

Lesotho's Other Epidemic: Gender Inequity in the Age of HIV/AIDS

A case study documenting the development of a YAH Committee Member

Building Capacity and Community Engagement in Lesotho:

Youth Against HIV/AIDS (YAH)

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Land-locked within the Republic of South Africa, the tiny mountain-kingdom of Lesotho is plagued with the third highest HIV prevalence in the world, with an estimated 30 percent of the population infected by the virus. Those who have hitherto escaped infection are still touched by the ravages of the epidemic every day: children must tend to their ill parents; orphans are forced to fend for themselves or are left in the care of extended family members; life slows down every Saturday to accommodate the many funerals. In a way, no one is spared.

The country's staggering prevalence rate is a crisis enmeshed in a myriad of other social problems: misinformation about the virus which fuels stigma and discrimination; a poor education system; a crippling unemployment rate; a growing number of orphans and vulnerable children; alcoholism; food insecurity; and violence against women and children. HIV exacerbates these social problems, and these problems propel the epidemic; it is a vicious cycle that appears unstoppable.

Underlying and aggravating this crisis is the egregious inequality that exists between Basotho men and women, the latter of whom bear the brunt of sexually transmitted infections, relationship violence, and a plethora of other health issues, including HIV. Women's disproportionate infection rates are attributed to social norms that curtail women's decision-making power; insufficient access to capital, land, and education; and rigid gender roles that thrust them into precarious economic situations to provide for their families.

A known driver of Lesotho's HIV epidemic, gender inequity is a major focus in the work of Help Lesotho, an Ottawa-based charity that has been working to mitigate the effects of HIV/AIDS in the country's remote towns and villages since 2004 (www.helplesotho.ca). As part of its mission to promote youth leadership development, Help Lesotho (HL) supports the Youth Against HIV/AIDS (YAH) project, a partnership initiative of the Institute on Governance (IOG) undertaken with funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). This innovative project seeks to ameliorate the effects of the epidemic by fostering greater governance capacity and community engagement of civil society organizations in the most resource-poor, isolated areas in Lesotho.

The YAH project aims to mobilize Lesotho's greatest resource in the fight against HIV/AIDS: its youth. Youth committees were established in Hlotse, Seboche/Bokoro, and Pitseng in 2006 and earlier

this year, two additional committees were formed in Thaba Tseka, the district which endures the worst of Lesotho's resource-scarcity and poverty, as well as one of the highest national HIV prevalence rates.

Youth from Thaba Tseka's surrounding villages were selected to participate in an intensive three week governance training followed by interviews with leaders in their respective towns and villages to learn about the major problems plaguing their communities, as well as existing programs and structures to fight them. The youth were then charged with the task of improving their communities based on the information which they had compiled.

Between February and April 2007, I lived in the town of Thaba Tseka and served as a volunteer on the Youth Against HIV/AIDS project. Dwelling in an area where approximately one-third of the population is infected by the virus, I heard countless tales of hardship, mostly from the women, young and old, who somehow muster up the strength to support their families and communities in the face of tremendous adversity.

One such story I heard came from Nthabiseng Thamae,^{*} a young woman who volunteered on the Thaba Tseka Youth Against HIV/AIDS committee. This case study outlines her experience working on the YAH initiative. Her story illustrates the efficacy of such initiatives, but above all else, Nthabiseng's case demonstrates the need for continual support to the young Basotho women who, amidst everything, must fight the epidemic that flourishes alongside Lesotho's HIV epidemic: widespread gender inequity.



Nthabiseng Thamae

Her petite stature is misleading. Short and thin with hair cropped to her ears, 24 year old Nthabiseng has the build of an adolescent. Her face is a sharp contrast: she wears a serious expression, and her eyes are those of a woman who has seen more than her share of adversity.

Nthabiseng, preceded by four brothers, was the youngest in the family until the birth of her sister 16 years later. She shouldered a great deal of responsibility in the Thamae household. Adhering to her traditional gender role, Nthabiseng cooked and cleaned and laundered alongside her mother. Young Nthabiseng's domestic duties increased markedly upon her mother's passing in 2005. At the tender age of 22, Nthabiseng became the woman of the Thamae household, tending to her father and brothers and serving as a surrogate mother to her 6 year old sister.

The death of Nthabiseng's mother introduced not only hardship, but discordance in the Thamae household, as the family struggled to cope with "influences from the outside." As Nthabiseng describes it, ill-intentioned people in the community conjured up rumours about her which spread to her father and brothers. Her family responded by tightening the already stringent restrictions on Nthabiseng. At the same time, they came to expect more from her in the household and refused to distribute the workload evenly. Nthabiseng puts forth a brave face, but her eyes betray her sadness as she recalls how the stress of her mother's death brought conflict to her home.

