

Mbizi: Empowerment and HIV/AIDS Prevention for Adolescent Girls in Botswana

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This article describes a small group intervention for HIV/AIDS prevention among adolescent girls in Botswana. The psychoeducational group model is designed to empower girls to overcome the gender inequality that puts women at increased risk of HIV infection in the country. Group goals include heightening group members' awareness of the influence of the restrictive social messages that surround them and assisting them in developing efficacy and skills to combat the barriers they face. Specific goals, strategies, and interventions for the initial, middle, and termination stages of the group are described. Indigenous and culturally relevant interventions are included in each stage.

Keywords: *adolescents; Botswana; empowerment; gender; HIV/AIDS*

Perhaps nowhere are the direct consequences of gender inequality more immediately life threatening than in the sub-Saharan African country of Botswana, which suffers from one of the highest HIV/AIDS infection rates in the world. The brunt of the disease in this country is increasingly being borne by young women; the most recent national prevalence survey indicated that for every HIV-positive boy age

15–19 years there were three HIV-positive girls (Botswana AIDS Impact Survey II, 2005). In Botswana, as in other settings where gender inequality predated the arrival of HIV, lack of social, interpersonal, and economic power has directly impacted women's vulnerability to infection. According to Green (2003), "a good deal of female sexual behavior in Africa can best be understood as strategies for economic survival and adaptation to patterns of male dominance" (p. 315).

In Botswana a number of economic, social, and cultural influences have contributed to the disempowerment that endangers girls and women. In this country with strong oral traditions, these influences include a number of stories, myths, songs, and proverbs that have at times served to ensure male dominance over sexual behavior. In a recent study of the influences on adolescent sexual risk behaviors in Botswana, proverbs that communicate messages regarding sexual relations and behavior were identified (Chilisa, Mmonadibe, Malinga, & Ellece, in press). The dominant discourse expressed in the proverbs was that of unbridled male sexual drive which should have no limits. An example of this theme is *Monna poo ga a gelwe lesaka* (A man is like a bull, he should not be confined to one kraal [pen]). A second theme among the identified proverbs was the justification of asymmetrical relations between men and women, in which the man is the natural leader and decision-maker. An example of this theme is *Ga di nke di etelelwa pele ke manamagadi* (The herd is never led by the cows).

The messages communicated in these proverbs influence how people behave sexually, and shape societal attitudes toward men's promiscuous behavior. These societal attitudes in turn define the boundaries of girls' perceptions of their own power in relationships and their ability to question and negotiate with their partners. In other words, such messages have served to "strip girls of the will to resist sex with men, made them malleable to men's sexual pursuits, and constructed them as passive objects in sexual transactions dominated by male power" (Chilisa, 2006, p. 255).

Clearly there is need in Botswana for strategies that empower girls and young women to resist and overcome these oppressive messages and the broader forces that endanger them. In a comprehensive review of effective HIV reduction strategies across sub-Saharan Africa, Green (2003) concluded that "Empowerment of women may prove to be, if not a sine qua non factor in HIV prevalence decline, at least a great facilitating factor" (p. 12).

The purpose of this article is to describe a group-based intervention program designed to facilitate empowerment of adolescent girls in Botswana as a means of preventing HIV/AIDS infection. Group work in counseling is a largely untapped intervention in the country.

However, based on a review of available evidence of the successes and failures of existing HIV/AIDS prevention programs, results of the authors' recent study on the prevailing local knowledge regarding risky sexual behaviors among adolescents in the country (Chilisa, Nitza, & Makwinja-Morara, 2009), and experiences with a series of pilot groups, we assert that a small group intervention for adolescent girls in Botswana will be able to effectively promote empowerment and ultimately reduce the sexual behaviors and practices that put adolescents at risk for HIV/AIDS.

