happens at your house. But Letsema helped me to speak out”<sup>43</sup>.

She has brought her experience of change into her work as a social worker at a clinic, as a traditional healer in consultations and when she works at initiation schools with girls. When she works with people one-on-one she allows them to talk and then shares her story with them too: “Before I can do healing, I must speak with her, the tears must go away”<sup>44</sup>.

When she works with the girls in initiation schools, which is twice a year with groups varying between 30 and 100, she tells them about her experience of abuse: “If they get married they must know the life, and be aware. Immediately when the husband becomes abusive, she should know it’s wrong”<sup>45</sup>.

A second member, a man talks about how an interaction with a Lesbian woman at the open space meeting challenged ideas he grew up with on gender and sexuality:

“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.”<sup>46</sup>

The moment he describes happened at Letsema’s open space meeting:

“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 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.”<sup>47</sup>

He describes in the writing how previous workshops had not managed to change his thinking, while this one moment did:

“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.”<sup>48</sup>

In this example, it was the personal interaction that made his change in consciousness possible. Having the opportunity to interact on a one-on-one basis with Sweeto at the meeting was more powerful than the information and ideas he had been exposed to at other meetings.

A third women member noted that, “this group really helped me because it helped me accept my son who is gay”. Her son came out to her after she had been attending Letsema meetings: “I kind of felt prepared because already in Letsema I was already interacting, loving and laughing with the LGBT community.”<sup>49</sup>

Others talk about how their experience of connecting with others in the space, around these issues has led to them becoming activists in their communities.

42 Interview with Letsema member 2017

43 Interview with Letsema member 2017

44 Interview with Letsema member 2017

45 Interview with Letsema member 2017

46 Jabulani Makhoba Dlamini (2016) ‘An eye-opening moment’ in *Our Hearts are Joined: Writings from Letsema*, page 35

47 Jabulani Makhoba Dlamini (2016) page 36

48 Interview with Letsema member 2017.

49 Jabulani Makhoba Dlamini (2016) page 36

A fourth member, a man, writes in *Our Hearts are Joined* that listening to the stories about GBV touched his heart and led to him being involved in Letsema.

“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.”<sup>50</sup>

A fifth member, a woman, describes how it was listening to others and taking inspiration from them that helped her become an activist: “I think what really helped me was listening to other people’s testimonies in the meetings; what helped them... Before I came I was a closed person and I didn’t share anything about myself and my life and that in a way, imprisoned me but through participating in this group I then realised that the more you speak, the more you heal yourself...When I came here I was very angry, I am a single parent. But mixing with other people and also learning what really helped them, I then got my strength. As a result, I also take up a lot of issues and struggles. So even now in my area people are now calling me The General Secretary because I am taking up issues, I’m vocal and I now believe in myself.”

These individuals are challenging a culture of non-action in the face of social challenges, particularly violence, in a context where violence has become normalised.

Their changes have emanated from a space, that members describe as safe, non-judgmental, where they feel free to say what’s in their minds and hearts, while at the same time are challenged to question previously held ideas and feelings.

### 6.2.1 DIALOGUE AT GROUP AND COMMUNITY LEVEL IS A STRATEGY FOR CHANGE

As a direct result of their experiences in the Letsema space, members have gone on to create similar spaces where people can connect and share. Some examples are the world cafes, dialogue groups, talks at churches, community meetings, as well as the vegetable garden. The action group stories in section 8 illustrate examples of the way in which action groups have used dialogue in different settings: through regular meetings with parents to shift how they relate to the children in the face of bullying and violence at schools; through a world cafe bringing together community members to deal with drug and alcohol abuse and through the creation of an informal safe space (the

vegetable garden) where people can share about the challenges in their lives and the lives of those around them.

These stories illustrate change in a variety of ways. In the case of the world cafe, they illustrate how listening to others’ stories in a community dialogue can inspire someone to become an agent for change. For the members of the vegetable garden and the parenting dialogues, they have managed to shift relationships in their own lives and have become more concerned about supporting others around them.

Though these contexts are diverse there are some commonalities around how they use dialogue as a strategy for change, which illustrate the thread between the Letsema reflection space and the work of the action groups.

All the stories show that a safe space is necessary for dialogue to happen in a way that is meaningful. They have created this firstly through making sure the environment is relaxed and welcoming. In the case of the vegetable garden, the space itself, with the tree and plants provides a holding space for discussion. As one of the members says in the story, the fact that it is informal allows for discussion to happen naturally.

In the parenting dialogues and the world cafe the safety is created by the facilitation methodology which aims to allow people to speak freely on whatever is important to them, without judgement or providing solutions.

As one of the members of the Drug and Alcohol abuse group noted, as a facilitator, keep your opinions to yourself until they are asked for: “Every time you want to be on people’s side, you don’t have to lecture people, you have to talk to people so that people can talk back to you. When you start lecturing them, they will think you are judgemental... Most of the time, I let them give their opinion first but what I like about people, like I said about people, if you talk to people - people will talk to you. Even if you didn’t want to give your own opinion, they will start asking you - “what about you? What will you do?”. When you talk to people, you don’t judge them because it’s just a conversation, and when you start talking to them you emphasise that we are talking to help ourselves out; you don’t say to “help you out”<sup>51</sup>.

The methodologies in these stories allow participants to connect and learn from each other through the stories they want to share. An important factor in this is that feelings have the space to emerge. However, what these spaces lead to can be difficult to track. As one of the vegetable garden group members said, this work is like planting seeds, and very often they don’t go back to see what’s grown. Another reality is that if something has grown, the change is

<sup>50</sup> Simon ‘Bull’ Lechoko (2016) ‘Empowered to care’ in *Our Hearts are joined: Writing from Letsema*, page 98-99

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Letsema member 2017

due to a composite of factors of which Letsema is one part, much like a flower is a product of water, soil, sun and air.

A member from the drug and alcohol abuse group reflected that:

“Some people you can talk to them and today they start making efforts. Some people, you will talk to them today and they will start making efforts after 6 months, after being tired of hurting people more. So, some people will take years.”

