



**Transforming cultures of violence:
Ploughing the soil, planting the seeds of new social norms**

**A story of the Letsema Collective Impact Process
focused on
"How can we create 0% Gender Based Violence"
in the Vaal, Gauteng, South Africa**

**by Michel Friedman
February, 2017**

DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to Millicent Mamfene Phillips from Orange Farm, the Vaal, Gauteng, South Africa, who passed away on 18 February 2016

Millicent was a participant in a Gender Action Learning process between 2008-2010 as a member of the feminist community based organisation, Remmoho and she was a member of the core-group of Letsema.

Millicent was a feisty, spirited woman who was an activist to the bone. Besides being an active member of the core group, she used to teach Tai Chi and finger holds to clients in the oncology unit near where she lived and she also facilitated dialogues between grandmothers and their grandchildren about sex, sexuality and relationships.

Millicent has stories in all 3 books produced by G@W South Africa –
Writing from the Inside: Stories of Hope and Change,
Transforming Power: A Knotted Rope
Our Hearts are connected: Writings from Letsema

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND¹

In September 2013, the South African Gender at Work (G@W) team initiated a feminist inspired social change process to experiment with the possibility of using an approach that emphasises dialogue and working with multiple and diverse actors to collaborate in creating greater collective impact² in relation to violence against women and non-conforming genders³.

The social change process was named “Letsema” - an isiSotho word referring to the practice in rural areas where women came together to work the soil. In the context of the social change process initiated by the Gender at Work team, “Letsema” gave meaning 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.

Women and other community members in the Vaal, a resource poor area an hour from Johannesburg in the Gauteng province of South Africa, lead Letsema. The process seeks to link and facilitate enabling conditions for the activities of diverse role-players. In a short two years, Letsema participants tell profound stories of how the process has contributed to outcomes in them learning to work collaboratively, in relation to personal empowerment, consciousness and behavior change, changes in family/household, neighbourhood, and broader community levels.

This paper attempts to outline the story of **what** happened during the Letsema process; **what** our initial Theory of Change was and what has enabled the changes, **what** are some of the key outcomes and **what** this has meant in terms of norm change. Finally we ask **now what** - where the process is going - what are some of the key challenges we face and what are we learning?

The paper aims to share our experience with other facilitators/ educators/ initiators of community processes. We offer a different kind of process for supporting the creation of new norms for collective community engagement for social change and for ending gender-based violence. This initiative can thus be seen as a primary prevention intervention that aims to address underlying causal factors or drivers of GBV, such as gender inequality, problematic social constructions of gender, and a prevailing “culture of violence” (or the normative use of interpersonal violence), in

¹Thanks to Ray Gordezky and Tanya Beer, important thought partners in supporting our efforts. Thanks to Nosipho Twala from Evaton in the Vaal who had the courage to say yes to be a G@W anchor person for this work. Thanks to Nina Benjamin, Fazila Gany and Nosipho Twala, co-facilitators in the South African G@W team who have together willingly walked this uncertain and emergent learning path in support of the process. Thanks to all the coaches who have been committed to supporting the work and learning of the action groups – Nina Benjamin (core group), Bongani Dlamini (Traditional Healers’s group), Fazila Gany (Vegetable growing group), Nhlanhla Mabizela (Men’s Calabash group), Shamim Meer (Each one teach one Group) and Nosipho Twala (Dialogue group). Thanks to Shamim Meer for her writing and editing support and her support to the coaches. Thanks to Jackie Mondl for her writing support. Thanks to Pernilla Luttrupp and others from the Skype Open Space group for support on facilitating Open Space. Thanks to Nancy Castro for her support in helping the action groups develop fundraising proposals. Thanks to all members of the Letsema core group and action working groups who have demonstrated remarkable commitment, resilience, willingness to learn and experiment with new ways of working. Thanks to G@W for supporting innovative approaches and backing us to try something new. Thanks to the FLOW Fund (Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women) from the DUTCH Government for financial support. Thanks to all interns and scribes who have helped to record various reflection meetings and to Rebecca Klaasen for editing support. Thanks to all readers of earlier drafts of this paper and to Kalyani Menon Sen for ideas on the title.

² See Ray Gordezky (2015): From Us to Them: Working with Multiple Constituents in Dialogic OD, in Gervase R. Bushe & Robert J. Marshak, (eds.) Dialogic Organizational Development: The Theory and Practice of Transformational Change, Barrett Koehler, Oakland, CA, pages 305-323 and Fay Hanleybrown, John Kania, & Mark Kramer, Channeling Change (2012, p2): Making Collective Impact Work in Stanford Social Innovation Review.

³ People who don't conform to traditional gender stereotypes or binaries. For example, biologically born females who identify as masculine or as men, biologically born males who identify as feminine or as women, biological males or females who have undergone surgery to become trans-women or trans-men, biologically born females who don't marry and choose not to have children, etc.

an effort to prevent the violence before it starts. Through the story, the paper provides an introduction to socially innovative methods and approaches used in the process and facilitators' reflections on using these methods. It provides a broad overview and context to the stories shared by some of the Letsema participants and coaches in "OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: *Writings From Letsema*. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal"⁴. The "I" in this story is myself, the Gender at Work program manager in South Africa. The 'we' in the story refers to the Gender at Work facilitation team, which comprises of myself, Fazila Gany and Nina Benjamin and Nosipho Twala, who also work for The Labour Research Service (LRS), a trade union support organisation(LRS)⁵.

How did it all begin?

The Letsema initiative began with a series of Gender Action and Peer Learning (GAL) processes with community based organisations and trade unions⁶. These were facilitated by G@W in partnership with the LRS between 2008 and 2013. In earlier processes, organisations were free to choose their focus. The last of these action learning processes however, was focused on a common theme of addressing the links between Gender Based Violence (GBV), Women's Economic Empowerment and HIV/Aids. South Africa is notorious for its high level of GBV and this last process inspired us when participants across a diverse range of organisations built strong relationships and started generating new ideas for action. The process enabled participants to think about GBV differently and to see both how possible and how valuable it was to have construction workers, domestic workers, health sector workers, home based care workers and LGBTI youth in the same space. As facilitators we began to wonder how we could deepen the work and go beyond impact at a single organizational level.

At the June 2012 G@W global strategic learning session I found myself asking on behalf of the G@W South African team: **How can we build a more sustainable gender action learning process that is rooted in working class perspectives, is less resource intensive and addresses existing gender deep structures in society, for example, norms underlying GBV?** This was to become our core-framing question, and at that stage we had no firm idea of how we would answer this.

As we at G@W considered questions relating to GBV and how to link this to a grant from the Dutch FLOW Fund to implement a GAL process, we suddenly found ourselves in a context of tremendous popular outpouring of desire for change relating to two rape cases – one in India and one in South Africa. In Dec 2012 we observed an inspiring public plea for change in India⁷ and in Feb 2013 we witnessed calls for justice relating to the horrendous rape and murder of Anene Booysen in South Africa⁸.

Given this context we at G@W and LRS asked ourselves a number of questions: 'How can we respond innovatively to the extremely high levels of GBV in the country?' Can we apply similar

⁴ Edited by Shamim Meer, 2016 Published by Gender at Work and the Labour Research Services, https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5LON_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

⁵ See <http://www.lrs.org.za/>

⁶ Shamim Meer, Michel Friedman and Nina Benjamin (2013), *Bringing Back the Heart: The Gender at Work Action Learning Process with Four South African Trade Unions*, Published by Solidarity Centre, W.D.C., <http://www.genderatwork.org/tabid/169/Default.aspx?loc=http://genderatwork.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Resources/Gender%20at%20Work.South%20Africa%20Case%20Study%20PDF%20Final.pdf>

⁷ In India, the horrific gang rape and murder of a young Indian woman, Jyoti Singh, inspired ordinary women and men to take to the streets and collectively protest their country's scandalous problem of systemic violence against women.

⁸ Anene was a 17-year-old girl who was found by a security guard the morning after she had been [gang-raped](#) and [disemboweled](#) at a construction site in [Bredasdorp](#), in the [Western Cape, South Africa](#); she was still alive, but died later in the day. <http://www.ndtv.com/article/world/hundreds-mourn-at-funeral-of-south-africa-gang-rape-victim-328801>

principles as in the GAL process and respond to the endemically high levels of GBV in the country through the FLOW grant? How can we build on the experience of our partners, while using the G@W approach to change, creating safe, non-judgemental and respectful learning spaces conducive to building trust, openness and authentic relationships?

We knew that high levels of violence negatively influenced people's ability to trust each other and be receptive to innovation. We wanted to use the resources, skills and relationships we had already cultivated to make a difference in ordinary every day social relations that have become normalised as violent. We were mainly concerned with the question of how we could help to create new norms that are not so violent at heart.

Thinking about our core-framing question and given that our existing partnerships were cross-sectoral, we decided to focus our efforts in a geographically based area in which these partners either worked or had contacts. Initial partners who chose to work with us included - **women's and feminist organisations** – Vukani and Remmoho; **community based organisations (CBO's)**- Kganya Consortium and the SA 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).

During the first quarter of 2013 we reflected on what our approach could contribute to the work on GBV in the country. We began to conceptualise some hypotheses in answer to all of our questions and to develop a way to start creating what was to become an emergent and ever changing process. We were beginning to taste the meaning of the notion that:

*"Human systems, like systems in nature don't tend to change through plans or dictates, but through emergence"*⁹.

Decision process: location and approach

We chose to work in an area called the Vaal, about 60-90 minutes outside of Johannesburg. Being relatively distant from Johannesburg as opposed to other townships, it is considered a peri-urban area with massive sprawling informal settlements. It is an area that has experienced more massacres than any other region in the Republic of South Africa¹⁰. It is an area that is relatively under-resourced in terms of NGO's, especially those focused on servicing survivors of GBV. It has high rates of illiteracy, informal employment and unemployment. Letsema participants¹¹ say that unemployment leads to high rates of crime, drug, alcohol and sexual abuse. They talk of high rates of rape, intimate partner violence and abusive relationships with children. Girls have problems with respect to early pregnancy, sexual abuse and bullying; there is a high rate of school dropouts; old people are vulnerable to abuse and often have their social grants abused by others. There are few recreational facilities; women struggle to break the silence around issues that are considered private such as domestic violence and sexual abuse and the Vaal in general has a reputation for people being reluctant to speak out for fear of reprisals. There are many illegal initiation¹² schools and many stories of young boys who have been abducted without their parents consent. The Vaal however is also considered *"a very important economic hub, and people from all over bring their*

⁹ Sera Thompson and Greg Judelman with Tim Merry, Kathy Jourdain and Tenneson Woolf A Field Guide for Systems Change. The Art of Social Innovation (2010, p16). http://avnu.ca/avnu/uploads/2015/02/aosi_fieldguide_v01-1.pdf

¹⁰ <http://truthstours.weebly.com/vaal-uprisings-30.html>. Also see fn 14.

¹¹ Minutes from Fundraising workshops (2015) and August evaluation meeting (2015).

¹² Male initiation is a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood for some ethnic groups in South Africa. Ritual male initiation includes circumcision and in the traditional form, initiates spend about a month or longer in seclusion in the bush. <http://theconversation.com/changes-in-gender-norms-are-making-initiation-safer-for-south-african-boys-46488>

cultures and beliefs with them. Different people gather here, that's why the Vaal is important and unique" (Simon Lehoko, Aug evaluation meeting, 2015). In other words, in relation to GBV, the Vaal's residents have a range of different cultural/traditional beliefs and practices that might influence how they engage with the issue of GBV.

One of our colleagues, Nosipho Twala, lives in the area and was willing to be an anchor for the process. At the first meeting we held to initiate the process, she said:

"The Vaal has seen people experience such cruel and harsh violence. It feels like people are not shocked by the violence anymore and we have become numb to it. As a community we only end up responding when something is horrific. The massacres¹³ normalised violence and we can only act when it is big" (Nosipho Twala, Sep 2013 core group meeting minutes).

One of the local participants said at the second meeting –

"I'm grateful that the Vaal was thought of – usually it is left out of things" (Meisie Mphanya, Core group OCT 2013 meeting minutes).

Although we had initially hoped to have representation from the Vaal Triangle¹⁴ (see Fig.1), we have succeeded so far in sustaining work in 5 of the ten district Municipalities – namely - Evaton, Sebokeng, Bophelong, Sharpeville and Orange Farm. More recently, police from the Boipatong District have approached Letsema to initiate community dialogues there as well.



Figure 1

We worked with the hypothesis that if we enabled marginalised communities at the coalface of experiencing the worst levels of violence to take the lead in defining their responses it would be more likely to achieve sustainable change in the form of reduced levels of violence. We also

¹³ The **Boipatong massacre** took place on the night of 17 June 1992. The attack on township residents was carried out by armed men from the steelworks residence KwaMadala Hostel, which was located roughly 1 km from the township. Forty-five people died and several were maimed. http://www.iol.co.za/the-star/the-boipatong-massacre-20-years-on-1.1318617#_VUDM3Bess4R; The **Sharpeville Massacre** occurred on 21 March 1960, at the police station. After a day of demonstrations against the Pass Laws, a crowd of about 5,000 to 7,000 black African protesters went to the police station. The South African police opened fire on the crowd, killing 69 people. In present-day South Africa, 21 March is celebrated as a public holiday in honour of human rights and to commemorate the Sharpeville massacre. <http://africanhistory.about.com/od/apartheid/a/SharpevilleMassacrePt1.htm>. On the night of 12 January, 1991, more than 30 people were killed while attending an all-night vigil held in a tent in **Sebokeng**, Vaal where weeping mourners paid final respects to community ANC leader, Chris Nangalembe. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/sebokeng-massacre-leaves-more-30-mourners-dead>

¹⁴ Comprising Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark, Sasolburg, Meyerton, Sharpeville, Boipatong, Bophelong, Sebokeng, Evaton and Orange Farm.

assumed that if those who are more marginalized take the lead, the process in its very modus operandi would challenge some of the existing social power hierarchies at play.