THE *MBIZI* GROUP MODEL

Oppressive gender role expectations and practices, as highlighted above, are largely unexplored contextual influences on the lives of adolescent girls in Botswana. The indoctrination of girls into traditionally defined gender roles is both strong and pervasive, leaving girls with little awareness of the extent to which these external pressures and restrictions limit their choices and behaviors. The group approach to social justice and empowerment employed here thus involves heightening girls' awareness of the social contexts in which they live and how these contexts influence their behavior (Lee & Hipolito-Delgado, 2007). The structure and goals of this group are largely consistent with a psychoeducational group model as identified by the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW, 2000). The group model seeks to assist group members in naming the barriers created by a restrictive gender context, identifying how these barriers have impacted adolescent girls in general and group members as individuals, and developing and implementing collective and individual strategies for overcoming these barriers.

Based on this approach, the specific objectives of the *Mbizi* group are to assist group members to (a) examine and deconstruct dangerous cultural practices and traditions that influence girls' sexual decision making; (b) develop efficacy, skills, and strategies for dealing with barriers that impede members' success; and (c) develop a supportive peer network for coping with present and future challenges.

Group Planning and Preparation

Selection of group members. This group is designed for adolescent girls in Botswana who are between the ages of 12 and 17. Because nearly all girls in Botswana encounter some form of the oppressive gender role expectations and practices described above, nearly all girls could benefit from this type of group. One important consideration

specific to this population is the use of homogeneous or heterogeneous group membership; in some cases, homogeneous groups may be indicated. For example, girls with a disability, girls who have been orphaned, or girls who are already HIV-positive may benefit from a homogeneous group in order to have the freedom to discuss their experiences with these issues without fear of stigma and discrimination beyond those related to gender.

Group leader qualifications and characteristics. A limited number of available professional counselors in Botswana may necessitate groups such as the *Mbizi* group described here be led or co-led by those serving in counseling roles as paraprofessionals. In-service training in group leadership is thus essential. At a minimum, such training should cover the basics of group development, group leadership skills, and the opportunity to practice the interventions utilized in this group model.

An additional recommendation is that at least one of the group leaders be fluent in Setswana. Although much instruction at the junior and senior secondary school level is conducted in English, informal conversation among students is largely in Setswana. It is important to the process of empowerment that members have the option to express themselves in either language. The role of language in self-expression and empowerment was highlighted during the process of completing this manuscript. In working to identify appropriate terms and metaphors for the activities in the group, one of the co-authors joked that it would be much easier to find effective expressions in Kalanga. (While Kalanga is the native tribal language of the two Botswana co-authors of this manuscript, it is a language specific to only one of the many tribal groups in Botswana and thus is rarely used in professional settings.) This comment prompted a discussion about language use and self-expression that resulted in the two Botswana co-authors giving themselves permission to work with the ideas for this project in Kalanga. The energy, freedom, and sense of empowerment fostered by this decision reinforced the importance of language in facilitating an empowering climate in the group model itself.

Finally, it is recommended that co-leaders include both a male and a female when possible. This balance provides members the opportunity to interact with male and female role models who model healthy gender roles and who communicate effectively with each other and with the members themselves.

Goals, Interventions, and Strategies for the Initial Stage

The first step toward achieving the goals of the group is the development of an empowering group climate which includes free

expression and exchange of opinions and ideas, a strong sense of cohesion and support, and a collaborative, non-authoritarian relationship between group leaders and group members. In addition to creating the conditions necessary for the rest of the group process to be effective, the development of a safe, cohesive, and empowering group climate will directly promote the goals of the group. Being given the opportunity, within a safe and supportive atmosphere, to speak one's mind and to have one's thoughts heard and valued will begin the process of empowerment.