Change is therefore an interactive process, something needs to be ready in people so that it can ignite. But many people through Letsema have caught fire and are lighting up the lives of others. While it is difficult to say exactly when this ignition will happen, what is clear is that many of the change agents are inspired through Letsema in part because of their personal stories – their own experience of violence in their own lives and the lives of their family members<sup>52</sup>.

### 6.3. CREATING A CULTURE OF NON-VIOLENCE IN RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE OFTEN MEANS FACING WHAT IS CHALLENGING AND MOVING THROUGH IT.

Another thread running through the work of Letsema is that creating a non-violent response to violence often involves facing what's painful and negative and then moving through it. The methodologies used in Letsema and which have been described in previous sections, create a soft supportive container for this work. As can be seen in the personal testimonies of Letsema members allowing space for negative and painful feelings to emerge was part of their process of change<sup>53</sup>.

In the experience of Letsema there have also been moments where they have had to do this work as a group. The core group story in section 8, about a memorial walk held for Sarah, a Letsema member murdered by her husband, is an illustration of how the group was able to move through difficult emotions with the help of bodywork and create a non-violent response. The traditional healer's group story provides a different example of consciously choosing to work with the perpetrators of violence and giving them space to change as part of a process. They organised a meeting with gangsters involved in illegal schools and community members, including parents of children that were kidnapped. They used dialogue as a container for painful discussions to be held.

In *Transforming Cultures of Violence*, Michel Friedman writes about

another example, when the core group decided to hold a world cafe after violence in December 2014, when “young men who had recently returned from initiation schools were behaving like gangsters and in one area community members responded by burning their shacks down”<sup>54</sup>. Facing this, the core group “felt very heavy and to some extent perhaps even slightly despairing” but managed to move through this and hold a dialogue with all groups affected by the violence in Bophelong.

For at least some of the Letsema members this has challenged their first impulses in dealing with conflict. In the example of Sarah's walk, the member who brought the news to the group describes how being in the space allowed for her anger and desire for revenge to shift into a desire for positive action. She says it was the love and support she felt in the group that allowed this shift. A member of the traditional healers group talks about how being part of Letsema has fundamentally changed the way he responds to violence:

“I used to solve all my problems with violence especially when it came to these initiation schools. Letsema taught me how to better work with the community and work with many places and find better ways to solve issues in all these communities.”<sup>55</sup>

Other members have taken this learning into how they respond to conflicts in their families<sup>56</sup>.

In this way, Letsema members are creating the culture that they would like to see in their community. In doing so they are challenging the culture of violence that is deeply embedded around them, as well as the paralysis that often exists in response to this violence.

### 6.4. WORKING TOGETHER ACROSS DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS, GENDERS, SEXUALITIES AND SECTORS CAN HELP CREATE A COLLECTIVE AND STRENGTHEN THE RESPONSE TO GBV

One aim of the collective impact methodology that the facilitators applied was to bring “the whole system into the room”<sup>57</sup>. The “whole system” refers to as many different actors that are relevant to solving the problem as possible. This includes people who have authority, resources and contacts in the Vaal, organisations with expertise as well as people directly impacted by GBV. Letsema sought to involve religious organisations, government actors from various departments, traditional healers, NGOs and CBOs who have worked on GBV,

<sup>52</sup> The stories in section 8 illustrate provide examples of this. In the sports group story, one of the organisers of the soccer tournament is convinced to act because of losing his sister to violence. The young man in the drug and alcohol abuse story who employed young men who were drug addicts was a former addict himself which allowed him to relate to the situation of others.

<sup>53</sup> See the previous section on dialogue as well as the dialogue group story in

section 8

<sup>54</sup> Michel Friedman (2016) page 24

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Letsema member (2015)

<sup>56</sup> See the Dialogue group and Vegetable garden group stories in section 8 for examples of these.

<sup>57</sup> Michel Friedman (2016) page 13

police, educators and men and women of different ages, sexualities and gender identities.

From the beginning of the process Letsema has been conscious of having these different actors in the room. The initial core group included representatives from unions and organisations that work on GBV and LGBT rights. The people in the group represented these different and overlapping identities: LGBT people, workers, women and men. Stakeholders from the different constituencies they wanted to involve were invited to the world cafes, open space meeting as well as other subsequent events and meetings.

### 6.4.1. WORKING ON GBV ACROSS DIVERSITY

Letsema has been successful in bringing together groups of people that do not normally work together to tackle GBV. The first thing that struck me when I was introduced to Letsema was how amazing it was to be in a space that included old and young people, people with different sexualities and gender identities, who all sat in a circle and worked together. Letsema offers a unique opportunity in this regard. Letsema members noted that one of the remarkable things about the open space and world cafes, was the diversity of people in the room. Reflection meetings are designed for participants to work together and to challenge the inequalities that have been cultivated in us:

“It’s like a Zulu Kraal, we sit in a circle and we all connect to the circle from different aspects. For instance, on a cultural level in the past it was men who sat around the Kraal making decisions discussing people’s futures.”<sup>58</sup>

The result has been a feeling of family. As one member describes her experience: “What’s different about Letsema is that you have white, black, old, young people but you don’t really feel issues of class and you are like a family”<sup>59</sup>.

This choice to involve people who do not usually work on GBV, women’s right or LGBT rights in a space designed to tackle these issues has had great impacts on the individuals. Men in Letsema have been challenged on their views on gender equality and have started recognising the need for it<sup>60</sup>.

As one man wrote in *Our Hearts are Joined*:

“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.”<sup>61</sup>

Through Letsema, a focus on gender equality and GBV has been taken into terrains where it might not have been present before including sports and traditional initiation discussions<sup>62</sup>. Similarly, heterosexual members of the group who were previously homophobic have shifted their views and have even become advocates for LGBT rights<sup>63</sup>.