We chose to work with Emergent Learning and Collective Impact frameworks because they seemed a natural extension from our previous GAL work and because we had support from our international G@W colleagues. The Emergent Learning framework¹⁵ includes a core framing question, hypotheses and regular reflections on what groups are learning from their actions and based on new insights they adapt future actions. Its tools help to support thinking, planning, sharing assumptions and reflections before and after any action. It helps keep the process alive and participants more conscious of how they learn as well as responsive to what is emerging. It helps participants break the habit of “over-investing in solutions being “right” by asking groups to see solutions as hypotheses that need to be tested and refined, and recognizing that there may be more than one hypothesis”¹⁶.

The Collective Impact Approach¹⁷ is a structured approach to collaboration that aims to achieve substantial impact on a large-scale complex social problem. Such initiatives share five key conditions that distinguish them from other types of collaboration. Namely, a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous learning/communication and the presence of a backbone organization.

The South African context

- Violence and a ‘war’ narrative¹⁸ or a collective impact approach?

In a context where ‘fighting’ to make your voice heard, to access resources, to transform a power imbalance is the norm, working to create a more ‘collaborative’ approach that challenges a ‘war’ or ‘fighting’ narrative is a challenge to say the least. Collective impact approaches require us to work from such an alternative narrative - where actors from different sectors and interests commit to a common agenda/purpose for solving a complex social problem. We see Violence against Women and Gender Based Violence as an example of a complex social problem and thus well suited to a collective impact approach as described by FSG¹⁹:

“Collective impact is a significant shift from the social sector’s current paradigm of “isolated impact,” because the underlying premise of collective impact is that no single organization can create large-scale, lasting social change alone. There is no “silver bullet” solution to systemic social problems, and these problems cannot be solved by simply scaling or replicating one organization or program. Strong organizations are necessary but not sufficient for large-scale social change”.

For a collective impact approach to work, participants and stakeholders need to learn to function more collaboratively and to focus on a longer term collective ‘good’, not only on their own immediate interests. Participants need to build trust where before there might have been disconnection, separation or even hatred; they need to learn to work together and not compete; they need to learn to hold the tension between their own sense of separate identities and

¹⁵ See Introduction to Emergent Learning, Fourth Quadrant Partners (2015).

¹⁶ Marilyn Darling, Jillaine Smith and Heidi Sparks Guber (2015): Introduction to Emergent Learning, Fourth Quadrant Partners, p11.

¹⁷ See <http://tamarackcommunity.ca/> for resources on collective impact.

¹⁸ I get the idea of a war narrative and an alternative non-war narrative from Charles Eisenstein. See charleseisenstein.net/the-end-of-war.

¹⁹ See FSG website: <http://www.fsg.org/OurApproach/WhatIsCollectiveImpact.aspx>

interests and their common or shared humanity; they need to learn to truly listen to each other from the heart in order to understand different experiences, perspectives, world views.

We in the G@W/LRS South African team made the assumption that creating a society in which violence against women and non conforming genders becomes the norm is going to similarly require a 'new narrative' – a non 'war' narrative. The name Letsema was chosen to describe the initiative because it embodies this principle. The core group deliberately chose this word in this context for its metaphoric reference to women (and men) coming together to work the soil of creating new social norms. It is a word that connects people back to a positive cultural practice, and is the first step in creating a new norm in a different context.

Collective impact approaches are guided more by a vision for change that is framed in the form of a compelling question, by something that collectively wants to be created rather than by focusing on what needs to be resisted, fought against, destroyed or critiqued. This approach in itself is the second non-normative 'act' of the Letsema initiative. There is a big difference in intentionality, attitude and approach to saying - "*we are fighting against violence against women*" to "*how can we create a society with zero percent violence against women?*"

In the G@W team we had a long debate about what language to use. We started off talking about violence against women and non-conforming genders. In the process the core group decided to use the term 'gender based violence' (GBV) because it has become familiar to activists and is commonly used. Technically it refers to any violence carried out against someone specifically because of her or his 'gender'. We were concerned that the emphasis on violence against women in particular would be minimized and we were also concerned that violence against people who refused normative expressions of gender and sexuality would be excluded. In the end the core group chose GBV, strongly motivated by one of the group members who had herself been a long time activist working on the linked issues of violence against women and of discrimination against HIV positive people. By making sure that LGBTI people are present in all Letsema spaces and that women feel safe to speak about any issues facing them, our initial concerns have not materialized.

WHAT HAPPENED

Initiating the process, establishing a core group and shared vision

In mid-2013 we (Gender at Work and LRS) initiated a series of meetings with our previous partners from the peer learning processes, and together we decided to support marginalised groups in the Vaal to take the lead in developing local, more collaborative responses to gender based violence. After two formative meetings in Sep and Oct 2013, a core group²⁰ was shaped and started to claim ownership of the process. For many of the newer participants this was the first time they were working on this issue and for everyone it was the first time they were working on GBV with such a diverse group of people.

The initial partners developed criteria to invite other stakeholders and community representatives to expand the initial small base. Together they generated a core framing question (common purpose) to guide the initiative: How can we create a Vaal with zero% GBV?

²⁰ 20 female: 6 male participants

Expanding into the wider community, refining and identifying key issues

In order to increase its reach, the core group planned and managed district community level dialogues in each of the 6 participating districts. In March 2014 the G@W/LRS team helped to facilitate six community meetings/dialogues of 40-60 people each – with a total of 280 diverse participants²¹ from ages 17 to 90 in different areas of the Vaal.

Evaton		Orange Farm		Sharpeville		Sebokeng		OF/Khetiwe		Bophelong	
F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
37	9	34	23 5 unknown	36	17	23	20	31	7	45	7

After these district meetings, the core group reflected on what they learned from the experience, what was changing for them and what new questions had emerged. They reflected on who attended, what it took to get them there, and the issues prioritised. They were surprised that for roughly 70% of participants, the discussion on GBV was new. Women, men, LGBTI, Hiv positive and disabled people, health workers, church pastors, shebeen²² queens, taxi associations, traditional healers, hawkers, were all represented.

Three months after the district community dialogues, in June 2014, the core group organised a large meeting at the Saul Tsotetsi sports hall in Sebokeng which brought together about 280 participants²³ from across the 6 districts as well as representation from educational institutions (schools and technikons), Government officials such as Safety and Security, South African Police Services, clinics, Dept. of Social Development.

Day 1		Day 2	
F	M	F	M
145	82	169	88

In response to the question - How can we create a Vaal with zero% GBV? - 90 topics were generated by participants for discussion on the first day. On the second day 20 different action plans were mooted for further work.

Building networks, developing action experiments and growing a sustainable learning culture

After every major event the core group would reflect on its experience and make conscious what it was learning and how it was creating conditions in which Vaal citizens could solve their own problems. In August, leaders from six of the initial 20 action groups, the core group²⁴ and six

²² An unlicensed drinking establishment

²⁴ **Vegetable growing group** – aims to make the vegetable garden a safe space that allows the building of relationships of equality between men and women, and enables them to work together

Dialogue group – creates spaces for community members to dialogue with each other and break their silence about GBV

Traditional Healers Group – aims to stop and prevent the abduction/kidnapping of persons (male/female) without their permission/consent.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse group – aims to address the lack of open communication among young boys and girls

Each 1 – Teach 1 group – aims to provide information to young people (through schools) on LGBTI issues

Men's Calabash – seeks to strengthen male involvement in creating a tolerant society

The Core group – aims to sustain the initiative, continue to create new partnerships and attract more stakeholders that can contribute.

By June 2015, the Men's Calabash group and the Each 1 Teach 1 group were unable to continue. Interested members from these groups have joined one of the other groups.

mentors/coaches²⁵ arrived to participate in a 3 day learning process facilitated by G@W. The workshop focused on how to run an action learning group and assisted the groups to clarify their thinking, assumptions and define their work agenda more specifically.

Since then two of the initial action groups have met more or less monthly for group mentoring sessions with the coach/mentors. The core group and action groups meet quarterly for a collective reflection, sharing, learning and planning meeting that is facilitated by G@W. The G@W team has Emergent Learning reflection sessions with strategic learning facilitator, Tanya Beer about three times a year.

Between November 2014 and September 2015, the groups through their own commitment and enthusiasm have themselves organised community wide opportunities for further dialogue, engagement and involving new stakeholders. They have either facilitated these themselves or drawn on the assistance of one of the newly trained coach facilitators. Whereas G@W initially facilitated the early community dialogues, now we only provide reflection and thinking support. Examples of the events organised include: 5 World Café's²⁶, a Heritage Day event, a one-day workshop on gender, culture and tradition, a sports tournament for young girls and boys, a policy discussion with Contralesa, the traditional leaders authority, to discuss controls for illegal initiation schools, a large public gathering (354 people) to discuss the abduction of children for initiations as well as bullying and gangsterism, a memorial walk in honor of a local woman who was stabbed to death by her partner. In addition to these larger events, action groups have initiated dialogues in places where they have influence²⁷. The police are becoming increasingly interested in joining with Letsema in community led events and the Vaal University of Technology (VUT) is now seeking to become involved as an interested stakeholder. The grant received by G@W ended in Dec 2015. Since July, the action groups have been busy working on their own fundraising proposals and are due to start a series of dialogues on xenophobia.

All the previous organisationally based action learning processes G@W has facilitated have taken roughly 18 months. The Letsema process is now just over 24 months with the bulk of the on the ground work having happened since the large cross district meeting in June 2014. By any standards this is a short time to measure norm change. The following section outlines our initial hypotheses/theory of change and what we did that we think caused the results we are seeing and hearing about today. Thereafter we share some examples of the outcomes and where the process is going.

OUR THEORY OF CHANGE

Our initial theory of change

From our previous experience in facilitating GAL processes with diverse organisations²⁸, the South

²⁵ Two of the mentors had been working with G@W for some time in the GAL peer learning processes; four of the mentors had recently participated in a 6 month G@W led democratic feminist facilitator capacity development process. This particular kind of mentoring or coaching process was however new to all the coaches. Ray Gordezky, a G@W associated supported the workshop from a distance and Shamim Meer facilitated it.

²⁶ With focus areas ranging from Tradition, culture and gender, to alcohol and drug abuse, to gangsterism in schools or general dialogues answering the core framing question. See stories in "OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: *Writings From Letsema*. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvMNsR2wxWG8/view

²⁷ For instance, – families, neighbourhoods, with mother's groups, in churches, schools, taverns, sports clubs

²⁸ Meer et.al (2013); *Change Is A Slow Dance. Three Stories Of Challenging Gender & Power Inequalities In Organizations*; Michel Friedman and Shamim Meer (eds.2007); *Writing from the Inside, Stories of Hope and Change*, Shamim Meer, ed., 2010, http://www.genderatwork.org/sites/genderatwork.org/files/resources/Stories_of_Hope.pdf; Transforming

African G@W team were confident in our ability to create positive learning environments. We knew that non-prescriptive, dialogical and action-learning approaches to social change worked²⁹ and we knew that people from diverse backgrounds could learn to work together in productive ways. We also knew that we needed to take South African's authoritarian history and high levels of trauma seriously. However, we had always worked at an organisational level and in a very bounded way, with a clear endpoint. We had not used these principles simultaneously at a community-wide level, across organisations and individuals, with multiple actors representing different interests and with a process whose endpoint was unclear.

Our G@W colleagues, Ray Gordezky and Tanya Beer, were more experienced and confident with collective impact and multi-actor dialogically based approaches, but neither had implemented them in our kind of under-resourced, organisationally challenged, peri-urban context, or with a focus on gender based violence. While intrigued and willing to try, we were still nervous and sceptical that it could work. At heart, the dialogic and democratic principles underlying these approaches have the potential to support more inclusive and equal cultural practices and we were curious to see if they could enhance a feminist vision of a society free from violence against women and non-conforming genders. With the support of our colleagues, the SA G@W/LRS team developed an initial theory of change in answer to our core framing question (August 2013):

Conceptually³⁰:

- ***if we use the G@W framework*** to help focus actions on gender based violence, we will either see
 - new actions that start addressing unequal cultural gender norms and/or
 - see current actions continuing in ways which more consciously take account of unequal cultural gender norms and/or
 - see changes in women and men's personal consciousness and behaviour as well as changes in relevant organisational or government policies and/or
 - see greater synergy between these different kinds of changes

Attitudinally:

- ***if we encourage the women and men who have to live with the consequences of the strategies*** to be involved in developing and implementing them, then we will build stronger local level ownership and leadership in collective organising towards creating safer environments

Methodologically:

- ***if we use a forward thinking focus*** framed by a question like "*What might be done to create a rape and domestic violence free society in the Vaal?*", we will see greater innovation and impact
- ***if we build on existing relationships and broaden stakeholder participation***, then we will see enough critical mass - greater collective impact and consciousness - (ie. Collective strength, common vision, bringing together of passions) to create momentum for working collaboratively in a similar geographical area (the Vaal, Gauteng province), in a new way, (i.e that strengthens and deepens strategies for addressing GBV)

Power: A Knotted Rope Shamim Meer, ed. 2012;

²⁹ Shamim Meer et.al. (2013).

