



MMS Bulletin #130

Addressing Sexual Violence and HIV

***LifeLine gender-based violence program in rural areas of
KwaZuluNatal, South Africa***

**Turning the Tide on Gender Based Violence
and HIV in rural areas of KwaZulu**

By Sinikiwe Biyela

In response to high gender based violence incidents and HIV infection rate in KwaZulu Natal, LifeLine Pietermaritzburg has developed a program that seeks to address the root causes of gender based violence at a community level, to reduce HIV infection risk and to bring hope for the victims of rape. The approach addresses cultural practices that perpetuate gender stereotype and therefore exposing women and children to greater risk of being abused sexually by addressing gaps between cultural practices and legal rights.



Comfort pack for rape survivor (LifeLine)

In 2014 South Africa celebrated 20 years of democracy as a country, but it is noted with great sadness that women and children are not free. Every 8 minutes a woman and more than 20 000 children are raped in South Africa every year. In simple language, this means that women in South Africa have more chances of being raped than learning to read. South Africa has the highest HIV prevalence rate compared to other countries. Women have greater chances of being infected with HIV, because 1 in 3 of the perpetrators are HIV positive. What complicates the situation further is the fact that most perpetrators are known to the victims, and are a source of income for families. Survivors are very reluctant to press charges against their perpetrators as they are financially dependent on them and are made to believe that it was a mistake, it will never happen again. With 40% unemployment rate in South Africa, survivors find themselves trapped and sexual violation becomes part of their everyday life experiences.

In KwaZulu communities women and girls are kidnapped and raped (*Ukuthwala custom*) on their way to schools. This emanates from a traditional cultural practice where a man and his friend or peers set out to force a girl to accept his marital proposal and advances. This cultural

practice has been distorted and twisted from its original manifestation. In the communities where LifeLine works, this custom has been used to legitimize and validate criminal abduction and the infliction of gender based violence against minor girl children and women. There have been many incidents where girls travelling to school by foot (from the age of 12 years) have been abducted by a man or group of men who overpower her and rape her. The girl or women is kept and raped in a man's house for more than a week. When she eventually escapes, it's too late for her to access post exposure prophylactic to stop HIV transmission if the man was HIV positive. This is one of many cultural practices that has exposed women and children to sexual violence and increased their risk of HIV infection.

A whole community response to Gender-Based Violence

Sexual violence is an extreme violation and a life threatening attack for most of our survivors. A traumatic experience like rape or sexual violation is like an infected wound that will not heal unless treated. It can leave deep and lasting emotional scars. It is for these reasons that LifeLine developed an approach to work with victims of rape, support them and turn them into survivors. As an organisation we believe that there is life after rape or abuse, but most people need help to reclaim their lives. I also believe that turning the tide on gender based violence and eradicate sexual violation is everybody's business. It is for this reason that LifeLine program is a whole community response to Gender-Based Violence. The approach has two pillars:

- **Psychosocial Support Services through counselling at the crisis centers**
- **GBV Prevention through community sensitization and dialogues**

The approach requires that we work with different stakeholders especially the traditional leaders as they are the custodian of culture and have powers to change cultural norms that are not helpful. LifeLine together with the traditional leaders recruits unemployed youth from their local communities to be trained as gender based violence counselors and ambassadors. Training of youth from the community ensures that resources remain in the community; therefore they become an asset in their own communities.



Picture of youth trained as counselors in Umzimkhulu

The first main goal of the program is to support survivors of gender based violence and help them reclaim their lives; and this is done through the establishment of the crisis centers to offer counseling and emotional support, and health care services. To date LifeLine has established 11 crisis centres in 5 district municipalities where survivors of sexual violence are supported. This is a one stop multidisciplinary service place for the survivors to get support. In 2013 the crisis centres assisted 4'652 new rape survivors with counseling and emotional support, HIV counseling and testing. Women and children were also assisted with medical examination and treatment including post exposure prophylactic, STI's infection control, birth control, and collection of evidence for DNA purposes. Legal assistance such as pressing charges, gaining access to shelters and comfort packs for survivors without clothing or in need of toiletries is given. The comfort packs are mainly given to the survivors who presented at the crisis Centre within 72 hours, to be used after the medical examination. The comfort pack contains a dress/clothing, underwear, toothbrush, toothpaste, body lotion, shampoo, soap, pads, comb, hand towels, comfort doll, biscuit as well as tea/coffee sachets. Survivors are able to take a bath before going home; and that brings back their dignity that was taken away from them.

Each Crisis centre has two full time employed counsellors, who on average assist 57 new rape cases per month. The program has reduced HIV infection rate associated with sexual violence to 0% through Post Exposure Prophylactic last year.

Root causes of gender based violence

The second major goal of the program is to identify root causes of gender based violence and assist communities to come up with possible actions to address the scourge of gender based violence. The trained local youth is equipped with skills and additional knowledge to facilitate community dialogues on gender based violence. During dialogue sessions community members discuss the root causes of Gender Based Violence and are encouraged to come up with possible solutions to reduce GBV in their own communities. To date the dialogue participants have challenged twisted cultural norms and discriminative religious practices, and the custom of *ukuthwala* (abduction of girls) was abolished in 3 communities by the traditional leaders. Community members took actions against incidents of GBV after participating in dialogue sessions or group. What we enjoyed the most about their actions is that solutions are owned by the communities. In 2013 we saw an increase in the number of people participating in gender based violence dialogues to 15'773.



Youth taking a stand against the custom of *ukuthwala* (abduction of girls and women)

Echievements

LifeLine has noted quite a number of achievements using the model especially in deep rural areas. The program has empowered communities to change societal norms or to take actions against twisted cultural practices. It has reduced the abduction (kidnapping and raping) of

women and girls between the ages of 13-25 in rural areas. It has involved indigenous groups as they are the custodian of the culture and advocated for the rights of women and girls living in rural areas. Through gender based violence sensitization activities, survivors are presenting within 72 hours in the crisis centres and are able to access post exposure prophylactic which reduces chances of being infected with HIV. Communities are more supportive towards survivors of gender based violence, and they support them through legal processes. The program has healed women who suffered severe GBV through Solution Focused Approach (*LifeLine team was trained by terre des hommes switzerland on this approach and it was incorporated to our GBV program*). Lastly, training offered to youth has created job opportunities for youth to be employed permanently by the state or other LifeLine programs/ other NGO's, and therefore reducing the high unemployment rate in South Africa and reduced women dependency on their partners.

The program has turned many gender based violence victims into survivors! They are relieved as they discover that they are HIV negative and they are able to concentrate more on their emotional wellbeing. It is always encouraging to see the survivors leaving our office with a smile after their three month HIV test, as they test negative. We know that the program has saved their lives and brought back hopes for a better future!



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