For women and LGBT people, it has given them the feeling that they can work with straight men on GBV. There is a sense that when we work together across these differences, we can learn about and from each other. This is illustrated by the sports group in their work with mixed gender teams and including women in sports administration bodies, which is based in part on the idea that when men/boys and women/girls work together they can see each other as equals<sup>64</sup>. As one sports member noted on their work with soccer committees:

“Men are learning to act respectfully towards women in the committee and to see them as equals, and this impacts how they see and treat women back home as well. Instead of fighting they will argue more. I have a friend who used to be very rude and said he couldn’t listen to a woman. Now he is one that promotes equality.”<sup>65</sup>

There are of course also challenges working across lines of class, gender and sexuality. Although men and women in Letsema generally agree that working together is important, there has been a tendency in the bigger reflection meetings for men to speak more than women in plenary spaces. The women I spoke to about this responded that they were happy with their participation, maybe in part due to the fact that the meeting methodology does allow for much of the work to happen in smaller groups. However, it does still mean that men dominate a key space. This could be linked to language inequalities.

All plenary sessions in the reflection meetings are held in English to accommodate the facilitators, as well as being the language that most of the methodologies are conceptualised in. Most of the women in Letsema are less comfortable in English, while the men in the group tend to have more experience communicating in English.

However, much Letsema has succeeded in creating a space that breaks down boundaries, the roles and conventions of NGO spaces still tend to hold a certain power. One coach and facilitator found that when she visited her group in their home territory she learnt things about their work that she was not able to in their previous meetings:

*Writings from Letsema*, page 85

<sup>62</sup> See the stories on these groups in section 8

<sup>63</sup> See Michel Friedman (2016 and section 7.1 for examples)

<sup>64</sup> See the sports group story in section 8

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Letsema member 2015

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Letsema facilitator 2017

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Letsema member 2017

<sup>60</sup> See *Transforming cultures*, for more examples

<sup>61</sup> Mooketsi Lehlahla (2016) “Let bygones be bygones” in *Our hearts are joined*:

“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.”<sup>66</sup>

In relation to the extent to which Letsema has taken on LGBT struggles, although many members of the group have become advocates on a personal level, this has not translated into a dedicated focus in the work of action groups. This might also be due to the fact that Letsema has not managed to expand and sustain the involvement of LGBT people. At the time of writing, the 3 members of the group who are lesbian, gay or transgender are not able to regularly attend meetings because of work.

#### 6.4.2. WORKING AS A COLLECTIVE

To create the initial core group, the facilitators invited people linked to organisations that were closely related to the communities they were located in. They wanted these organisations to share what they were working on so that they could find points for synergy and collaboration. They would then be able to leverage their organisational position and resources while working with others from different sectors to support each other. “The idea is that their collective impact over the whole terrain would be enhanced because they stopped working alone”<sup>67</sup>.

Some groups have, through Letsema, achieved this collective impact effect. For the traditional healers group, working in Letsema has helped them to upscale their impact, by expanding their networks and their ability to respond to cases of kidnapping:

“Letsema members are scattered all around. And even though they belong to different action groups we all have an awareness of what we are trying to achieve and we all know the work we are doing as the traditional healers group. So when they know of someone or they hear of anything, they report it and so that made it very easy. Because I know in Sharpeville there is Simon and then there is Betty in Sebokeng, and then there is Khethiwe in Orange Farm so that made it very easy for us”<sup>68</sup>.

The collective space has also brought new people to work on this issue which has challenged norms around who can talk about initiation. One of the members of the group got involved after the open space. He was a chairperson of the CPF and so had key networks with the police. Also, importantly, he has not been through

initiation. As one of the founders says,

“I stand for the initiation schools. He’s not been to the initiation school, so having him, other people in the room also feel like they are represented, because we are not only speaking for one voice, he stands for the other group. So when we do our talks we assess, if he needs to come in, he comes in as a member of the community also concerned about this issue”<sup>69</sup>.

The sports group members have also leveraged their position and access to soccer associations and the Pooe Soccer Tournament to expand the location of GBV work.

However in reality most members of Letsema do not have an organisational location, and much of what they are doing is new activism as opposed to expanding on previous initiatives. The fact that most of the members are unemployed or work part time doing piece work also means that the resources they have to draw on are few.

Nonetheless, Letsema has allowed for collectives to develop in unanticipated ways, which in a sense is the point of emergence as a way of working. The fact that most of the members do not have to ensure that there is an organisational mandate before acting, has also allowed for a level of innovation and activism that might not have been possible with a different kind of collective.

The kinds of collective action which Letsema has produced have been organic, and come out of the necessity of the context. Collectives, formed through shared spaces in Letsema, allowed for mobilisation to happen when key challenges were faced. An example of this is Sarah’s memorial walk written about in section 8. The dialogue group has also mobilised to deal with issues in their community including access to electricity and dealing with the presence of drug dealers in their park<sup>70</sup>. The fact that there was a group connected and working together meant mobilisation was easier.

#### 6.4.3 CHALLENGES WITH MAINTAINING THE COLLECTIVE AND BRINGING IN STAKEHOLDERS.

A concern that came up often for Letsema members in the interviews as well as in various reflection meetings is getting more stakeholders with institutional power involved<sup>71</sup>. The Letsema core group wanted stakeholders who are “directly or indirectly involved with GBV and that can bring support and create capacity”, including assisting them with getting resources.

66 Nosipho Twala (2016) ‘Using conversation to overcome barriers’, in *Our Hearts Are Joined*, page 137

67 Interview with Letsema facilitator 2017

68 Interview with Letsema member 2017

69 Interview with Letsema member 2017

70 See summary of action groups and *Our Hearts are joined*.

71 At the analysis workshop as part of this research process in April 2017 groups were given their action group stories to read and respond to. When asked what they would do differently as an action group in future, all groups identified stakeholders they would like to involve.