³⁰ In practice, the language we used and that participants related to was head, heart, feet.

- **if we encourage** a diverse³¹ group of organisations rooted in structurally less powerful locations, but more organically connected to working class people, then we will see a richer and deeper understanding of the whole system, creativity, innovation and new kinds of collaboration towards creating new norms in addressing broader issues of violence and discrimination
- **if we work with a group of diverse organisations**, using democratic feminist facilitation³² tools and **build trusting relationships** then they will work more cooperatively, will be more resilient and will be able to make the maximum use of minimal resources
- **if participants who bear the brunt of the violence have maximum freedom in choosing how to take action** then we will build ownership and emerging action will be rooted in the existing resource base (also existing resources might be used differently)
- if we use **emergent action-reflection tools** and make the **principles** of the methodology **more conscious** then these processes will help to build the leadership, participation and skill of the participants in working collaboratively with multiple actors in new ways (*ie. that combine reflection and self-organising*). This experience will thus enhance future community led initiatives and impact. *In other words, we assume that these methodologies are powerful tools for mobilising action and for responding to difficult and complex situations. That by facilitating inductive processes which assist knowledge and strategies to emerge from local contexts, participants learn that such knowledge and strategy are understood as 'in process'; not fixed or permanent and subject to a continuous process of refinement and adaptation.*

Theory in practice

-How did this theory translate in practice? What has enabled the outcomes? What was the 'how' of the process?

Collective Impact literature talks about the importance of - **Continuous Communication** – how all players need to engage in **frequent and structured open communication** to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create a common vision and motivation. This is easier said than done. We have often been asked – How do you get so many diverse people into one room to talk and to support one vision? How do you get people to talk in a way that is constructive? What enables ownership of the process of change? How do you deal with difficult situations?

In the early meetings with the core group, we introduced the G@W Framework as a tool to help participants think about what they are trying to change in the world, both at the individual level and the systemic level, as well as help clarify what assumptions we are making about how we think these changes take place. We used it to reflect on the different aspects and patterns underlying their own stories and different perspectives on violence and what would need to change to make a difference in the stories. Many of the personal stories spoke about how much we have come to accept violence as 'normal' in the society and how culture and everyday practices either exclude some people like lesbians or stigmatise women. We used a tangible metaphor of what it takes to grow fruit. That is, what is invisible and comes from the air and the soil affects the fruit. Later, when analysing existing strategies being used to address gender based

³¹ ie. organisations representing as diverse a reflection of the society as possible, particularly perspectives that do not usually share the table together - including gender, age, sexual orientations, race, religion, class, employment, activist, education, govt. depts., way of engaging with GBV, and so on.

³² [Can be linked on website to what comes out of the cap dev work](#)

violence and their effectiveness, many recognised that while we need change in all four aspects of the framework, *“unless we change what happens because of negative aspects of culture, the problem will continue forever”*. Based on this reflection the group recognised that they needed to bring religious and traditional leaders on board as well as *“those who are on the ground, beyond those who are already converted”*³³. They generated their core framing question which at heart holds the promise of a feminist vision, and they decided on the name “Letsema” which has a focus on changing social norms.

All the coach/mentors are familiar with the framework and probably have it somewhere in the back of their minds influencing how they facilitate reflection sessions with the action groups. In a recent collective reflection session, two years after the process began, the groups again used the framework in an overt way to reflect on their achievements and to re-strategise. It has helped them to reflect on what they mean by norm change. It has also helped people feel less judged about their particular emphasis and to see how the piece they are working on is part of a larger whole³⁴.

Getting the ‘whole’ system into the room³⁵

In recognising that to address GBV we are working with a complex social system, our first principle of practice is to attempt to get as many perspectives as possible from ‘the system’ into the room. This principle assumes that if as much of the system as possible is represented through active participants, the nature of the whole can be better understood. It also assumes that doors might be opened that have never been walked through before. The point is not only to get actors who are somehow abstract representatives of particular categories or groups, but who are individuals that care about the issue and are willing to take responsibility for what they feel passionate about. In this sense even if they might have a different view to someone else, they still care enough about the issue to get involved.

In Letsema, G@W and LRS began with our initial CBO and union partners. In order to invite a wider representation of actors relevant to addressing the issue in the Vaal area, our initial partners identified other actors who had interest and influence on the issue. They also used the acronym ARE IN³⁶ to brainstorm how to expand their reach.

A - refers to people who have the authority to act. The group suggested religious organisations, government departments (eg. police, justice and social development), local ward councillors, media, traditional healers, other NGO and CBO’s, youth and aged, individual policemen, educators and community patrollers.

R - refers to those who have resources such as time, money or contacts. The group included: business people from the area, (money); local govt (ward councillor, money, venue), donors, churches, schools (venue), media (community newspapers and radio for contacts), transport, taxis, police, social development (enough resources to develop victims and perpetrators).

E – refers to people and organisations that have expertise in the area. The group proposed – women’s and GBV focused organisations (Thswaranang, POWA, NISAA); Aids law project, - rape crisis councillors, Sonke gender justice, nurses, gender commission, victims/perpetrators, ex prisoners, traditional leaders, politicians, different NGO voices together

³³ Core group meeting minutes, 18th October 2013.

³⁴ G@W team reflection, Dec 2013.

³⁵ A Principle taken from Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff (2007): Don’t Just Do Something, Stand There! Ten Principles for Leading Meetings that Matter. Bennett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco.

³⁶ Weisbord and Janoff (2007:17).

I – refers to those who have information about the topic that no others have. Taxi drivers, ex-prisoners, men's groups, ex drug addicts, victims, and perpetrators were suggested.

N – refers to those who need to be involved because they are directly affected by the issue. In the group's view these included victims and perpetrators, ex offenders, parents, youth, family members' organizations, forums, unions, churches, and LGBTI people.

The AREIN process generated the 'ideal' list of possible actors that Letsema should engage. In order to attract new actors we worked on the principle of building on existing relationships. In an ongoing way participants reflect on their relationships with relevant actors who care about GBV and consider how they may be encouraged to join. Many new people have become interested because of others who were involved. One of the male traditional healers, a dedicated core member, was invited by one of the early woman participants, a healer herself. An initial partner invited another dedicated core member, an activist sportsperson, and he in turn has brought in more men. After some of the community dialogue processes, new people became interested because they heard about what happened from friends, they experienced the learning spaces, and liked what they found and how they felt.

At different times in its history, Letsema has succeeded in getting many of the 'ideal' range of voices into the space. Some have stayed on in the expanded core group³⁷ as regular committed members, while others only come for specific events or community dialogues. At a community level, the most active participants have represented women, men, old, young, LGBTI, HIV positive, traditional healers, sports people, church pastors. Although at government level there has been engagement with schools, police, social development, community safety and clinics, it has proven exceptionally difficult to get government officials to participate fully and in a sustained way in the core or action groups.

Working together

-One of the consequences of attempting to work systemically means that women, men and non-conforming genders work together

As it has turned out, using the term GBV has created the space for men to feel included and for issues of abuse against men to also surface. Critics might see this as problematic because it could reduce the emphasis on women. In this context, the inclusion enlarges the space and challenges women and men to interrogate all violence and how it contributes to amplifying violence against women and girls. We know that it is helpful for women, men or LGBTI people to have separate spaces to do their own work and at times this happens organically in Letsema in the way different action groups' form or do their work. However, we also don't believe it is possible to create new non-violent norms by working with half of the population. At the same time we have noticed that even though men as a group benefit from patriarchal power and privilege more than women as a group, both women and men can internalize and express patriarchal values, attitudes and behaviours. At the same time, in learning to work together, a diverse range of community members are experimenting with learning to relate in new ways in public space and are beginning to create new norms in the process of acting and learning collectively.

For instance, after the large cross district meeting members of the core group said:

"I came to realise older people and the youth can come together and discuss their problems and reach solutions together. The young girl was telling us

³⁷ The expanded core group consists of the action groups and smaller core group and is the group that attends the collective quarterly reflection meetings.

old men everything. She talked. We listened. It is not about age. It is about what people have inside them" (man (SL), Open Space reflection 4/7/2014 minutes).

Creating safe yet challenging learning spaces

When asked what is special about Letsema, many participants comment on the welcoming atmosphere, the commitment to dialogue in a respectful way, the feeling of 'safety' and non-judgement, and the unusual diversity of people in the room. At a recent reflection meeting participants said:

"Letsema honestly speaking, gives everybody a warm welcome – compared to other institutions. You know you will feel you're in a jail cell in other places" (Aug, 2015)

"What makes the space different is that I've been into different spaces where someone must defend, someone must attack, but here, there's a culture of not being defensive, not attacking each other, but coming up with solutions that can work for us all. And also, supporting each other, because I remember at some point the police were given a platform to say their frustrations and to discuss how, as a community, we can support one another" (Aug 2015).

'What most inspired me is the manner that Letsema is organized. I go to different projects and they never have a this approach of allowing each and every member to be free, to participate their views freely' (Aug, 2015).

As facilitators, we have learned that one thing which helps to create more equal gender norms are conditions in which participants can feel safe to reflect on, be honest about and not feel judged in relation to their own beliefs, behaviour and practice, both personally and organisationally. Once participants have experienced this, reflected on what helps to create it and practiced doing it themselves it becomes a core skill for this work. We aim to create spaces which encourage participants to learn to listen deeply to each other, so as to facilitate connection, respect and understanding. People are not told what to do or what to think – they are urged to explore and discover for themselves, using a questioning approach. They learn how to ask questions to deepen conversation rather than to give advice or tell people what they should have done. This shifts the focus from ideology to curiosity and inquiry.

When a space is created in which people do not feel judged but curious and when different perspectives, experiences and ideological positions are in the room sitting in the bodies, hearts and minds of individual participants, then a productive dialogue can take place and those different views get reflected and engaged with. Participants share ideas and learn from each other. We encourage people to talk from the heart about what matters to them, often through sharing stories from their own experience, or talking about how they feel. When there is so much diversity in the room and people are meeting others with whom they wouldn't normally engage, participants are often confronted by other's differences and this can be extremely challenging³⁸. Each person can question what he or she knows and realize that through dialogue, existing thoughts will likely change and new knowledge will be created³⁹. In a way each person learns a

³⁸ Jabulani Dlomo's "An eye-opening moment" in "OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: Writings From Letsema. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal (2016 p.35-38), is a particularly powerful example.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

³⁹ Dialogue is a core concept for popular educationalist Paulo Freire. See <http://www.freire.org/paulo-freire/concepts-used-by-paulo-freire>

kind of practical 'deep democracy'⁴⁰ where they learn to listen with compassion to different parts of themselves as well as others - even those parts that have been shunned, shamed, exiled and rejected. By listening to each person, the group helps to free the individual while the individual's increasing freedom helps the group to grow.

For instance, at a meeting after a particularly challenging community dialogue focused on gangsterism core group members reflected that what helped was how they set the space so that it could contribute to being a violence-free zone. They introduced the meeting with:

'We are not here to judge, but we have this issue that as a community we need to respond to and come up with strategies and all voices are important'. They also recognised "The meetings people are normally participating in, its not only the blaming, but also how they are facilitated. The facilitators and the people in the room want to give answers and solutions but do not take people together through a process that helps them discover or identify their own answers. By asking those difficult and honest questions respectfully".⁴¹

Inevitably new relationship connections grow that in turn foster new intersections. Another core assumption in this approach is a trust in the power of individual agency of diverse people in interaction with others. In relation to creating new non-violent norms, we also assume that it is going to be hard to create peace in the world⁴² if we can't first create it in our own hearts.

For instance a male participant from the vegetable garden group says:

The community is scared to break the silence but I can see how you can create a platform to do things differently, speak freely and release anger – and this can happen if there is a way you are welcomed and give hospitality. If I was given this opportunity then I can create this opportunity for others. Now I am able to deal with situations, I am more sensitive.

(Man –(ML), Veg grp Fundraising minutes, July 2015).

All interactional spaces are inspired by principles of good feminist facilitation such as inclusion, challenging patriarchal binaries⁴³, active participation, creativity and the notion of a 'good meeting'⁴⁴. Democratic principles that inform Liberating Structure⁴⁵ exercises, particularly for large groups are also utilized. Meetings are designed, set up and facilitated with great care and thought. Whether the meeting is a planning, reflection and review meeting for the core group, mentoring meetings between coach and action group or dialogue space for community members - the same ideas apply. In this sense participants come to experience meeting spaces as safe, offering opportunities for connection, sharing, healing, creativity, reflection, challenge, learning and engagement about real issues that touch their hearts. Participants learn that their presence in a meeting counts; that their absence is noted and that meetings are meant to produce outcomes. Sometimes those outcomes are insights and learning, sometimes new plans or new actions,

⁴⁰ Arnold Mindell (2002): The Deep Democracy of Open Forums: Practical Steps to Conflict Prevention and Resolution for the Family, Workplace, Hampton Roads Publishing.

⁴¹ April 2015, mentoring minutes.