*A pseudonym has been used to protect the subject's privacy. Informed consent was obtained prior to conducting the interviews which inform this case study.

Nthabiseng's story is not an uncommon one in Lesotho, where children, often girls, are left to head households in the wake of their parent's premature death. This is most often the case for maternal orphans, ** since it is typically the mother who serves as the primary caretaker in the family. When her mother died, Nthabiseng inherited her role. She was burdened with a disproportionate share of the workload, without any corresponding power in decision-making in the household.

What followed this difficult period was what Nthabiseng once believed to be “a miracle”—her father began listening to her concerns, and her brothers began assisting her more around the house. Now, having gone through governance training, she recognizes that a more assertive style of communication helped her get through to her family: “...I said to them, these people [who spread rumours], they want bad things for us...these things they say, they are not true. The family must stay strong and forget the outside influences.” It is possible that her status within the household may have been bolstered by the fact that she contributed to the family income with the revenue from the piece work she does, repairing shoes and fashioning bags. However, Nthabiseng does not see money as a factor, since the family is middle class and never struggled with finances. Instead, she notes that her increased responsibilities in the household speeded her transition from childhood to adulthood which, in turn, resulted in an improved relationship with her father, who now sees her “not as a silly child,” but as a grown woman with legitimate concerns.

It was perhaps this change in the Thamae household that led Nthabiseng to the YAH project. One of her brothers heard about the initiative and thought that it would be a good opportunity for his sister to get busy outside of the house. Nthabiseng applied—twice to be safe—expecting to learn how to write grant proposals to fund her dream of opening a shop to sell her wares: shoes, bags, belts and holsters that she had learned to make in a leatherworks and tannery program at the Thaba Tseka Technical Institute. She was later pleasantly surprised that she would learn much more than that.



After the selection process, Nthabiseng and her fellow candidates attended HL's six day annual Leadership Camp in the village of Pitseng in January 2007. Far from their roles and responsibilities at home, the Thaba Tseka YAH members were free to get to know one another, as well as others in the HL network, including members of the established YAH committees.

Nthabiseng felt shy at the camp, but quietly, unassumingly, she absorbed all of the information available to her. Much of what she learned augmented the knowledge that she had gained through being involved with Paray High School's Red Cross club, but still she felt that the camp somehow changed her. Most significantly, her belief that a leader's job is to give orders was replaced by a new understanding of leadership, one that championed collective decision making and active listening. While in Pitseng, Nthabiseng made a resolution to work on her short temper so that she, too, could be a good leader.

At the Camp, participants had the opportunity to test for HIV. Many of the youth struggled with this choice, knowing that alongside Lesotho's HIV epidemic there thrives yet another epidemic: one of stigma and discrimination towards those who are known to be positive. While many overcame their fear, Nthabiseng did not manage to make it to the testing station. The year previous she had gathered

** A maternal orphan is a child who has lost only his or her mother

the courage to test and was relieved to find that she was negative. At the time she had found strength in her father, who was convinced that he and his daughter should test, as suggested by a myth-busting radio show, *Know about HIV/AIDS*. Since turning down her chance to be retested at the camp, Nthabiseng had been informally counselling herself to prepare for another test, considering what she would do if she turned out to be positive the second time around.

Despite having adhered to the advice of the post-test counsellor following her first HIV test, her fear of a positive test result remained, perhaps fostered by a persistent doubt about Thabo, her boyfriend of two years. She spoke very infrequently of Thabo, saying only that he appreciated that she was involved with YAH because it kept her “head and hands busy with something.” Nthabiseng reported that he understood the concept of gender equity, and never tried to make decisions for her. She believed her involvement with YAH strengthened their relationship significantly, and that Thabo appeared to respect her even more.



When the Thaba Tseka YAH committee reunited again prior to their governance training in February, I found Nthabiseng to be extremely shy and reserved. Away from the group, her passion and vigour came alive. She and her friend, Maneo, explained their search for capital to fund a business venture: the aforementioned shop of which Nthabiseng had long dreamt. Nthabiseng’s spirited determination set her apart from her contemporaries, many of whom were debilitated by apathy bred from Thaba Tseka’s lack of opportunity. Nthabiseng spoke with great enthusiasm about their plans and soon after, she unleashed her true spirit at the governance training sessions as well.

Facilitated by Canadian and Basotho instructors, the training covered a range of topics including: medical facts about HIV/AIDS; gender equity; power and decision making in the community; democracy and government structure; communication and conflict resolution; and sexual violence. Nthabiseng, who had expected to acquire teaching skills to educate her community about HIV/AIDS, was surprised and slightly overwhelmed by the density of the training. However, as with previous challenges, she rose to the occasion. At the close of training, Nthabiseng realized that the concepts which they had learned are, “...things we live with but...don’t name.” When she learned about the practice of good governance in the household, for instance, the idea that men and women should be equal seemed intuitive to her; now she simply had acquired the vocabulary to put words to her ideas.