This includes people who play an important role in the community, who can spread Letsema's message and provide critical support through their roles:

"We want police, teachers, pastors, nurses, ward councillors, community leaders involved. All of them did come, the first time we invite them and then after that they don't. They just come once, or twice. We want them to be part, to understand our language, the talk we are talking about GBV. They have to have some inputs in our work that we are doing. They have to recommend to their colleagues that there is Letsema in Evaton, they are doing this and this."<sup>72</sup>

One member described how the police, in her area are not supportive in dealing with GBV:

"When community members call the police stations and you say somebody is being beaten they won't come immediately. They will tell you there are no vans. Or they will arrive and say oh you've been beaten Mama, this one is family matter or you can go to small claims court to get a protection order."<sup>73</sup>

One reason for this challenge could be that Letsema's methodology takes time and committed engagement which is unfamiliar for many:

"Stakeholders are uncomfortable with the approach we are taking because it's slow. They need to sit in a meeting for two days and there is no time for that because they need to be ticking boxes. They want to come and address and give them t-shirts, leave and sign the register. They want to come and do stuff and not willing to sit in a meeting where they think through what they are doing with the work."<sup>74</sup>

A former member who was a teacher reportedly left because she found it boring. The methodology however does mean that the people who stay in the space are committed to it.

Some of the action groups have managed to get support from the police or police structures in their work. The traditional healers group has a good relationship with the police and is able to call on them whenever they need help with rescuing children from illegal schools. The dialogue group has had an experience of success in approaching the Community Policing Forum in Evaton to respond to issues. For some stakeholders, a solution is to engage them on the specific activities or roles they are needed for. They do not necessarily need to be in the space to support Letsema and be effective in dealing with GBV. They just need to understand the importance of their response and be convinced of this.

However, the time required to participate in Letsema reflection meetings (2 days every 3 to 4 months) blocks the participation of many relevant and interesting people who have full time work. For example, one of the action groups that were identified at the open space but could not develop was for women taxi owners who were encountering violence and wanted to change the behaviour of men drivers.

The experience of members with full time jobs in NGOs or CBOs is that they have found it difficult to get buy in to regularly attend meetings even though Letsema's work is relevant to the objectives of their organisations. Their organisations hence do not see the collaboration as valuable enough to justify the amount of time necessary to attend meetings. A previous Letsema member from a community based organisation who was interviewed noted that she left Letsema because she did not have the time for meetings.

Letsema has also lost key members, of the core group for example, because they have gotten jobs and don't have the time to attend meetings.

This is a difficult issue to find a solution to. Changing meeting times to weekends is a possibility but there are also members who have weekend commitments and those in jobs which require them to work on weekends.

<sup>72</sup> Core group Focus group

<sup>73</sup> Core group Focus group

<sup>74</sup> Core group Focus group



## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND MOVING FORWARD

Letsema has developed many containers for responding to GBV in the Vaal. The initial container which facilitators created through the first world cafes, open space and reflection meetings has been expanded by Letsema members into a network of spaces and actions that seek to challenge violence and the consciousness and culture that this emanates from. These actions and spaces that have come out of Letsema are as diverse as the group that has created them. They are a testimony to a process that allowed actions to emerge from participants.

Letsema has collectively created spaces for listening and talking, where individuals can share stories and transform their own ideas and feelings. These spaces plant seeds of inspiration that lead to action. Although the extent to which this has happened is difficult to track and fully account for, the evidence shows that the methodology being used does create change.

This has happened in relation to women leaving abusive relationships, young men getting off drugs, boys and girls learning equality through playing soccer together, parents shifting how they relate to their children and people being able to solve conflicts in their homes amongst many other circumstances.

Letsema has allowed for its members to find non-violent ways of confronting violence and they have taken this into difficult community situations in dealing with public violence including the huge issue of gangsterism linked to illegal initiation schools in the area.

It has done so by creating a space for people from diverse backgrounds, genders and sexualities who play a variety of roles in their community to come together to share and connect on their experiences of violence in the Vaal and find a way of working together. This has brought new actors, including soccer players and traditional healers into working on reducing GBV and advocating for gender equality and LGBT rights. It also created opportunities for collective action and support.

Letsema is sustained by a group of committed individuals who are working on issues that are close to their hearts, their families and their everyday lives with few resources. The work of this group has been

made possible by an emergent process which at every step of the way allowed participants in Letsema spaces, those most affected by violence in the Vaal to define their own responses to problems. This has led to responses that are diverse in the strategies employed and is connected to the passions and needs of the individuals implementing them. While the Letsema process has been successful in ensuring responses led by those most affected by violence, it has not been as successful in sustaining the involvement of enough stakeholders with institutional and organisational bases.

The emergent process as well as the use of methodologies that create ownership and allow people to connect with heart are key elements in what was possible in Letsema. While they are essential ingredients in this process they are not so easy to replicate. On the one hand this approach requires a willingness on the part of facilitators and funders to support a process that leads to action as opposed to a pre-defined programme. Secondly it requires a facilitation approach and skills that can allow for the unknown and difficult emotions to be present and transformed.

In the next phase that Letsema moves into, a challenge they will face is how to continue as the facilitators who started the process begin to reduce their role<sup>75</sup>. The role that they have played of holding the group together not only structurally and financially but also emotionally will have to be taken over by the members of the action groups.

Another key challenge for Letsema will be sustaining and expanding the participation of community members and stakeholders in their work, particularly in relation to members who have jobs or positions in organisations or institutions. This will be important for helping the group leverage much needed resources and support.

This next phase will definitely change Letsema in many ways. However, the seeds of non-violence which have already been planted through this process will no doubt continue to yield results in unexpected and perhaps unknown ways.

<sup>75</sup> At the time of writing, Letsema has received confirmation that they will be supported for another phase by JGF. Part of this phase will include a handover process where Letsema members will take over the backbone role that G@W and LRS has played. This includes taking over the holding of a budget.

# 8. ACTION GROUP STORIES OF CHANGE

These 6 stories, one from each action group illustrate ways in which Letsema has contributed to reducing GBV in the Vaal. They show how Letsema members have taken their experiences from the Letsema reflection spaces and applied these in various contexts to create shifts towards non-violence in their lives and communities.