⁴² See Thich Nhat Hanh (1992): Peace Is Every Step, Bantam Books, NY

⁴³ See handout developed for Capacity Development training cross link to 'field guide'

⁴⁴ Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff (2007). Don't just do something. Stand there. Ten principles for leading meetings that matter. Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco 2007.

⁴⁵ Examples that have been used in these meetings include 1-2-4-all, Wicked Questions, Appreciative Interviews, What, So What, Now What, World Café, Open Space, impromptu networking, Social Network Webbing, See <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/>

sometimes they could simply be a sense of having spent a few hours together in a powerfully meaningful way.

Methods that help healing, embodiment and presencing

Given the high levels of stress, violence and trauma that are part of everyday life, and as part of building participant's capacity to live in non-violent ways we pay attention to what will help keep participants embodied and present. As one of the men⁴⁶ in the core group puts it:

"Letsema is like a university or college of education. Letsema provides space for us to talk about our emotions, express our feelings, and remove stress. Letsema restores self-confidence and pride".

Facilitators consciously create calm, open spaces, which intend to help participants be present and connected to each other. The presence of each individual is noticed⁴⁷. One of the tools we use to do this includes valuing the importance of feelings as much as rational thought and intellectual capacity. Fazila Gany's and Nina Benjamin's stories⁴⁸ are good examples of the power of how important it is to acknowledge feelings, give them space to be unpacked and in the process help participants also learn to be less emotionally reactive⁴⁹.

We also make use of various forms of **bodywork**. As a team of facilitators we regularly set intentions and use the Resonance Repatterning system⁵⁰ to make sure we resonate with them. For example, before we even started to plan this work in early 2013, we were still feeling anxious about the new approach. In one of the first repatterning sessions, one of the statements said:

"Collectively we craft an innovative program to respond to and address the complexity of violence in SA while simultaneously supporting and strengthening the network we've grown over the past 8 years. The program generates and is resourced on all levels to support innovative action experiments that address the gendered nature of violence in new, creative, healing and meaningful ways".

Capacitar⁵¹, which offers a core program of energy-based healing practices that awaken and empower people, is another tool that is used regularly. For instance, Capacitar's adapted form of Tai Chi⁵² is used to start all meetings, to help participants to be aware of themselves (a kind of body literacy), to be present, open and connected to each other. Fazila Gany feels that *"Tai Chi helps integrate different spiritualities and gives participants*

Commented [AS1]: Anu later you can HyperLink to bodywork handout/paper coming with the cap dev work

⁴⁶ Mokete Lephollitse in *Creating a Vaal with zero % GBV. Our hearts are joined: writings from Letsema*. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

⁴⁷ For instance, counter to the culture of what many participants have learned in other spaces, it has taken a while for them to stop coming late to meetings or wanting to leave early; to learn that it does not work to pop in and leave and then pop in again later, to keep phones switched off.

⁴⁸ See OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: *Writings From Letsema*. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

⁴⁹ See stories by Moeketsi Lehlaha (pg 85), Jabulile Mogane (pg 151), Millicent Phillips (pg 82) "OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: *Writings From Letsema*. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal", and later section on facing into difficulties.

⁵⁰ Meer(2013) et.al.; Michel Friedman (2012). *Becoming the Change You Want to See in the World*, in Linzi Manicom and Shirley Walters(eds.) 2012, *Feminist Popular Education in Transnational Debates. Building Pedagogies of Possibility*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

⁵¹ <http://www.capacitar.org/>

⁵² see www.capacitar.org/ and Michel Friedman (2012)

*the sense that this will be a nonjudgmental space. It helps set the right tone and create a sense of comfort*⁵³. From what people say and how they behave afterwards, it seems as if the Tai Chi exercises release oxytocin, a hormone in the heart, known as the 'love hormone' or 'bonding hormone'. Oxytocin is said to evoke feelings of contentment and calmness whilst also reducing anxiety and fear and facilitates social connections.⁵⁴

Other exercises such as fingerholds⁵⁵ or rhythmic breathing are used as we go along depending on what is happening and what emotions are being generated. For instance, in one of the initial meetings, after stories of violence and the participants' motivations for attending the Letsema meeting were shared in the large group, people were feeling very emotional. The pain in the room was palpable. Fazila spent some time showing people how to do a 'Big Hug'⁵⁶ and to connect more deeply again with their breathing. We do this as a way of calming brain reactivity down by integrating an understanding of how the amygdala brain works in contexts of trauma – with fight/flight/freeze⁵⁷ responses and the critical importance of learning skills of energy management, emotional management and how to be less reactive. For example a woman participant said at the end of our second meeting with the core group –

"The exercises liberated me from my pain and I will practice this at home and in my organization; 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" (Oct 2013 mins).

Collaborative Culture

- Consciously building a collaborative culture by creating conditions for ownership and trust to be built

G@W/LRS facilitated all the initial meetings with the intent to build a team that could recognise the value of collaboration, with a shared vision and could learn to trust one another. We learned about the principles of collective impact and about working at a larger scale while doing it. In other words, we were 'making our path by walking it'⁵⁸. From the start the Gender at Work/LRS team had the conscious intent to support Vaal community members, in particular women, to take the lead in developing strategies and solutions for action. From our earlier Gender Action Learning processes we had practiced using an Appreciative Inquiry approach⁵⁹. That is, we intentionally support participants to learn how to tap into existing resources by identifying the best of 'what is' to pursue dreams and possibilities of 'what could be'. We create conditions in which participants can cooperatively search for strengths, passions and life-giving forces that already exist within the system and that hold potential for inspired, positive change.

⁵³ Gender at Work team reflection, April 2015.

⁵⁴ Alan Watkins(2014,p46). Coherence. The Secret Science of Brilliant Leadership. Kogan Page, London. Also see Millicent Phillips in "OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: Writings From Letsema. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

⁵⁵ see www.capacitar.org/. Also see Nina Benjamin's in "OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: Writings From Letsema. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

⁵⁶ The Big Hug comes from Jin Shin Jyutsu, see Mary Burmeister, Mary (1985:41). Introducing Jin Shin Jyutsu IS. KNOW MYSELF BE IT IS, IS. BOOK III. Physio-Philosophy J.S.J.© Distributors, USA.

Cross your arms and place your thumbs under your collar-bones - so left thumb is under right collar bone. Let the rest of your fingers rest gently on the edge of your shoulder blades. Drop your shoulders, smile, bring your attention to your breathing and give your best friend a hug. Honour and let go of everything that has come before this breath so you can be open to receive a new breath of life. Imagine that all stress and tension that you are holding in any part of your body can leave your body through your toes and feet so you can be open to the new.

⁵⁷ See Friedman(2012, pg 214) for more detailed information on the limbic brain and trauma responses.

⁵⁸ www.berkana.org

⁵⁹ <https://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>

Storytelling

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. With diverse participants in the room it also helps to 'build a larger view of the whole'. In one of the first initial meetings with the core group, participants were asked to introduce themselves to each other by telling their own stories/experience of violence against women / non-conforming genders. Stories that they had a direct personal relationship with or that had deeply touched them. They then had to reflect upon what stood out for them from listening to the different stories, articulate what they were learning and what they might be motivated to do differently as a result of what they were hearing. From the start participants were thus encouraged to tap into their own wisdom, knowledge and ability to learn from their own and others existing experience. After this a Gender at Work facilitator reflected⁶⁰:

"Bringing back our humanity through the experience of telling and hearing their own stories in a new way seemed to help people connect the personal and the public, and to fuel energy around it".

Regular check ins at the start of meetings is another way in which stories are told. About a year into the process, at a quarterly reflection meeting, one participant courageously told the story of how her child had challenged her own emotional violence. She was so shocked by what happened, she shared it with the group in a way that made her vulnerable. Others in turn reacted powerfully – the initial sharing evoked something in them which in turn gave them permission to admit their own capacity for perpetrating violence⁶¹.

Another way to give structure to storytelling processes that lends itself to active dialogue and conversation, and which we have used often in Letsema, is the World Café⁶². This is a powerful tool that supports inclusive participation and encourages listening to other's views from the heart. World Café is a method for creating a living network of collaborative dialogue around questions that matter in organizations and communities. It allows groups of 12-500 to have small and intimate conversations while at the same time making visible larger patterns and wisdom in the collective. The Gender at Work team used World Cafe for the first time with such large groups (40-60) in a community setting to structure the 6 early district community dialogues. Reflections from Letsema participants demonstrate its value:

"The atmosphere was relaxed. Like friends we asked questions and laughed";

"It helped me gain different perspectives on how people think";

"This gave us a chance to talk to an older person";

"With all the talking I feel better";

"The small tables forced us to contribute to the maximum and people were stretched to think";

"Learnt the power of sharing and creating spaces for dialogue and discussion"

Sharing responsibility

⁶⁰ Emergent Learning team reflection with Tanya Beer, Dec 2013.

⁶¹ G@W team reflection meeting, (April 2015).

⁶² Groups of four people – preferably who don't know each other – sit at tables to talk about each question moving to a new table for each new question. Table hosts share key insights with new guests, thus building a web of interconnected sharing. See www.theworldcafe.com/. Can also hyperlink with the capacity development materials and videos from India

- **Starting with a framing question and participants feeling the freedom and responsibility to respond from their own reality**

In order to help the Letsema participants develop their core framing question, in one of the early meetings participants were asked - *What is the question that if explored deeply could give us a real breakthrough? That if explored with others could make a difference to the future of violence against women and people who don't conform to gender stereotypes?* Out of the many questions which were generated, the group chose "How can we create a Vaal with zero percent GBV?". Having a question implies that there is no one answer. It helps *"the feeling that we're entering into "unknown" territory. That there's not a pre-existing answer helps create the sense of shared forward momentum, perhaps contributing to the sense of equal footing in the room"*⁶³.

Having a compelling question - instead of a flatly worded goal - that lives inside of individuals and inside the initiative acts like a 'north pole' and has proven to be a binding force. The question is forward moving and action oriented, focusing on something we are co-creating rather than on something we are critiquing. It helps get people past the habit of judging and blaming, and opens them to the possibility of many different ways forward. Numerous individuals say the question reverberates in their minds all the time and as a result new actions are mushrooming in unexpected directions. Individuals and groups are now taking initiative in spaces where they have influence - at home, in relationships with family members, in their organisations, neighbourhoods or in the wider community. For example, at a team reflection⁶⁴ Fazila noted: *"it has become part of them. Where ever they go they bring up questions about gender based violence. One man starts conversation in taverns - he waits for 7 or 8 men to get together and poses a question about GBV and starts a discussion. This impacts people.... It also helps new people who are coming in - there is a certain tone they enter into that makes them feel free to be much more challenging of themselves"*.

- **Facilitators' role**

As facilitators we found that we had to strengthen our capacity to 'do less so that community members would do more'⁶⁵. We did this in two ways. Firstly in relation to organizing and managing community events and secondly in relation to how meetings were facilitated. For instance, the expanded core group was given the budget to organize and manage the initial world café's in their own areas as was appropriate, even though Gender at Work facilitated. In the planning process, the expanded core group was invited to think about what it would take to design a warm and welcoming space and how to develop the questions for discussion. The same was true for the large cross district meeting. Later the core group would both organize and facilitate their own meetings with the support of their mentors.

Throughout the process, we continually sought out ways of facilitating that stimulate critical conversations, and that can liberate the full potential of a group.

⁶³ Emergent Learning team reflection with Tanya Beer, Dec 2013.

⁶⁴ Emergent Learning team reflection with Tanya Beer, Dec 2013.

⁶⁵ Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff (2007:p7): Don't Just Do Something, Stand There! Ten Principles for Leading Meetings that Matter, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco.

As much as possible we tried to follow principles that inform what have become known as “Liberating Structures”⁶⁶ which can help to change patterns of interactions, decisions and actions between individuals, within groups and across groups⁶⁷.

A major turning point in Letsema’s history and the further development of Letsema participants’ agency as citizens and ownership of the change process was our use of one such ‘liberating structure’, Open Space⁶⁸, for the large cross district Vaal-wide meeting. This meeting was held after about nine months of building the core team and after the district level dialogues. Again, Letsema’s core framing question was the catalyst for discussion. Like World Café, Open Space creates time and space for people to engage deeply and creatively around issues of concern to them. It also maximizes democratic and inclusive participation, but crucially challenges authoritarian forms of control. It requires participants to take responsibility for their own engagement. It thus offers huge potential for working with large diverse groups that reflect significant social power differences like exist in Letsema. The agenda is self-generated by participants who raise topics they feel passionate about. Participants self-select which discussions they wish to join and for how long they wish to engage. They are free to rove between discussions as they wish. In practice, the Open Space allowed participants to implement an old Xhosa saying: “Khaw’undiph’indlebe (lend me your ear)”⁶⁹. At the end of the session participants also take collective responsibility for finding solutions.

Core group reflections after the Open Space demonstrate their sense of ownership, engagement and inclusivity.

“We all took responsibility. Nobody said ‘do this or do that’. We all did it.”

“We were our own leaders. We all took big roles in bringing up the topics”

“The topics were ones we were passionate about, ones that spoke to our communities”

“This was the first time I was in a discussion about GBV with both women and men where it wasn’t a fight”

“The exciting thing was that every language was spoken.”

“The people who we thought would be quiet were participating the most!”