Speaking about gender equity and governance within her family, Nthabiseng admits that although the situation in her household had recently improved, she felt it was unfair that her father and brothers continue to leave her out of decision making processes because she is a woman. After her training, she understood that “...women have a right to decide,” what is best for them and their families.

Consequently, Nthabiseng committed herself to practicing gender equity when she starts her own family: “Some people think teaching girls is a waste of time...[because] when they are married, they will be unable to help their own families...[My]children will know we are equal in the family...My husband will not say, ‘this is my wife, she is like a child, she will listen and not ask me any questions.’ No, that is not the way.” Nthabiseng admits that facilitating this change will be difficult because, “in Basotho culture, it’s not easy to argue, to oppose men. A woman who does this is taken as a silly woman who does not respect her husband.” Still, the training infused Nthabiseng with a new hope: “We cannot change the culture, but people have to change the way of living.”

In addition to challenging her attitudes toward traditional gender roles, the training profoundly altered Nthabiseng's sense of personal comfort around talking about the virus. The session on medical facts on HIV/AIDS, in particular, added to her knowledge base, enhancing her confidence in her ability to speak at public gatherings.

Speaking at public gatherings—a thought which hitherto would have paralyzed her—was now something that Nthabiseng talked about quite casually, indicating another transformation brought on by her involvement with YAH. Finding a voice to express her opinions about HIV/AIDS, gender and democracy; acquiring the vocabulary to grapple with complex concepts, such as governance and capacity; struggling with issues that the Basotho are socialized to suppress, such as sexual violence—the governance training evoked within Nthabiseng a new sense of confidence: “the training brings new changes in our lives as young people.” Although participating in group discussions was initially the greatest challenge, it proved to be the most fruitful learning experience for her, even resulting in her appointment as team leader of one of the committees. Partnered with another young and promising male leader, Nthabiseng lead her group into the next phase of the YAH project: Capacity Mapping.



Nthabiseng and fellow team members were extremely anxious at the thought of interviewing respected community leaders, as youth are not taken very seriously in Basotho culture. Nthabiseng also anticipated that the inclusion of ‘HIV/AIDS’ in the title of the project would invite criticism and suspicion from the community because of the stigma surrounding the virus. Nthabiseng's prediction was correct on both counts. Despite these obstacles, or perhaps *because* of them, the entire team rose to the challenge and performed immensely well under her leadership.

There was a marked change in the way Nthabiseng, in particular, began carrying herself as the interviews got underway. Reflecting on her personal development, Nthabiseng notes that at the onset of the Capacity Mapping phase her apprehension gave way to a realization that “...you cannot do capacity mapping if you have fear.” Putting her self-doubt aside, she interviewed the Police Chief Commissioner, a man known to be difficult. With each subsequent interview, Nthabiseng's confidence increased substantially.

Doubt in her own leadership abilities was an additional source of anxiety. Nthabiseng worried that she would not be taken seriously because of her small build, and that her loud and boisterous group, especially the young men, would be hard to lead. In the end, Nthabiseng mastered an effective style of leadership: “I give them a chance to say their views. I don't think for them.” Her training in communication helped her understand that some use comedy as a tool to express themselves. She is now very proud of the way she leads group discussions: “I am confident and brave...people pay attention to what I say.” As the Capacity Mapping phase came to a close, Nthabiseng and her group members saw how it had facilitated an important exchange in Thaba Tseka, teaching the YAH members about their community, and demonstrating to the community leaders the potential of the youth.



As Nthabiseng and I sat over a cup of tea and pondered what the future holds, she spoke excitedly about YAH and about improving the conditions of the district. She now considered the government officials with whom she met as allies in this battle against HIV/AIDS, having seen first hand how

committed many of them are to bettering the district. She also saw for the first time that there is power in numbers: “If I come alone...[the government] will not listen...if there is something needed in the district, and we come with a group, the people in the government will hear us.” Grateful to have gleaned so much invaluable information from the training, proud of her growth as a strong leader during Capacity Mapping and pleased with her team members’ accomplishments, Nthabiseng Thamae appeared committed to remaining leader of her committee and becoming a leader in her community.