## 8.1. VEGETABLE GARDEN GROUP: VEGETABLE GARDENING AS A WAY OF REDUCING GBV

The core members of the vegetable garden group, which include men and women, have all attended Letsema reflection meetings. Through this they have experienced changes in how they see themselves and become more conscious of GBV. Their definition of GBV differs a bit among members of the group. Some see it as violence against particular groups in society, women and LGBT people in people. Others see it as violence regardless of who it is against (so including violence against men who are not LGBT). However what group members have in common is the idea that violence is a problem and that there are other ways of solving conflicts besides violence. They are also clear about the need to create a space where people can talk about their feelings and be softer.

All the participants said that they have become more open in sharing with others about their personal problems. One member shared that being part of the group has allowed him to find ways of resolving conflicts at home with his younger brothers who fought with their partners and tenants who lived on the property. Letsema gave him a means of dealing with these conflicts through dialogue:

“Since coming to Letsema, I had that opportunity to bring them together, talk with them, bring the tenants, let them not trouble the tenants and let the tenants live together in harmony with them. Through the experience, I had from Letsema, through the workshops, I did it through Letsema.”<sup>76</sup>

Going through these personal changes and connecting through the group has also led to a desire to share with others, and a concern for what happens in their community. This includes inviting others to share the space. One member said:

“Being part of the food garden has assisted me to identify people who are closed, with challenges. And I think I have been able to help them because it is easy to invite a person who is suffering to a neutral space to say why don’t you come to the food garden instead of you know approaching the thing directly.”<sup>77</sup>

The garden has become a space for people to connect with the act of gardening and each other, including talking about the issues of GBV which surrounds them in their community:

“The garden shows that we meet all the time as a group. So, without the garden it would have been difficult to call a meeting three times a week where people can sit and discuss. But because we meet thrice a week, it has facilitated and strengthened and deepened our conversation. Because we are coming to something else but we also take time to discuss GBV.”

The discussions relate to their own personal experiences but sometimes they talk about other people they know and may choose to invite them to the space. The strategies they use are talking, listening and sharing advice based on their experiences.

The strength of the space they say is that it is informal:

“People who might not agree to go to a meeting on GBV will be more likely to come and relax and discussion can then happen naturally.”<sup>78</sup>

“There is shade of a tree, by the garden they chill and we are just working and some of them they are just watering. Maybe we come there just to have a rest and someone will just raise an issue, you know just a basic issue to say you know there was an argument between this one and this one, how do we solve it. MaGogo comes with an input, somebody comes with an input, we just do it in a nice way without being too formal you know.”<sup>79</sup>

A reality of this work is that people might listen and experience change in the space or not. One of the members described their work on GBV as “planting seeds”. He says, “I have planted them in different people in the community, but one thing that I have not done is to go back to check if the seeds I have planted have actually germinated and grow.”<sup>80</sup>

76 Vegetable Garden Group focus group

77 Vegetable Garden Group focus group

78 Vegetable Garden Group focus group

79 Vegetable Garden Group focus group

80 Vegetable Garden Group focus group

## 8.2. DIALOGUE GROUP: PARENTING DIALOGUES AND CHANGING RELATIONS

As parents, members of the dialogue group were aware of bullying at schools, which is sometimes linked to gangsterism. This bullying includes physical violence, lunch money being stolen and children being made to pay to use the school toilet which then leads them to use the toilet in a nearby field.

Members of the group (who are all women, many of them single mothers), also became aware of how they spoke to their own children and that this was also a form of violence. They also began to acknowledge that the way they spoke to their children could lead to violence at schools.

As one Letsema member wrote in *Our Hearts are Joined*:

“One day when I shouted at her and beat her, she cried and said to me, ‘Mama don’t you see 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 she 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. 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 practiced 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 practicing 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.”<sup>81</sup>

Experiences like these, where group members began to reflect on and change their own relationships to their children, plus listening to the stories of others made them realise this was an important issue to work on.

As a result, the dialogue group started parenting dialogues where they invited parents, mostly women but sometimes men to talk about their experiences of parenting. The emphasis of the dialogues was on promoting positive parenting and how to build positive relationships with children. A ground rule for the group is confidentiality – that whatever is said in the group stays there. In the sessions members of the group share their stories of challenges they face in parenting. Other members are encouraged to share their own experiences in response instead of saying what they would have done. In this way, the group becomes a safe and nonjudgmental space. Members of the group then have an opportunity to “listen to the different views in the room and then you would take whatever you think you will be able to take from the group”.

Although they have a theme for the group meetings, they keep the session relevant to the participants. As one member explained:

“We try to make it as beneficial to all the people who are coming in and as a result you find people sharing on different and diverse topics even though we have identified a theme but that is important because people share directly what their challenge is, and sometimes they highlight something that happened in the previous meeting and how it worked for them. And from doing parenting, we have moved from looking at things about parenting and children in the home but sometimes you will speak about a neighbour’s child that is problematic that is even bullying or playing with your children.”<sup>82</sup>

One of the dialogue group members says that it has been a positive experience for many of the parents:

“I would say it has given rise to happy children and to that bond and relationship, that we didn’t experience before. All the time, we used to sit and complain about how rude and how lazy our children have been - but have moved to sharing positive things about our children.”<sup>83</sup>

Other participants in the group had this to say<sup>84</sup>:

“I really like to shout, especially at my children. If a child does something wrong, I will shout at the top of my voice and sometimes I do tend to be a bit difficult but I think that ever since participating in the group, I am a different person and I speak, I try to speak very nice to my children and my patience is growing day by day.”

81 Mazet (2016) ‘My Journey with Letsema’ in *Our hearts are Joined: Writings from Letsema*, 91-92

82 Interview with Letsema member 2017

83 Interview with Letsema member 2017

84 Dialogue group focus group 2016

“I am very close to the children even where I am staying now. I play with the children after school and I’ve been teaching them all the indigenous games that we used to play. And I see myself as a teacher and a role model. And even the things that I used to hide without knowing why, like before when I was on my period, I would hide my pads from my daughter because I thought it was embarrassing for her to see that, but now I am open and this has made her very close and very open to me.”

### 8.3. DRUG AND ALCOHOL ABUSE GROUP: WORLD CAFES CAN INSPIRE ACTION

The Drug and Alcohol abuse group held a world cafe in June 2015. The meeting included people of different ages, though mostly young people, social workers, people who work in clinics and other community members.