“I have never seen a meeting where you bring the church, LGBTI, traditional healers and the union together and have a discussion with respect. No intention to control, allowing people to be themselves....no one was introduced with their title. I saw a policeman sitting comfortably in a conversation criticizing the police. That was powerful. We had powerful people in the room also excited to participate at the same level as everyone””.

⁶⁶ Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless (2013), *The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures*. Simple Rules to Unleash a Culture of Innovation, Liberating Structures Press (p26).

⁶⁷ Examples that have been used in these meetings include 1-2-4-all, Wicked Questions, Appreciative Interviews, What, So What, Now What, World Café, Open Space, impromptu networking, Social Network Webbing, See <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/>

⁶⁸ See www.artofhosting.org/thepractice. See Letsema open space video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGxCurGIw>

⁶⁹ Nomboniso Gasa (2015) explains that this is a term used “when someone wants to have a moment in which she is listened to, in which her voice and views are treated with respect. In this instance, everyone enters a space in which power is spread between those who want to voice something — be it a grievance, advice or caution — and the one who is invited to “lend an ear”. To ask to be listened to is to enter a space where official status does not automatically mean power”. *Asserting traditional leaders own land opens old wounds*, <http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/2015/07/24/asserting-traditional-leaders-own-land-opens-old-wounds>

In a later team reflection⁷⁰ Nosipho commented: *What stood out for them is how the open space has made them feel and their results. They are surprised that the method has produced such a high level of ownership and mutual respect.*

G@W helped to facilitate the Open Space meeting - the first time we had used this method in such a large group. I was the main person responsible for holding the space. Although it looks easy to do, and the rules are simple, I was anxious about holding an Open Space meeting for so many people. During the actual meeting I had to persuade other Gender at Work team members to trust the process, trust the participants, trust that we had the 'right' people in the room and allow people to manage themselves. It was not easy. To prepare myself, I spent about 6 months sitting in on a Skype Open Space discussion group to learn from others who were more experienced than I was. They had no examples of people using Open Space to focus on the topic of GBV or in a resource poor, largely peri-urban informal settlement context. It made me nervous, but people were supportive. They said, "If it's a topic people care about, you'll be fine." That gave me confidence; I felt supported by a huge invisible world. During meditation sessions prior to the Open Space meeting, I practiced letting go of any need I might have for control⁷¹.

At a recent reflection meeting with the expanded core group, other facilitators and mentors⁷², our team shared with Letsema participants how we had to continually hold the tension between providing input and facilitating access to various resources – 'being there', while simultaneously ensuring that participants retain overall control of decision making – 'holding back'. This stance requires deliberate focus and intent.

Capturing and building on learning

■ Praxis

As a key strategy in strengthening Letsema participants' ownership and leadership of the process we have encouraged a strong praxis – where the use of action learning and emergent learning tools are part of Letsema's core practice. Paulo Freire⁷³ is well known for arguing that it is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality. They must act together upon their environment in order critically to reflect upon their reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection. *"Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other."*¹

⁷⁰ Emergent Learning Team reflection with Tanya Beer, July 2014

⁷¹ See Jabulile Mogane in "OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: Writings From Letsema. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5LON_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view. Also see [Letsema open space video - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_AGxCurGIw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_AGxCurGIw) link to open space video clip. Needs to be loaded on website.

⁷² Fazila and Gany and Nosipho Twala, August 2015, core group reflection meeting.

⁷³ See <http://www.freire.org/paulo-freire/concepts-used-by-paulo-freire>.

Seven of the twenty action ideas generated from the Open Space meeting evolved into action groups. Gender at Work organised for the leaders of these groups to be trained in how to run themselves as action-learning groups with the support of locally based mentor/coaches. In this training, participants also learned the art of asking powerful questions and strengthened their capacity to manage themselves. Over time these groups began to work with some of the tools developed by Four Quadrant Partners, the founders of Emergent Learning. These tools help groups develop critical awareness of their social reality, learn how to learn, to make their thinking and assumptions clear to themselves and others and by ongoing reflection on what works and what doesn't work to improve their practice with each activity they undertake. It also helps groups with different foci (eg. vegetable garden and traditional healers) explain how they think their work will help create the long term vision and find synergetic connections. By consciously applying what they are learning to ongoing work, they learn to improve and accelerate their results over time. The monthly mentoring meetings and quarterly collective reflection meetings facilitate ongoing learning within and between groups. The regular use of these tools helps the groups grow in confidence, in their ability to think deeply, plan, act and take responsibility for their choices. Such ongoing learning by doing and reflecting also strengthens the groups' ability to be adaptive, flexible and to achieve results around new and evolving problems and opportunities through holding meaningful conversations.

The coaches and Gender at Work facilitation team in turn have our own reflection spaces to help us clarify our own thinking and assumptions, so that we too can take our new insights into improving our own practice. For instance, an ongoing challenge has been how to get government actors to be more involved in the ongoing work. In a team meeting with our 'coach'⁷⁴, we grappled with this dilemma and wondered if *"few officials were coming because they didn't connect to the issue in a way that is beyond their official role"*. We 'turned' this insight into a new hypothesis that would then consciously inform future work. In Dec 2013 we hypothesised: *"If we can engage officials in a way that gets them to participate not just in their official role, they will be more likely to come and to commit"*. *"If we can find an official or two who has a personal connection to the issue and recruit them to participate, then perhaps she or he would be willing to recruit other officials (which is likely to work better than if we do more formal invitations of people we don't know well)"*. This clarity ended up helping us look for such opportunities and assisted in attracting a senior police officer to attend the Open Space meeting. This man has ended up being a major ally.

▪ Maintaining the core group

The work of the core team in Letsema is three fold⁷⁵. First it is to hold the deep core of the work, the shared purpose and translate that into an invitation for action. Second it is to learn about and incorporate new ways of doing things, and to lead the way in this learning. Third it is to pay attention to relationships between people in the system to create a system of accountability that is based on trust and

⁷⁴ Team discussion with Tanya Beer, Dec 2013

⁷⁵ Like with the Finance Innovation Lab (2015) written by Rachel Sinha and Charlotte Millar. http://financeinnovationlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/FIL_SystemsChange-Web-Final.pdf

respect. This is by far the most sustainable form of accountability in human systems. The core team is a place of practice based on principles.

We believe the expanded core group has come to embody the shared vision and purpose required for organizational sustainability⁷⁶. A man at the April mentoring meeting sums this up⁷⁷: “we are all gathered here talking about change- this is not a waste of time - change is with us”.

At first some participants found the reflection frustrating and wanted to focus more on ‘action’. With time this changed. After facilitating a meeting in which I was sharing with the core group the basics of the Emergent Learning framework, I received feedback that what I was suggesting was intimidating. This was my response:

Creating new norms is about creating new habits. Whether we are looking at new habits in ourselves (and our learning and planning) or in relation to how we ‘be’ women or men in ourselves and in our communities. These ‘tools’ we are all learning in the Letsema process can help us to bring greater awareness to how we all participate in the ongoing ‘creation of gender’ – of what it means for us to be women or men in our own contexts – and that awareness is probably the main thing that is going to bring about change. Changing habits requires repetition, patience, perseverance, practice and awareness – catching ourselves when we fall into the ‘old’ habits so we can make choices about taking ‘new’ directions. Above all it also requires compassion – we will continue to fall into the old habits, and make mistakes and have to keep picking ourselves up. These ‘conscious’ reflection spaces are to help remind us. (April 13th, 2015)

Facing into difficulties and challenges

Working emergently can feel chaotic and very messy, and certainly so in the early stages. At times it felt like we were tumbling our way forward. As Rebecca Solnit⁷⁸ says - it requires of us to “go about finding that thing, the nature of which is totally unknown to us”, to “let the familiar fall away and let the unfamiliar appear” Neither has it been a seamless journey of positivity. There have been many moments of intense anxiety and uncertainty. Even though there are many inspiring stories of change and the core group and action groups are motivated and committed, there has not been a total elimination of violence. What everyone is learning is that we can’t run away from these extremely challenging situations. The only way through is to face into them, create space to acknowledge and interrogate what is going on and to process and work with our own feelings as best we can so that we are responsive rather than reactive. To create space where people can talk to each other instead of immediately moving towards killing or destroying each other. To learn how to find whatever opportunities or

⁷⁶ Chris Corrigan, From consultation to participatory engagement: a concept paper and design plan for creating ownership and activating leaders in community engagement initiatives, www.chriscorrigan.com. He says: “as much as possible a shared vision and purpose is one that will be sustainable over time because it invites all the active members of a system to co-own the vision and share the responsibility for translating that vision into meaningful change. A shared purpose co-owned by a committed and diverse core team can be the core that transforms a system (p5)”. And that the core group “holds the values, intentions and practices. The core team must deeply embody the change it wants to see. If the change involves shifting a system, the core team must lead the way in shifting its own system in the direction in which it wants to change. What is held at the centre of the work is not simply the values, beliefs and visions, but the centre becomes a place to practice these on a systemic level, even with a small group”.

⁷⁷ April Mentoring Meeting minutes, 29th April, 2015

⁷⁸ Rebecca Solnit (2006), Field-Guide To Getting Lost, Penguin Books.

learning might exist in the crisis and how to use the Letsema 'infrastructure' to respond from a different place. For instance, two dramatic events occurred during 2015. After both these incidents, the G@W/LRS team played an important role in supporting the core group to reflect on how they could use what they had built in Letsema to respond in ways that did not further fuel the anger and violence⁷⁹.

The first incident transpired in December 2014, when a storm of violence erupted in some of the areas where we were working. 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. Initially, the core group felt very heavy and to some extent perhaps even slightly despairing. The coach/mentors picked up this same heaviness after hearing this news at the January 2015 mentoring meeting. On receiving this feedback from the mentors about the mood permeating the January meeting, and after reading the newspaper articles about the terrible violence and community retaliation, I too felt collapsed. I knew that we had to shift our own resonance to be of any use in the situation. Luckily for me, that week I had a supervision session with a Mindell trained processworker.⁸⁰ From my journal:

The heaviness I felt about Letsema was my starting point. During the exercise, I got an image of a big bird --- like some kind of eagle, maybe a fish eagle - my favorite --- 'hanging' out on a thermal - very high up in the stratosphere.... I was able to 'feel' into the mood and energy of this and could really feel the 'support' of the thermal, the way it kind of carries the bird up and along and how little effort the bird has to make - hardly even needs to flap its wings. I could've stayed there forever - it was so comforting. And strangely enough when I 'felt' that kind of support - facing Letsema was somewhat easier and dare I say 'lighter'...

After this session I was able to engage from a different perspective. I was able to contribute to the core group's decision to respond to the December violence by organizing a World Café discussion with the focus on how tradition/traditional schools can help to create 0% GBV. About 100 people participated – and all effort was made to invite as many roleplayers as possible to attend. Representatives from the traditional schools, the young initiates, the families of those who had experienced the violence, the mothers of the initiates, the police, the church, the dept. of community safety. The core group was anxious about how they were going to handle the heated emotions – “*when emotions are high logical thinking is lost*” (Moeketsi Lehlaha⁸¹)- and worried about how they were going to ensure that all weapons would be left outside the venue. They planned for the meeting with great care, setting clear intentions and reminding themselves of what they had already learned – about creating a safe space that was open and non-judgemental, to engage respectfully by asking powerful questions and to see themselves as facilitators that had influence but not to take over⁸².

On the day one of the traditional leaders arrived with a python and two massive rock lizards on his shoulders. It took some skillful negotiation⁸³ on the part of the facilitator to

⁷⁹ For other examples of how participants have learned to deal with frustration and anger in non violent ways see stories in: “OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: *Writings From Letsema*. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal from Letsema”. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

⁸⁰ see <http://www.aamindell.net/>

⁸¹ Core group minutes 26th February 2015, reflecting on the Bophelong World Café. See stories in “OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: *Writings From Letsema*. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

⁸² Core group minutes 18th Feb 2015, planning the Bophelong World Café.

⁸³ Core group minutes 26th February 2015, reflecting on the Bophelong World Café. For more details also see “Friedman and Twala (2016) [Website ref](#)

see that these ‘natural weapons’ whose presence was there to create fear – were left outside. Initially when Tai Chi started the youth were disruptive but later settled into it.

In the meeting one of the mothers asked if these schools are only there to teach boys about how to be violent or do they also teach them how to love? The traditional leaders said no one had ever asked them before how they could help contribute to 0% GBV. This meeting led to an engagement with Contralesa – the highest decision-making authority structure for traditional leaders. Stories, experience and evidence from the World Café discussion were used to persuade this authority that changes are urgently required to what is being done under the guise of tradition.

The second horrifying incident occurred on Mothers Day (8 May 2015). Her partner and father of four children gruesomely stabbed Sarah Mogwera, one of the woman police reservists, and active participant in Letsema dialogues, to death. Soon after the murder, the core group was attending what was planned as a fundraising workshop. Nina Benjamin, the facilitator of this meeting, had no choice but to let go of the plan. They spent most of the day helping the group process their feelings about the murder and redirect their energies into planning a symbolic memorial walk rather than the usual marches⁸⁴. Again there was much heaviness and despair and the facilitator’s role in helping to shift the energy was significant. Soon thereafter, the memorial walk took place on a Friday afternoon through the area where Sarah was killed to commemorate her life and express distress at her murder. More than 100 community members participated and knives were used to cut apples as an alternative to stabbing.⁸⁵

The ability to ‘sit in the fire’, as Arnold Mindell⁸⁶ puts it, has been one of the more important skills the process has taught the participants. And despite the way we use various forms of bodywork, to help us shift from depleting, negative depressing energy states, we are learning that this work is not about living in the land of the positive but about seriously grappling with and facing into what is hard, painful, violent and at times dangerous. Bongani Dlamini and Jabulani Dlomo⁸⁷ describe a large community meeting independently organized by the traditional healers’ group to address the rise of gangsterism and bullying in the schools. In response to wide spread xenophobic attacks in early 2015, Letsema actively sought funding to support more dialogues to reflect upon xenophobia and its contribution to GBV.