Unfortunately, Nthabiseng’s plans never materialized. Four days after our last conversation, on the eve of our Strategic Planning workshop, the Basotho YAH Coordinator, Tlalane Tlali, received a text message from Nthabiseng explaining that she and her boyfriend had eloped and moved to Mohotlong district, one of the poorest and most remote areas of Lesotho. It was a tremendous shock to her family. They had forbid her from dating out of fear of unwanted pregnancy and had not known she was involved in a relationship. It was a tremendous loss to the committee. Nthabiseng’s team members in particular, depended heavily on her direction and guidance, and were quite shaken by the sudden abandonment by their team leader.

Following this shocking news, the YAH coordinators and committee members mourned the loss of Ausi (sister) Nthabiseng, her profound insights and strong leadership. I reflected on my last conversations with her about the steps she would take towards applying what she had learned through YAH: raising a family where good governance was practiced; having the confidence to manage her own business without the help of a man; educating her community to eradicate HIV-related stigma; and getting herself tested for the virus. From what I remembered of Nthabiseng’s determination, I believed she would work towards accomplishing these goals, wherever she may find herself.



For months following my own departure from Thaba Tseka, I wondered what had come of Nthabiseng, and tried to call her cell phone on a few occasions. I persisted and one morning in July a quiet voice was faintly audible through the static: it was Nthabiseng. Not much was clear due to the bad connection, but my worst fear was confirmed by the call: Nthabiseng had left abruptly because her boyfriend had suddenly wanted to get married; eloping was essentially his decision. YAH’s promising young leader is now “doing nothing,” as she explains. She desperately wants to work, but there is little opportunity in Mohotlong. Her husband, too, is without a job. When I inquired about her dream to open her own shop, she seemed to laugh at the absurdity of the idea. Echoing my very first conversation with her, Nthabiseng explained to me that “there is no capital,” for a venture such as this. She said she would re-visit this goal some time in the future, but it simply is not possible considering her current situation.

She says she is happy, but added that “life is not too different from when I lived with my own family.” Coming full circle, Nthabiseng is now cooking and cleaning and laundering—only now she is in the service of her husband and mother-in-law. Her father and siblings in Thaba Tseka, whom she formerly served, are lost to her: “It is in our culture...I cannot go to see my family.” It is unclear to me whether this mandatory isolation is temporary or permanent. When asked if she is frustrated by her new living arrangements, she says that her frustration “passed last week.” She now accepts that “...this is the way it is to be now.”

When I asked the newly married Nthabiseng about her past life with YAH, she said she would like to continue to do similar work in Mohotlong, if possible. Indeed, in spite of the new challenges that she faces, Nthabiseng remains committed to the project goals. As I listened to her and reflected on her development over the past few months, I began to grasp a sliver of an understanding of Nthabiseng's complex reality. Her story is not simply one of a woman who has become ensnared in the trap of her traditional gender role; it is also one of an extremely determined woman who, with the right resources, will make a difference in her new community. Her environment and situation have changed markedly, but she is still that bold, courageous, spirited young woman who once pledged to save her dying country. Nthabiseng's journey with YAH may have ended prematurely, but we can hope that her strength and courage will hold strong as she begins this journey in Mohotlong. The knowledge and experience she gained through her involvement with YAH will surely prove to be invaluable tools as she builds a new life and starts a new family.



In considering the efficacy of initiatives such as YAH, cases like Nthabiseng's are illustrative of the need to "...recognize the burden that women and girls bear in the age of HIV/AIDS, but equally, to celebrate their achievements in the fight against the pandemic."*** Often times, the global community is quick to fulfill the former part of this appeal, but the latter part remains unanswered because we are consumed with sympathy towards the character of the vulnerable African woman. It is easy to fall into this trap in Lesotho: mothers and sisters engage in sex work to supplement their family income; grandmothers sustain informal networks of care in their communities; young girls fall prey to the lures of transactional sex; all are affected, directly or indirectly, by sexual violence in the private and public spheres.

Within these stories of hardship, however, are also stories of survival. In hearing women's cries for help, let us not turn a deaf ear to the sounds of women's voices, ringing strong and clear, fighting oppression, stigma, and discrimination in their towns and villages. Let us not be blind to the sight of these heroines who, in the face of tremendous adversity, serve as the backbones of their fragile families and the bonds of their fragmenting communities.

Initiatives such as YAH are effective primarily because they cultivate the capacity of young women and men to transfer their new found understanding of their reality to the larger social and cultural context in which this disease thrives. Women's indispensable experience, especially, renders them the most valuable soldiers in the war against this virus. With sustained support from capacity building and community engagement initiatives such as Youth Against HIV/AIDS, these soldiers will have the weapons to turn the tide on the twin epidemics which are slowly destroying Lesotho: HIV/AIDS and gender inequity.

*** Annan, Kofi. *Secretary General Hails Women as Most Courageous, Creative in Fight Against HIV/AIDS, in World AIDS Day Message*. UNAIDS Press Release. (23/11/2004).