The day started with Tai-chi as in the case of other Letsema meetings. Participants I spoke to from the meeting said they enjoyed the Tai-chi, even if at first they felt unsure about it. They described it as helping them to “feel free” and “calm” and to “forget about our stresses”. Groups then discussed questions linked to drug and alcohol abuse and how to prevent it, especially in the case of youth. As one participant said, “I remember people talking about different views on how to solve the problem, their experiences and a way forward.”<sup>85</sup> Some people shared their personal experiences:

“There was a woman who was sharing a story about herself, about being a recovering alcoholic. So for me, it was a WOW moment to see a person coming out in an open space, in this space for the first time and being able to talk about yourself and then, you know, the bad that you did at the time you were an alcoholic.”<sup>86</sup>

Many ideas for solutions were shared including dealing with unemployment and going to do more talks in churches. The role of the police was also debated. Though the world cafe felt like a success in the sense that it created a community space to discuss these issues, which rarely happens, the group has not been able to follow up on any actions following the meeting, mainly because of a lack of funding.

However collective meetings like world cafes often inspire action. One community member, a young man who attended the meeting was inspired to take work with young men who are drug addicts. He was invited to the world cafe by a member of the drug and alcohol

abuse group and was a former drug addict himself who had “self-rehabilitated”.

At the time, he was unemployed but planning on opening a car wash. After attending the world cafe, he was inspired to hire other young men who were drug addicts to work with him on the car wash. He said what really stayed with him was the discussion on unemployment as a cause for drug and alcohol abuse:

“We talk about drugs and alcohol abuse but where does the problem really start? So if ever we can be able to assist people to not be involved in such situations...what’s the point of bringing someone from rehab, sending them home with nothing to do?”<sup>87</sup>

Listening to the discussions, he said “touched him” and got him to reflect on the situation of young men taking drugs:

“Every time I go to town, to malls, I see the very same young guys, all my own age, doing whatever they were talking about now [at the world cafe]. So, I would say it really touched me because I’m also on the same path, you know, it could be easy for me to be in the same situation, but because I have this opportunity of talking about such things, like I feel inspired. I feel like I could do something.”<sup>88</sup>

Following the world cafe, he invited 6 young men he knew, who lived in his area, and who were drug addicts, to start the car wash with him. The car wash is still running one and a half years later and 5 of the young men he invited are no longer addicted to drugs he says. Some of them have also gone back to school. He was however unable to help one of them.

He says that alongside employment, emotional support was essential for the young men to get themselves off drugs, including being able to share some of the painful experiences that drugs helped them escape from:

“It’s the way we grew up, we come from different backgrounds first of all, like some of us have parents that don’t care about us, they don’t care about our future, where we’re going. Maybe your parents are drinking too much, you don’t have food in the house. Some of these kids get involved with wrong people, because they feel left out. They don’t know what’s going on. These people who are always drunk, they have problems these people and you could think that when they’re drunk they are happy, but the time they get sober its back to reality... What you need to do is actually stop using. Its support basically. You need people who’d understand, who are you, where do you come from, not just anyone.”<sup>89</sup>

85 Drug and alcohol abuse group focus group 2016

86 Drug and alcohol abuse group focus group 2016

87 Drug and alcohol abuse group focus group 2016

88 Drug and alcohol abuse group focus group 2016

89 Interview with Letsema participant 2017

“The guys I work with, they are not using anymore”, he says. “They are just ordinary guys now, just willing for more positive things to do, unlike going back, we’ve got to do something progressive. Today has to be better than yesterday.”<sup>90</sup>

Throughout this time, he has had a close relationship with members of the drug and alcohol abuse group who have supported him with this work.

#### 8.4. SPORTS GROUP: BOYS AND GIRLS WORKING TOGETHER IN MIXED GENDER TEAMS AT TOURNAMENTS

An area in which the sports group has worked is using sports tournaments to raise awareness on GBV including playing mixed gender teams. This work started in 2014 at the Pooe Soccer Tournament, which takes place every year in December in Evaton. The tournament runs over a number of days and attracts people from all over the Vaal to a dusty sports field surrounded by shacks and houses. The area gets taken over by spectators, players and people selling food and drink. In 2014 Letsema members had the idea of using the tournament to raise awareness on GBV.

Their idea was to have a banner with Letsema’s question: “How do you create 0%GBV in the Vaal”, that boys and girls would carry onto the field before the matches started. One of the Letsema members visited the organising committee prior to the tournament and shared this idea. He also spoke to them about the gap between men and women and how men regard themselves as superior to women. He made reference to the bible and verses which talk about men and women loving each other to motivate for the importance of working on gender equality.

The organising committee were convinced and asked him to help with this. They also sat down and thought about what they could do in the tournament to bridge this gap and make it something visible. Two of the organisers had experiences of GBV in their own families which is partly why they took the issue on so seriously. As one said:

“Even myself, I used to see myself superior to ladies, truly speaking, I once did that, beating ladies and doing all sorts of things to them, but after I lost my sister, that’s where I saw that these things are not okay. They are human beings, we are equal.”<sup>91</sup>

They came up with the idea of having mixed gender teams at the junior level. Firstly, they had boys playing against girls and then they had a match which included a mixture of boy and girls on the same



Mixed Gender Teams – Letsema Soccer Tournament 2016

team playing against each other. This idea also came in part from their own experience of the impact of playing soccer with girls when they were growing up. As an organiser said, the girls he played with as a boy “were one of us”<sup>92</sup>. They also asked a Letsema member to speak with the team officials who then communicated the message on GBV and gender inequality to their teams.

The organisers saw the mixed gender teams as a possibility to create change in two ways. Firstly, by having boys and girls play with each other, it creates an opportunity for them to understand each other better and see each other as equals. Some of the boys may have the idea that girls are weaker than them, but playing with girls allows them to see their strength. For girls, it gives them an opportunity to also see their equality to boys.