SOME EXAMPLES OF OUTCOMES

In a relatively short amount of time, the energy, commitment, sense of ownership and engagement by all those touched by this process is moving, vivid and tangible. The core group has

⁸⁴ See Nina’s Benjamin’s story (pg 129) - Choosing non violence: a Core Group response in OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: *Writings From Letsema*. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal”. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

⁸⁵ See Sipho Boo (pg 68) - Awareness Campaign after a young mum’s brutal murder by her husband and Khethiwe Matumelo (pg 64) - A Stepping Stone, in “OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: *Writings From Letsema*. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal”. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

⁸⁶ Arnold Mindell, 1995: *Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity*, Lao Tse Press, Portland.

⁸⁷ See Jabulani Dlomo (pg 38) : The scourge of illegal initiation schools and Bongani Dlamini (pg 156) : Dialogue to touch souls, in “OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: *Writings From Letsema*. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal”. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

taken responsibility for moving the process forward and their enthusiasm for pursuing actions at multiple levels to create new non-violent norms is impressive.

Throughout the process we have had regular opportunities for reflection where participants share their stories of change and where facilitators share their observations⁸⁸. At various points in time different interns working with us had a chance to interview participants about their experience and what they felt had changed in the interim as a result of their engagement with Letsema. Fifteen participants have written their own stories in *"Creating a Vaal with zero % GBV. Our Hearts are Joined: Writings from Letsema"*. Below are a few examples that talk to the changes that Letsema participants have noted about their ability to understand, tackle, and change culturally biased norms and practices of unequal power relations. Their stories of change illustrate shifts at the personal, interpersonal, familial and community levels.

At the personal level, the participants who have been most active in the process talk about changes in both consciousness and behaviour in different spaces in their lives.

In terms of a generalised personal empowerment they talk of gaining new skills, confidence and knowledge. They now feel able to tackle GBV issues head on, are more patient and willing to listen to other people's views, and more willing to take responsibility and ownership of GBV in their communities. They are learning to think more and are more committed to addressing discrimination against LGBTI people. Participants are able to advocate and speak out about issues of GBV- including with families, children, friends, institutions such as the church, schools, sportsclubs and in public spaces such as sheebens and taxis. As reflected by one participant, *"As a young woman, I learned that I have got the right to say no and to fight for myself."* Other participants reflected on this newfound ability to break the silence, *"Letsema let us have the courage to talk to other people. I am very proud to be a woman," and that "Before [if people] saw that things were not well, they did not know who to talk to. Now people participate at different levels."*

Women's stories⁸⁹ talk about learning to practice what they preach, being less quiet and unlocking years of silence; about being able to face their challenges and stay cool in the face of aggression.

Many have found the courage to address abuse in their personal lives. As one participant stated, *"I was in an abusive relationship for 14 years, with emotional abuse and being raped sometimes at home. I went to social workers, I got multiple protection orders, I was a regular visitor at the police station but nobody would really help me. Since Letsema, I faced my challenges and I felt empowered to help myself solve my problems. [...] I am strong, happy and a better advocate for dealing with gender-based violence. I don't talk as a victim, but as a survivor. [...] I used to be silent; this process unlocked me, made me able to speak and to emancipate from this 14 years-old weight. To my surprise, since I'm able to articulate and speak out my relationship with my husband changed a lot; I feel like my husband is afraid of me now. Letsema has given me key skills and confidence."*

Before I was a doormat. Now I can stand tall. (KM, KP interview, May 2015)

⁸⁸ These stories are documented in meeting minutes. Monthly meetings are recorded by coaches. Quarterly reflection meetings are recorded by the facilitators and sometimes interns who are working with us from the University of Ottawa Canada. In 2015 the May and August large group meetings dovetailed with an external evaluation led by Jethro Petit. Facilitator's reflections have been recorded by Tanya Beer, Michel Friedman and Shamim Meer.

⁸⁹ See stories in : *"OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: Writings From Letsema. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal from Letsema"*. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

Others are confronting their own practice in significant ways. One younger woman⁹⁰ in the core group tells of how she listened to her child differently and realised that, if unchanged, her parenting could contribute to creating violence in the longer term.

Another older woman from the core group⁹¹ told us that after many years of not speaking to her sister, she made a concerted effort to resolve the conflict. One group of women, after discussing their concern about bullying in schools and their own role as parents, said⁹²: *"We decided that as parents, maybe we are having bullies in school because of the way that we treat them at home, we insult them and shout at them, so maybe if we can deal with the way that we treat them at home, then maybe we can influence how they engage with schools. Because our children would know that being violent is wrong because as parents we are not doing the same things".*

Men's stories talk about how they are learning to respect and communicate better with others and to better understand women's views. They are learning to open up to other people, deal better with their emotions and feel freer. One man said: *"I have learned to control my temper, to argue constructively and to identify problems in the community. I learned to intervene in situations of GBV even if I don't know the people."*

At the interpersonal level, family members were more willing and open to discuss issues of GBV, adolescents and adults had more open communication about sex and sexuality, and women reported an increase in the ability to talk about abuse in the home. Male participants have also demonstrated changing attitudes in relation to understanding culturally biased norms of GBV. As one male participant stated, *"Respect and seeing respect being given in these spaces also changed my attitudes."* Male participants demonstrated a willingness to engage in discussions on GBV, and engage in non-violent behaviour. These attitude shifts have not only led to an openness to talk, but also to address violent practices. For example, after engaging in informal talks on sex, sexuality and GBV, one male community member stopped physically abusing his girlfriend. A man⁹³ who had attended the Open Space shared how this changed his behavior at home:

Dialoguing with other women in the Open Space made me think about my relationship with my wife and children. I realized the power of respect and listening to others. When I got home I use to make everyone feel my presence as a man. Shortly after my arrival everyone would disappear to their small corners. I never even appreciated the food. One woman in the Open Space told me how this makes her feel. It was as if she was talking to me. Now I make sure that I appreciate my wife, play with the children and do not harass them to make my presence felt. Since I started doing this, I feel loved; they receive with love, my children welcome me from the gate, hug and joke with me. My presence is not only felt but appreciated and enjoyed. (Male participant in community World Café dialogue Dec 2014, NT minutes of meeting).

The Letsema process has also influenced participants to address culturally biased norms and address women's leadership⁹⁴ in a number of other spaces, influencing the wider community. The dialogue process has increased stakeholder participation and the ability to work together across different projects. For example, soccer committees are being used as spaces to discuss GBV and have increased women's presence in decision-making roles.

⁹⁰ ZM, Minutes Dec core group reflection meeting, 2014.

⁹¹ MZ, Minutes Dec core group reflection meeting, 2014.

⁹² August expanded core group reflection meeting, 2015

⁹³ Minutes Evaton World Café, December, 2015

⁹⁴ See Friedman and Twala (2016) Feminist leadership practice: Reflections from the South African Gender at Work experience.

"By involving more women in the soccer committee as equals or in authority positions, men are realizing that we do need women. They are learning to control their impulses because there are ladies in the room and they want to behave. It influences men 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" (Simon Lehoko, member of core group, Interview by AM, Dec 2014).

Other key institutions, such as church, schools, stokvels⁹⁵ and local council meetings have increased their knowledge base on GBV and have opened spaces for Letsema activists to engage the larger community in conversation about how to create zero percent GBV in the Vaal. Community dialogues and outreach have shifted mindsets from seeing GBV as a personal issue, to a community one. As one participant put it, *"Before, gender-based violence was seen as a personal issue. But now we are trying to see what we can do as a community to address it."*

A stokvel member explains how ordinary spaces are now being used to reflect on gbv :

"Every month in our meetings we have two hours where we discuss strategies of reducing gender based violence and give feedback about things we have tried in our families and churches. This has changed our stokvel. It is no longer about food and money. It's an empowering and safe space" (Participant in community World Café dialogue Dec 2014, NT minutes of meeting).

And local community meetings with the councillor no longer use 'violence as their language':

In the past we used to fight, swear and attack each other in community meetings. When the councillor was present, we did our best to frustrate him. As a result he didn't attend community meetings. Since the Open Space, he attends our meetings and gives monthly updates. He even volunteered to assist us to raise funds for the different actions that we are doing. The Open Space has inspired us not only to hope for a safe and violence free community. It has made us work together to build peace and change the tone and attitude of our engagements. Our community meetings are peaceful, short and the community attend them. (Participant in community World Café dialogue Dec 2014, NT minutes of meeting).

One of the more sustained outcomes from Letsema is how different interest groups have collectively mobilized to challenge traditional cultural practices and norms in relation to young boys' initiation rites. Young boys are being abducted and taken against their and their parent's will to often-illegal traditional initiation/ circumcision schools. In one of the open space discussions, a traditional leader met a local feminist activist who was feeling desperate, because some of the young men in her organisation had been working with had been recently abducted. Within a few days of the Open Space meeting, the traditional leader was helping to retrieve these boys and return them to their parents. A few weeks after the Open Space meeting the feminist said:

"When I go to the police they have an attitude that it is me again.. but this time when I went with the people from the initiation school who we met at the Open Space, the dynamic was different, the policemen changed, and were more willing to listen" (July 4 reflection minutes, 2014).

The chances are if these two people, the traditional leader and the feminist activist, were brought together before their involvement in the Letsema process with the intention of resolving this issue, we might not have had the same results. The process is encouraging listening to each other

⁹⁵ A traditional organisational form where mostly women organise with friends to save money.

and building relationships, and is not about confrontation or negotiating results. The shift in frame allows for collaboration in a new way. Over the year of working together in Letsema, the issue has not gone away. In fact, as has been alluded to earlier, it has become more amplified. The mushrooming practice in 'illegal' initiation schools is to abduct boys as a way of getting ransom money⁹⁶. Parents don't agree to this and are then forced to pay for their release. The 'legal' schools are seeking greater controls, regulation and policing.

In the Letsema dialogues, questions are being raised not only about the legality of these abductions, but also what role these traditional schools play in socializing young boys. Can these schools play any role in teaching boys to love or are they only learning to be violent?⁹⁷ That this question has been asked is itself norm challenging. Having a space⁹⁸ where women, mothers, younger girls, initiates themselves, traditional leaders, police, department of community safety, men, gay and lesbian people can talk to each other respectfully and truly listening is challenging a norm. Creating conditions where such conversations take place without any violence⁹⁹ is challenging a norm. When he first joined Letsema, the traditional leader was fairly normative and was experienced by others as dominating – for instance he took up a lot of airtime and strongly argued that men are heads of households. Now, he is starting to ask himself what it means to be a man. He is reflecting on what role he is playing in creating modern young men. In this context, this is a radical questioning of profoundly deep and old norms. He is also organizing meetings with the Traditional Authority as well as large-scale community meetings where these issues of gender, culture, tradition and masculinity are being discussed.¹⁰⁰

Mothers are also starting to question their husbands:

I sent three of my boys to the initiation schools because I know now that it's our culture. I never before asked my husband or his brother why boys need to do the right of passage. My last born was due to go this December but didn't go because I challenged my husband for the first time to find him a reputable school, to inquire about the curriculum and ensure that the school also teaches positive masculinity. (community World Café dialogue Dec 2014, NT minutes of meeting).

The complex interweaving of tradition, culture, modernity, the economically exploitative modification and adaptation¹⁰¹ of a historical initiation process of 'becoming a man' is all under the spotlight¹⁰². Later, we learned that many boys would emerge from these schools traumatised, at times brutalised and some resort to gangsterism and bullying in response. Nomboniso Gasa, a

⁹⁶ Comment on a recent article suggested that this practice will continue as long as it is able to cash in on a "lucrative, tax free business" in the informal economy. Gareth van Onselen, Business Day, (13 July 2015). Shutting Down Initiation Debate does not help society. http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2015/07/13/shutting-down-initiation-debate-does-not-help-society?cx_tag=bcuf

⁹⁷ Minutes from Bophelong World Café (25-2-2105) focusing on tradition, gender and culture. 55 female, 39 male participants.

⁹⁸ Bophelong World Café, 25/2/2015

⁹⁹ See Nosipho Twala in Friedman and Twala (2016) Feminist leadership practice: Reflections from the South African Gender at Work experience. [Website link](#)

¹⁰⁰ See Jabulani Domo (pg 38)– The Scourge of Illegal Initiation Schools, in "OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: Writings From Letsema. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal ". See also stories by Bongani Dlamini (pg 156) and Radikeledi Letuma (pg 104). https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmnNsR2wxWG8/view

¹⁰¹ Illegal practitioners, against parents' will in order to extract ransom fees, abduct the boys. This is counter to tradition where parents are supposed to support their sons going for the ritual to schools that are trustworthy.