Secondly, they wanted to send a message to the spectators. They had the idea that if they see boys and girls playing against each other they would also get the message that there is equality between the genders.

**Pooe tournament:** 15 Letsema members were present at the Pooe Tournament. Once the banner was shown on the field the Letsema members held it in another part of the field. It became a centre for conversation. One member said:

“I remember we had to climb on the van for us to hold the banner. But I’ve never had so many people interested, because its saying ‘how can we create?’. Because they were saying: Why are you asking us? Why are you not telling us how to?”<sup>93</sup>

90 Interview with Letsema participant 2017

91 Sports group focus group 2016

92 Interview with Letsema member 2017

93 Sports group focus group 2016



Mixed Gender Teams – Letsema Soccer Tournament 2016

As another member said,

“there were a lot of arguments but I think those were good discussions because we’ve never really had a discussion on gender based violence at a soccer tournament.”<sup>94</sup>

One Letsema member reported that mixed gender teams created conversation and gave her an opportunity for advocacy, “I think some of the questions that people were asking was:

“Why, how can they really make boys play against girls? But myself, as a member of Letsema, I took it as time for advocacy. I started saying, ‘what’s wrong with that?’ ...because you know, this is very, it’s something that’s very common.”<sup>95</sup>

She also said that having the mixed gender games made a difference to her personally, and made her feel represented at the tournament as a woman.

“As a woman, you would be around ten men and instead of them asking you, ‘why are you here? Why are you the only woman? And so, I saw that practice as answering some of that questions and unlocking some of the blockages that were there, because now I felt comfortable as a woman to be sitting around ten men watching soccer because there’s also, there is also women playing.”<sup>96</sup>

The organisers have included mixed gender teams in tournaments after this one. Letsema recently had another small tournament where they wanted to feature mixed gender teams. Unfortunately, just as the mixed gender game began a thunder storm came down and dispersed the crowd and ended the day early.

For at least some of the young people who played at the last tournament it has become normal to play with each other and against each other. The young people I spoke with showed an understanding of why it was relevant. As one boy said on being asked why their coach decided they should play with girls: “In my view it was all about how genders are equal. You cannot differentiate between them.”<sup>97</sup>

The young people had a sense of “sameness” or recognising the similarity between each other because of playing together. As one boy said, “Playing with girls, we are ensuring there’s no difference in our likes. We like the same thing which is soccer. So playing soccer with each other is a great way of bonding with each other.”<sup>98</sup>

One of the girls said that she found that playing with boys raised her confidence:

“When you’re playing with boys, boys give you that spirit like you can actually be a player like them. They are not separating, they take me as my family.”<sup>99</sup>

However, there was still a recognition of “difference” which happened off the field. “In a soccer field, I take the girl as a team mate but let’s say after the training session or after the game, I will obviously treat her like any girl. Like chill.”<sup>100</sup> The girls agreed that there was a difference in how they related with boys off the field. They were all a bit shy or reluctant to point out what they exactly meant by this difference.

Though these young people saw their playing together as normal, they were also conscious that others in their community may not get it: “Some people, I think don’t even watch the game, cause maybe they think it’s a waste of time. They don’t see what we are seeing.” One boy suggested that this could be changed if there were more professional women’s leagues: “If soccer leagues can be professional, I think more people can see what girls do and what us boys do is just the same thing.”<sup>101</sup>

94 Sports group focus group 2016  
95 Sports group focus group 2016  
96 Sports group focus group 2016  
97 Interview with Letsema participants 2017

98 Interview with Letsema participants 2017  
100 Interview with Letsema participants 2017  
101 Interview with Letsema participants 2017

## 8.5. THE TRADITIONAL HEALERS GROUP: BRINGING VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS TOGETHER

Letsema has inspired the traditional healer's group to bring different methods into the work, in particular making non-violence the centre of their work. In May 2015, the group organised a meeting that brought together 3 gangs linked to illegal initiation schools, traditional healers, families of children who were abducted, community members and police. They felt that they could not find a solution to the problem unless they bring together the gangs and the victims. They saw the limits of punitive justice as practised by the police, where gang members would be arrested, and come out again without anything really changing. They saw the possibility of pursuing restorative justice, of gang members facing what they've done and changing.

The meeting started with a hymn and presentations from the organisers after which there were testimonies from parents, mainly mothers, whose children were either killed by initiation gangs or abducted and still missing. The testimonies unleashed grief and sorrow in the room which began to affect some of the young gangsters. Some of them responded by asking for forgiveness. Since the meeting one of the gangs who were present has disbanded.

One participant in the meeting said that although "the tide had shifted", she felt there was a gap in that the parents did not have a chance to say whether they could forgive the gang members or not. She also noted that forgiveness is difficult in a situation where the perpetrators are still out there and many parents don't have answers about their missing children.

However, as another participant noted,

"Even though at the end, the victims couldn't say whether they had forgiven them or not, but the fact that they could be in the same space discussing, the energy in the room has somehow changed."<sup>102</sup>

In this challenging terrain, the group members are committed to a way of working that is non-violent and recognises the humanity of the gang members as well. As one member noted,

"Violence cannot be solved by another violence. The only way is discussion but the environment should be very safe, whereby one is allowed to just express the feelings and in a positive way and in a remorseful manner."<sup>103</sup>

Another challenge they have faced with disbanding gangs is support for the young men to ensure that they don't go back to gangsterism. In the case of the young men who were at the meeting in 2015, government promised certain support for them which has not materialised.

Another way in which the group is challenging the culture of masculinity perpetuated through illegal initiation schools is through talks on positive masculinity.

These talks happen in various community spaces including schools. As one member described them:

"I speak about respect as a mutual or a two-way, in order for you to earn you must give it. I also caution about force and power and control to say that if we respect each other, we don't need violence or force. I always speak about how brilliant our constitution is because it gives everyone the rights and dignity and equality so I try and speak more about that and also as a South Africans I speak about the importance of working together."<sup>104</sup>

Positive masculinity is also "speaking, loving and being a friend to your children and your wife. And being affectionate, being present and also understanding that you must practice what you preach don't just say: "don't do this" and above them all, is being there and making a difference and being loving."<sup>105</sup>

The Letsema space has supported them to become more conscious of this and to acting differently as a result.

## 8.6. CORE GROUP: SARAH'S COMMEMORATION WALK

In May 2015, Sarah from Orange Farm, a close friend of one of the core group members and a participant in Letsema gatherings was murdered by her abusive partner who she had recently left.

The core group got news about the murder the day after it happened at a meeting that was planned to talk about fundraising plans. The news shocked everyone. As one of the facilitators described it, the news had "left their own emotions raw, circling the room in dark clouds". There was anger and a desire for revenge.

Drawing on techniques of working with the body and emotions, the coach of the group got everyone to sit quietly and hold their fingers. Finger holds are a mind-body healing method practiced by holding each finger on your hand for a few minutes. It is based on the understanding on that each finger is linked with a different emotion

<sup>102</sup> Traditional Healers group focus group 2016

<sup>103</sup> Traditional Healers group focus group 2016

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Letsema member

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Letsema member

and that holding your fingers, helps strong emotions to pass<sup>106</sup>.

As the group held their fingers on that day they sat in silence. As the coach described it:

“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.”<sup>107</sup>

The core member who shared the news wrote in her research diary that:

“It was the 10th of May 2015. My friend was murdered by someone who was once her lover. The father of her three lovely kids. On the 11th of May, we were having a fundraising meeting. I was heartbroken, shaking, nothing seems to be OK about me that day. I was bitter and angry. I felt like I was going to kill someone. But because of my lovely family, they supported and comfort me, that’s where I realised that I have people around me that loved me. Deep down as we do the finger healing, I took a deep breath and start to think why I am in Letsema. Because our theme says, “we want create 0% GBV within our society.”<sup>108</sup>

The coach then asked everyone in the group to hug themselves which brought a feeling of softness and self-care. Following this the discussion shifted to the fact that in however they responded to this news, they needed to do it with non-violence. As one core group member said, “Violence breeds violence. Maybe we can have a prayer meeting, write something on a stone.”

By the end of the meeting the group had decided to arrange a walk to remember Sarah and to make a statement against the violence. They wanted to recognise the anger and pain the group was feeling, but transform this into an act of non-violence.

Sarah’s memorial walk which happened on the 22nd May 2015 started at the SPAR in Orange Farm close to where she lived and ended at the place where Sarah died. Members of the community policing forum, including police youth desk members, which Sarah was a member of, also joined the walk. Everyone wore black. Another Letsema member described the walk:

“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 hardworking 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.”<sup>109</sup>

One core member wrote that, “After the march I got a lot of people coming to my home, opening up about their abusive partners and how they live under the false relationships.”<sup>110</sup>



Letsema Open Space – June 2014

106 See [www.capacitar.org/](http://www.capacitar.org/)

107 Nina Benjamin (2016) ‘Choosing non-violence: A core group response’ in *Our Hearts are Joined: Writings from Letsema*, 132

108 Letsema member research diary 2017

109 Siphoo Boo (2016) ‘Awareness campaign after a young mum’s brutal murder by her husband’, in *Our Hearts are Joined: Writings from Letsema*, page 69-70

110 Letsema member research diary 2017



# APPENDIX 1:

## LIST OF FOCUS GROUPS AND ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

### FOCUS GROUPS

#### DRUG AND ALCOHOL ABUSE GROUP: 28 JULY 2016

Jabulile Mogane	(coach)
Gabriel Matt	(world cafe participant)
Caroline Pieteron	(member)
Nthute Mabitle	(world cafe participant)
Sarah Pieteron	(world cafe participant)
Florence Mokoena	(world cafe participant)
Merica Mazibuko	(member)
Elizabeth Mphanya	(world cafe participant)
Sonti Mofokeng	(world café participant)

#### VEGETABLE GARDEN GROUP: 8 AUGUST 2016

OF Matsoso	(member)
Tshepo Rampe	(member)
Sipho Booi	(member)
MaGogo Zwane	(member)
Moeketsi Lehlaha	(member)
Teboho Mlakeng	(member)

#### SPORTS GROUP: 8 AUGUST 2016

Chippa Vilakazi	(member and Pooe tournament organiser)
Mokete Lephollitse	(sports group member)
Flatta Mqwati	(letsema member and Pooe tournament spectator)
Piet Zondo	(referee)
Simon Lehoko	(sports group member)
Nhlanhla Mashishiwane	

#### TRADITIONAL HEALERS GROUP: 10 AUGUST 2016

Jabulani Dlomo	(member)
Radikeledi Letuma	(member)
Mpuse Sekete	(member of Light of Guidance)
Mashabata Sekhoto	(member of Light of Guidance)
Mpati Khoase	(traditional healer)
Zanele Mira	(member of Light of Guidance)
Makgala Mogotsi	(Seli la Sechaba)
Paul Chakela	(traditional healer)

#### DIALOGUE GROUP: 22 AUGUST 2016

Khetiwe Motaung	(women's dialogue member)
Flatta Mqwati	(women's dialogue member)
Thoko Noge	(women's dialogue member)
Nosipho Twala	(coach)
Mapule Keswa	(women's dialogue member)
Makotledi Ntlahse	(women's dialogue member)
Sophy Mofomme	(women's dialogue member)
Mamathupi Moloi	(women's dialogue member)
Meisie Mphanya	(core group member)

#### CORE GROUP: 16 NOVEMBER 2016

Khetiwe Motaung	(member)
Meisie Mphanya	(member)
Ntombi Zodwa	(member)

### ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

Caroline Pieteron	18th January
Radikeledi Letuma	19th January
Nthute Mabitle	19th January
Flatta Mqwati	18th January
Simon Lehoko	8 March
Betty Rasekwai	9 February
Gladys Mokolo	9 February
Group interview with soccer youth (3 boys and 2 girls)	25 January 2016
Chippa Vilakazi	25 January
Nosipho Twala	7 December 2016
Michel Friedman	6 January 2017
Sweeto Makgai	8 December 2016