¹⁰² Louise Vincent (2008). Cutting Tradition: the Political Regulation of Traditional Circumcision Rites in South Africa's Liberal Democratic Order, Journal of Southern African Studies, Volume 34, Number 1. Nomboniso Gasa *Women must lead initiation debate* <http://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/women-must-lead-initiation-debate-1.1567663#VObeES70US5>, Mthetho Tshemese, *Becoming men or dying in killing fields?* <http://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/becoming-men-or-dying-in-killing-fields-1.1668240#VOw8Ly70US4>

renowned South African feminist, has argued that her own interest in male circumcision arose because she saw the link in circumcisions to increasing levels of sexual violence towards girls. Gangsterism and bullying in schools is being tackled head on as described by Jabulani Dlomo¹⁰³

After a series of meetings organised by members of the Traditional Healers group, three schools really affected by various gangs have not reported violent incidents related to gangs to date. The BBF gang has since disbanded and the members placed in various extra mural activities and some have gone back to school. I can celebrate that some gangsters are on their way to becoming change agents in their various communities.

Letsema itself is role modelling a different culture for how diverse people can think, plan, strategise and work together. They are learning how to sustain a culture that supports collective impact work, have demonstrated ownership of the process of change and shown enormous energy for citizen action. While venues, transport, some air time and most facilitation has in the main been funded by the grant received from the Dutch government, all other activities have been carried out by participants using their own very limited resources. The following quotes by core group members capture the spirit of this culture:

People have taken over the process in different waysthere is a willingness to try different things to bring change. In Letsema stakeholders are working together, they connect what everyone is doing.....It feels good and refreshing in many ways to see the energy, the enthusiasm of the stakeholders and people participating. They have a willingness and a commitment to ensure that Letsema works... The ownership of the process by the participants is exciting. The process is not heavy.....I learned that we can work as a collective and that it is easy to cultivate mutual respect. I learned to trust the process and to believe in it. I learned to respect diversity and to acknowledge the different roles we all play. I learned to be patient by looking at the participants and seeing their confidence that has developed and their enthusiasm to take the process forward. The process freed the people to unleash their potential (Nosipho Twala, member of core group, Interview by AM, Dec 2014).

The process is giving us a space. Sometimes you would go and be taught by someone else, but here I can participate in the manner that I feel; it's something coming from me, not like in a school. We have to provide our own input instead of hearing from some board what we need to do. Now I apply that approach in the sessions I am conducting. It gave me great listening skills.... One of the changes is that we started learning from each other. When we started Letsema, we didn't know each other a lot but now it's like one big family. It brought us together as brothers and sisters for a common goal.....Now people participate at different levels, and also the stakeholders. The open space made us see that people need to be helped; it gave us a platform to talk with members of the community. (RT, woman member of core group, Interview by AM, Dec 2014).

"Letsema is about building each other and working together. And there is no certificate or diploma needed at Letsema. We are all equal there" (Carol in Writings from Letsema, pg 33).

¹⁰³ See Jabulani Dlomo (pg 38)– The Scourge of Illegal Initiation Schools, in "OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: Writings From Letsema. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal ".
https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvMNsR2wxWG8/view

"..when you are with Letsema you just draw ideas, you think out of the box and you figure out solutions. You hear others' options and opinions and then you tackle the issue"
(Lebohlang Ramahole in Writings from Letsema, pg 55).

"Letsema has taught me to be a free thinker, to see, think and analyse in different ways"
(Sipho Booi in Writings from Letsema, pg 70).

I have taken ownership into my own hands of fighting against violence and crime in order to build a better future (Nathi Zwane in Writings from Letsema, pg 95).

The confidence gained in Letsema is also leading to other kinds of citizen action. For instance, the women in the dialogue group recently walked 10km in a conscious non-violent way to the local Eskom station in Evaton to complain about not having electricity for a month in the middle of winter¹⁰⁴.

Feminism in our approach

The most obvious feminist principle that is being supported in this process is contained in the Letsema vision/core question – "How can we create zero percent GBV in the Vaal"? Next is the principle of inclusivity and diversity along lines of age, gender, sexual orientation, education, race, class, skill level, social sector. Differently abled people have participated in various processes but are not represented as a specific interest in the expanded core group. Letsema creates many opportunities for participants to collectively look at creating new norms and for giving individuals and organisations space to bring about change by standing and taking action together.

Feminist principles that challenge patriarchal binaries are intrinsically part of many of the meetings. For instance, older and younger women are out in the public world engaging in rich and meaningful conversation with older and younger men – they are not stuck in the kitchen or at home, shy, quiet and hidden¹⁰⁵; they are also given opportunities to become recognised leaders¹⁰⁶. *"One woman said she didn't speak at the beginning because she thought it was a space for intelligent people. Now she said she'll speak because what she thinks is important"*¹⁰⁷.

Sharing real stories in public about abuse and violations that are usually invisible – either kept secret or only shared in private at home – breaks a public taboo of silence. The safe spaces enable such loud silences to be broken. Sharing these stories¹⁰⁸ in mixed gender spaces is relatively unusual. Men get to hear stories from women who are not in their own immediate lives. It makes

¹⁰⁴ Dialogue group fundraising meeting minutes, July 2015. Nosipho Twala and Flatta Mqwati in "OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: Writings From Letsema. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal".

https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

¹⁰⁵ See Nosipho Twala; Carol; Eunice Lehlaha, Khetiwe Matumelo; Magogo Zwane and Flatta Mqwati in "OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: Writings From Letsema. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal". https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

¹⁰⁶ See Friedman and Twala (2016) Feminist leadership practice: Reflections from the South African Gender at Work experience. Website ref. Also see Carol (p33-34); Eunice Lehlaha (p45-46); Khetiwe Matumelo (p67), Magogo Zwane (p74);, Moeketsi Lehlaha (p90) and Nathi Zwane in "OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: Writings From Letsema. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal"

¹⁰⁷ G@W team reflection with Tanya Beer, (Sep 2015).

¹⁰⁸ There are few resource centres, shelters and other centres that can offer advice or counselling to participants in the Vaal. These resources are always shared with participants who are able to access them. As part of the process there is a desire to develop more resources of this kind in the area (Fundraising workshop minutes, June 2015).

it easier to listen and hear. Much to my surprise sometimes simply sharing stories in this space has had a powerful healing effect for the women in particular. I suspect that it has something to do with the public and collective nature of the environment in which the sharing is taking place. Some typical comments from participants describe this as follows:

"People have a baggage of problems but pretend that nothing is wrong. Once we started sharing we realised that there are more solutions as we talk. You have a right to speak and to be heard. We learnt that once you acknowledge a problem there are solutions" (Core group meeting Oct, 2013).

"I'm free and I'm safe. I can share this demon that is in my life so they can help me to chase it away... because, at the end of the day, we chase it away and everyone that comes here has a new passing, a new life Now the communication is starting outside the home but it started here". (Participant at Aug reflection meeting, 2015)

"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" (Moeketsi Lehlaha in Writings from Letsema, pg 89).

"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. 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..... I have shifted from seeing this as a private, family matter, which needed police intervention, to being made aware of my contribution in helping affected families, and not to be a passive bystander when this is happening."
(Simon Bull Lehoko, in Writings from Letsema, pg 89).

By ensuring that people representing diverse sexualities are in the room, it also enables a questioning of heteronormative practice through direct human engagement¹⁰⁹. The normative notion that biology is destiny is confronted in an immediate way. Recognising and acting upon the notion that gender based violence also includes violence against non-conforming genders is a powerful contribution of Letsema's practice. For instance, a male participant¹¹⁰ at the Open Space wrote in a reflection that after 36 years of living according to the patriarchal beliefs he grew up with and having attended many formal gender training workshops *"none of them could make a shift on my mindset"*. *"I was taught (by my Zulu culture) that there is only male and female and that gays and lesbians are a curse or a 'self-made' thing"*. However after finding himself in a discussion with gays and lesbians at the Open Space he said:

"For the first time someone politely expressed such information that sunk into my deep thoughts....I could feel my past traditional behaviours, practices and teachings being erased 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

¹⁰⁹ See stories by Nathi Zwane (pg 94), Lebohlang Ramahole (pg 54) and Magogo Zwane (pg 71) in OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: *Writings From Letsema*. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal". https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

¹¹⁰ See Jabulani Dlomo's story (pg 35) - "An eye-opening moment" in OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: *Writings From Letsema*. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal" https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view In

also engaged people openly about gay and lesbian issues. From that moment, my approach, behaviour and practices have positively changed."

A core group member, a mother of a gay man says:

"I am shy and I did not know LGBTI but I have a LGBT at home. I was angry that my son was dismissed at work for LGBT, being LGBT and he was discriminated against. At home I became more open. Letsema as a group started to show me how to respect others views, how to build a nation. I can preach at church, I ask the pastor for a few minutes to preach" (woman, MZ, Veg grp Fundraising minutes, July 2015)

At the end of the Open Space meeting, one of the community men who were present who we had never met before said in public:

"I want to send my apologies to gays and lesbians. I heard serious problems about them, but today I understand better they are also human. We need to respect them We need to accept them in our communities". (Man, at end of Open Space June 2014)

A gay man who now feels free says that Letsema changed his whole life:

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

(Lebohang Ramahole, in Writings from Letsema, pg 56)

Not only are traditional notions of sexuality questioned, but so are normative gender divisions of labour. Men discover that through this kind of engagement with others, they can also learn to listen deeply and care¹¹¹. For instance, one participant claims:

"We make time to speak with our children and our partners. We have stopped shouting unnecessarily. We encourage both boys and girls to share house chores. I have told my daughter not to buy guns and violent games for my grandchildren" (Female participant, in community world café dialogue Dec 2014, NT minutes of meeting)

The strengths and insights that women and gay people bring to debates are made visible and given a chance to be valued. Women and girls are encouraged to make choices to determine their own lives¹¹². All participants are challenged to take responsibility for acting on their passions and refuse victimhood.

Culturally taboo practices like not having women talk about or engage in anything to do with boys' initiation rites have been challenged. Contralesa, the highest decision-making authority structure for traditional leaders, have been persuaded that changes are urgently required to what is being done under the guise of tradition. New policies are being developed in this regard. Social responsibility arms of well-known soccer clubs are starting to make allocations to the Letsema sports group; they are considering sponsoring a shelter for abused women and are creating space for Letsema to engage during soccer tournaments.

Letsema is a powerful illustration of how possible it is to cultivate human capacities for interconnection, solidarity, compassion, collective action and non-violent practice. Integrating

¹¹¹ See Simon Bull Lehoko (pg 98)- Empowered to Care - in OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: *Writings From Letsema*. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal". https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

¹¹² See Stories in OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: *Writings From Letsema*. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal". https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

various forms of bodywork and acknowledging the importance of feelings challenges the patriarchal mind-body split – as well as helps participants to heal, to be more energised and more committed¹¹³. Participants' actions as individuals and as groups are fertilizing a different kind of soil - one that will in the long term create different conditions - so that normative excessive violence is not encouraged.

Ongoing challenges

As described in the outcomes, many of our initial hypotheses have been proven to work in the Vaal context. The expanded core group and action group members have all grown in confidence, in their ability to engage with others in dialogue and sharing information. They are increasingly presenting themselves and their experience in public forums such as the Vaal University of Technology on National woman's day, or the POOE organised soccer tournaments. However, it has been very difficult to get any government officials to participate in the ongoing work in a sustained way. This is very different to similar situations where either donors or government departments are the initiators and have extremely large budgets¹¹⁴. In this sense our initial hypothesis that we would be able to challenge existing power hierarchies by starting from the local community level has only been partially realised.

A main challenge thus facing Letsema is how to get more resourced actors and official system stakeholders who are responsible for the structural/programmatic elements of addressing GBV to come in as equals and to commit to the process in a steady, ongoing way that is respectful of the collaborative culture being cultivated. Even if they get interested, officials face many obstacles in getting permission to attend 1, 2 or 3 daylong processes. We have learned the value of these processes in building the kind of culture required to sustain a collective impact initiative but have had to find other ways to get government involvement. They generally can only attend shorter meetings. We've realized that sometimes it's easier to bring them in on something very concrete that links to their organizational mission – like bullying in schools. GBV is ongoing so it's not seen as a crisis. When you have an infrastructure like Letsema in place, it is easier to grab opportunities and respond differently to them. So that when a violence-related issue flares up for instance, the core group can respond quickly and appropriately and try to solve it in a different way and bring in new participants. Early in the process, a radio broadcaster and cultural worker were involved, but they dropped out. Letsema would benefit from having more media and cultural workers as active members in order to help reflect the lessons and impact into the broader community.

Other challenges include integrating new people into the existing culture without having the benefit of experiencing the long process other participants have been through. On the one hand,

¹¹³ See Millicent Phillips (pg 79) - A Long Way with Letsema – in OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: *Writings From Letsema*. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal". https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

¹¹⁴ For a South African example, see Parker (2013). Prevention in Action (PIA) - A Model for Social Mobilization to Address Violence Against Women, Project Concern International. The PIA Program was developed between 2008 and 2012 and implemented by Project Concern International (PCI) in partnership with two provincial networks on Violence Against Women (VAW) based in KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape respectively. The program set out to address HIV prevention through changing social norms related to sexual and other gender-based violence (GBV) against women. The explicit goal of the program was to reduce HIV transmission by changing social norms related to sexual and other gender-based violence against women. Its intent also aimed to develop a multi-stakeholder approach but not necessarily to foster community members as leaders or owners. Its result areas included:

- Mobilizing public and private sector partners to combat VAW;
- Improving the enabling environment for changing social norms related to VAW;
- Developing and implementing a sustainable program to address VAW.

The PIA project was not explicitly aiming to develop a collective impact culture and it is hard to compare with Letsema as it had a budget of \$3-4million/yr for four years. We only had \$152 000 for 2 years.

the G@W team think “*people see this as a new way to organize, where they have a new voice. Amidst a divided civil society - this way of talking and working is healing and that seems to be a driver of success*”¹¹⁵. On the other hand, as groups and activities solidify going forward, Letsema is going to face the question of how to deepen people’s capacity for self-reliance and action, rather than fall into traditional forms of coordinating and controlling. Sustaining the process in a context of high unemployment and few material resources is a major challenge. How to develop a more systematic method for getting feedback on wider impact and for collecting, collating, managing and making sense of existing change story data is a broader evaluation challenge.

Now what? Where to next?

The core group and action groups have gained in confidence and through the process of working on their funding proposals have become more acute and powerful in articulating their understanding and their dreams going forward. Any future fundraising will be done in a more overt partnership between G@W/LRS and Letsema. In practice Letsema will move towards hiring G@W/LRS for facilitation services. Although the process primarily supports work in the direction of norm change, there is new impetus to also address the shortage of services in the Vaal area required to support survivors. The groups are improving their ability to take responsibility for the ongoing learning and reflection, at least at the level of the group, and it is becoming easier to link and weave the synergy across all the groups. New stakeholders are showing interest and the process is becoming a role model for alternative ways of organising and mobilising at community level.¹¹⁶

CONCLUSION:

Recent literature on violence against women and gender-based violence advocates for multi-stakeholder approaches arguing for collaboration between organisations¹¹⁷ and sectors¹¹⁸, multiple methodologies that support the development of non-violent behaviours¹¹⁹ and theories of change that address the complexity of individual and social change processes¹²⁰. None of these articles however refers to actual practical examples. Others¹²¹ have argued that “*Sustainability of collective action in ending sexual and gender based violence at the community level is important; more understanding is needed on what drives citizen action, enables ownership of the process of change, and the resources needed to support this*”. Letsema began to experiment with how to implement many of these ideas before this literature was published and offers a powerful example to learn from.

¹¹⁵ G@W team reflection with Tanya Beer, (Dec 2013).

¹¹⁶ Nina Benjamin, Labour Research Services, pers. Comm. June 2015

¹¹⁷ Rachel Jewkes, Michael Flood, James Lang, (2014): *From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: a conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls*, www.thelancet.com Published online November 21, 2014 [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)61683-4](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61683-4).

¹¹⁸ Lori Michau, Jessica Horn, Amy Bank, Mallika Dutt, Cathy Zimmerman (2014), *Prevention of violence against women and girls: lessons from practice*, www.thelancet.com Published online November 21, 2014 [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)61797-9](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61797-9), p1.

¹¹⁹ Mary Ellsberg, Diana J Arango, Matthew Morton, Floriza Gennari, Sveinung Kiplesund, Manuel Contreras, Charlotte Watts(2014), *Prevention of violence against women and girls: what does the evidence say?*, www.thelancet.com Published online November 21, 2014 [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)61703-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61703-7), p1.

¹²⁰ Lori Michau, Jessica Horn, Amy Bank, Mallika Dutt, Cathy Zimmerman (2014), *Prevention of violence against women and girls: lessons from practice*, www.thelancet.com Published online November 21, 2014 [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)61797-9](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61797-9), p1.

¹²¹ Elizabeth Mills, Thea Shahrokh, Joanna Wheeler, Gill Black, Rukia Cornelius and Lucinda van den Heever (2015,43), *Turning the Tide: The Role of Collective Action for Addressing Structural and Gender-based Violence in South Africa*, IDS.

We recognised that gender based violence does “not fall neatly within the lines of our fragmented organizations and systems”¹²² and learned from experience the truth of what theorists on social innovation argue – that

“Social Innovation is an experiment with new: ways of seeing the world, relationships, power dynamics and practices. In order to try, fail, learn and try again; we need new spaces. These can be physical spaces, like a room or a forest; conversation spaces illuminated by a good question or a process which creates a container for dialogue and seeing together, it can be a temporal space where the use of timing in a given event and how we sequence multiple events over time lays the ground for new relationships, insights and actions. These are all ways of designing a space that can hold social innovation. Building a good container requires paying attention to multiple details and putting care into creating hospitable space as well as being responsive to the group and what is being asked for’.”¹²³

The Letsema spaces are described as safe. In this space of safety and love participants can be vulnerable, welcome different parts of themselves and others and share their truth. It helps to hold people while they realign themselves. Being in these dialogue spaces doesn’t mean you are never challenged or don’t feel uncomfortable, but rather that you aren’t shamed or demeaned. Through their embodied experiences in the Letsema spaces, participants have an experience that does not fit their previous experience of reality. All the meeting spaces do this, but the two day Open Space was especially formative in this respect. It offered participants an experience that rewrote reality for them. “Once this truth is inside of you it stays with you forever. You are no longer who you were” (Charles Eisenstein)¹²⁴..... Eisenstein further suggests that conversations about violence against women often shame men. He posits “What makes me less defensive is not logic and debate”. Intriguingly, the Letsema spaces have enabled men to own their culpability and to feel shame at the violence of other men¹²⁵.

Impact has been increased because participants have taken on actions that they feel passionate about and committed to, which means they are driven by a principle of self-organising and self-motivation. While all groups are working towards answering the same core question, they have freedom and flexibility to creatively generate responses and actions that are meaningful to them and that they care about. In this way, each action group functions as part of the whole, but is autonomous in its explorations and not hamstrung by the whole.

Using the Emergent Learning framework keeps the work adaptive. It offers a means for supporting ongoing learning and testing of a variety of assumptions, different groups are able to share their learnings and insights with others. As one of the core group members put it: “This helps us understand why things we do don’t always work or get us the results we expect”¹²⁶. The different groups are working collaboratively and at a community-wide level which connects them beyond small and narrow or micro level actions and to people they would not normally have any contact

¹²² Sera Thompson and Greg Judelman with Tim Merry, Kathy Jourdain and Tenneson Woolf A Field Guide for Systems Change. The Art of Social Innovation (2010, p7). http://avnu.ca/avnu/uploads/2015/02/aosi_fieldguide_v01-1.pdf

¹²³ Sera Thompson and Greg Judelman with Tim Merry, Kathy Jourdain and Tenneson Woolf A Field Guide for Systems Change. The Art of Social Innovation (2010, p8). http://avnu.ca/avnu/uploads/2015/02/aosi_fieldguide_v01-1.pdf.

¹²⁴ Charles Eistenstein (2015). Seminar series – Space between stories. Session 2.

¹²⁵ The tears, shock and shame of the men who heard the news of Sarah Mogwera’s death for the first time was striking. (Core group minutes 11th May 2015.) See also Sipho Booli (pg 68) - Awareness Campaign after a young mum’s brutal murder by her husband, in OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED: Writings From Letsema. Creating Zero Percent Gender Based Violence in the Vaal”. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Da5L0N_Qz4VmNvVmNsR2wxWG8/view

¹²⁶ Ayanda Masina (2015), Minutes, May coaches meeting.

with. By expanding the pool of committed actors through networking, relationships and connections, and by being 'attractive'¹²⁷ to others, the larger field in which they are working keeps growing. If we want to support movements taking hold, the best thing we can do is foster critical connections between pioneers who are working on the ground to create fresh and relevant solutions. As Corrigan¹²⁸ says: *"By starting with building networks that can evolve into communities of practice, we create the possibility for systems of influence, which allow formerly fringe efforts to become the social norm"*.

Paradoxically, we (G@W/LRS) started out assuming that this process would be carried by organisations. In the end it has been carried by individuals – some of whom are organisationally linked, others not, many who are unemployed. This has perhaps made it easier for participants to act and feel a sense of agency without needing to wait for organisational mandates. Compared to other collective impact initiatives, which have the opposite situation, Letsema is very strong at including community members yet struggles to get more resourced stakeholders to fully commit. The grant that has supported the work has mainly resourced the majority of the core backbone function¹²⁹ and the community level dialogue spaces¹³⁰. Fifteen members of the core group and action groups and the six coaches have been supported in writing workshops to write their reflections. The participants have indirectly 'carried' the majority of ongoing costs, particularly in relation to their time.

The Letsema process is working on the aspect of 'landscape change'¹³¹ that addresses the social and cultural norms that make up and perpetuate what we believe is normal. At this level, our work has been about creating the space to ask big questions about the high levels of violence and what keeps them going, devaluing of women and non-conforming genders that are a normalised part of our society – also what has emerged is a clear sense of how each person can contribute to this with their own aggressive behaviour. We focus on changing the climate of ideas around women, gender inequality, violence against women and gay people illuminating the positive behaviours and stories of change that are emerging and spreading these through networks of relationships built through various Letsema organized events and processes. In the Vaal context we could include a victim consciousness where people are used to waiting for others to do things and are reluctant to take ownership and responsibility or be accountable. After the recent xenophobia attacks in the country, Letsema have also been asking themselves questions about the differential value placed on foreign nationals and how this links to gendered violence.

¹²⁷ In the recent fundraising workshop for the vegetable garden group Magogo Zwane said: *If I am a happy Magogo they will see. All along we are living with these people and now they are attracted to us. (Minutes, 6 July 2015)*

¹²⁸ Chris Corrigan, From consultation to participatory engagement: a concept paper and design plan for creating ownership and activating leaders in community engagement initiatives, www.chriscorrigan.com

¹²⁹ The facilitation team's time, the core group action-reflection meetings, training process for core group members, action group leaders and coaches to learn how to use an action-learning problem solving approach, monthly mentoring meetings with coaches and groups, coach peer-reflection meetings, planning meetings for the core group, some meetings with specific stakeholders, local level coordination, networking and anchoring role played by one of the facilitators, support for action groups and core group to develop fundraising proposals.

¹³⁰ One day dialogue meeting for the core group to explore in more depth conflictual themes around gender, culture and tradition, facilitation, transport, food and venue costs for world café meetings focusing in one way or another on the core framing question, facilitation, transport, food and venue costs for a 2 day open space meeting with roughly 300 people. All the community level activities carried out since the open space.

¹³¹ The Finance Innovation Lab (2015:28) says "Landscape change is about the terrain the game is played on, rather than the dynamics of the game itself. It covers demographics, technological innovation, environmental factors and other broad trends, and also the social and cultural norms that make up and perpetuate what we believe is normal. Change at the landscape level is extremely slow. It is about shifting the purpose of a system and it can take generations".

At the regime¹³² level of change, the Letsema process is impacting on the dynamics of power who is included, who gets to shape the rules of the game and who has access to what information. Here our work is involved in changing the dynamics of the regime, primarily at household and community levels in a six district-wide geographic area (rather than at state level or the level of the market). Diverse participants are empowered to work more effectively for systems change by creating spaces and opportunities for as many participants as possible to be included in shaping the rules of the game. Representation is sought from women, men, diverse sexual orientations, diverse skills and ages, traditional leaders, religious leaders, cultural and political activists. Participants are encouraged to strengthen their leadership skills, refine their practice and build strong relationships and community. Unequal divisions of labour of care-giving and of women in leadership positions are being challenged. Different action groups are now taking responsibility for fundraising for their own work and for identifying markers of success. At the institutional level some inroads are being made with the traditional leaders council, at least one school governing body, some sports authorities and some churches. As we go forward, we are attempting to bring together coalitions of participants who are building new ways of behaving and relating with a wider range of stakeholders and players with influence in government and other institutional bodies. Letsema participants are learning that *“Real and lasting innovation requires us to see, understand and act with unlikely partners and allies. We need to open up hospitable spaces at the edges of systems where multi-stakeholder, cross-border conversations can give birth to something new.”*¹³³

At the level of **innovation** – there are now many individuals and organizations that are attempting to live their everyday relationships differently, and who find that they cannot return to their ‘old ways of being’.

If like Raewynn Connell we see ‘gender as a multi-dimensional, historically changing structure of social relations – relations that are constructed in active social practices’ – then the Letsema work is focused on changing active social practices.

Erturk(2013), suggests that

“Ending violence against women requires a new vision of human rights, development and security that expands freedoms and disempowers abusive power... In the final analysis, ending violence against women and therefore achieving gender-just peace requires ending patriarchy and militarist-nationalist agendas. This no doubt is a long term goal, but in the short and medium term what is achievable is rupturing and transforming patriarchal formations, values and practices”.

We believe that the women and men committed to the Letsema process are making a courageous start in this direction.

¹³²The Finance Innovation Lab (2015:28) says “At the regime level, the focus is more on the dynamics of power. Who gets to shape the rules of the game? Who has access to the most valuable information? Who is included and who is excluded? Who decides where money flows? Who gets to shape the narrative of success in the system? It comprises the entire infrastructure (structures and institutions both formal and informal) that perpetuates the ‘way things are’. The institutions, the market arrangements, the culture, the policies and regulations that enforce and protect the status-quo”.

¹³³ Sera Thompson and Greg Judelman with Tim Merry, Kathy Jourdain and Tenneson Woolf A Field Guide for Systems Change. The Art of Social Innovation (2010, p7). http://avnu.ca/avnu/uploads/2015/02/aosi_fieldguide_v01-1.pdf