In planning for this stage, it is essential to consider the background experiences of this specific population. The cultural norms and experiences that serve to disempower adolescent girls in Botswana are likely to translate directly to their initial responses to the group experience. Group members can therefore be expected to come to the group unaccustomed to having their opinions or ideas sought out by adults and to be habituated to deferring to adults as authority figures. They are likely to be uncomfortable initially with an open-ended, unstructured approach by the group leaders. In response, counselors must carefully balance the need to provide enough structure and direction for members to feel comfortable with the goal of promoting members' sense of empowerment and ownership of the group itself. It is important to note that, in a similar way, honoring group members' cultural background(s) while working to help members unlearn some of the cultural messages they have absorbed will require a conscientious balancing act on the part of the counselor throughout the group.

Many commonly used interventions and activities for the initial stage of a group can be effectively applied to this population as well (see DeLucia-Waack, Bridbord, Kleiner, & Nitza, 2006, for examples). A few specific strategies are suggested. The use of dyads may be beneficial early on in allowing girls to begin to comfortably share and self-disclose. In addition, implementing the traditional practice of the talking circle may be particularly valuable. In this practice, each group member is given a turn to speak her mind without interruption or comment. Members or leaders can only respond by saying "*Kalabeta*" (we are paying attention and we are interested). Initially, the talking circle can be used to have each member state her name or respond to a simple question; after members are comfortable with this practice it can be used to encourage deeper levels of sharing. Finally, non-verbal and movement activities allow members to begin the process of sharing without having to speak verbally in front of the group. One such activity is a movement exercise in which different places in the room are labeled with some set of characteristics and members move to the place that best represents them. For example, using the analogy of a kite, different areas of the room are labeled

as different parts of the kite (body, tail, wind, and string); members are asked to move to the part of the room corresponding to the part of the kite that best represents them. Processing questions can be used to explore the meaning(s) behind their choices and similarities and differences among members (see Nitza, 2007, for an example of this type of activity).

Goals, Interventions, and Strategies for the Middle Stage

The working phase of the group involves interventions that target both collective and individual change processes. Collective strategies utilized in this group involve a critical examination of traditional gender messages and their impact. Individual strategies include reflecting on each member's childhood experiences with sexuality or discrimination, naming of external barriers to be overcome, and identifying internal and external strengths and resources with which to overcome them.

Makungulupeswa. As noted above, Botswana is by tradition an oral culture in which norms and expectations are passed from generation to generation in the form of stories, myths, and proverbs. These messages have been used at times to promote male domination in many aspects of daily life. Therefore, one of the major objectives of the group is to heighten girls' awareness of these messages, their collective impact on girls and women in the country, and their impact on group members themselves.

In this group, an activity entitled *Makungulupeswa* (breaking up the myth) is utilized to begin development of heightened awareness. In this activity, group leaders write cultural messages (e.g., myths, proverbs, song lyrics) that are disempowering to women on strips of paper that are then placed in a bucket in the center of the group. Members take turns drawing out a slip of paper and reading the message aloud. Leaders facilitate discussion and critical examination of each message, using questions to explore the message being communicated, the purpose the message serves or has served in the past, and the way(s) in which the message is limiting, restrictive, or otherwise harmful to girls and women. Following an examination of individual messages, leaders facilitate a discussion of the themes or ideas that arose from the activity. The discussion should help members consider the social construction of gender roles, how they may have internalized the sexist messages transmitted by the culture, and how this may have limited them, hindered them, or otherwise shaped their behavior in terms of their friendships, intimate relationships, and sexuality (including how it may put them at risk for contracting HIV).

Following this collective exercise, the subsequent activities of the working phase are intended to help members reflect more deeply on their own experiences with sexuality and/or gender discrimination and to identify changes they would like to make and/or strengths they have that can be applied to address challenges they face.

Storytelling. Consistent with the oral tradition of the Batswana, storytelling is utilized to help group members share experiences of sexism, gender discrimination, or abuse. Using the traditional talking circle introduced earlier in the group, each member should be given the opportunity, at her own discretion, to share a story or give voice to her own lived experience. Once all members have had the opportunity to tell a story without interruption, leaders facilitate a discussion that reflects on the shared experiences, themes, and implications of the stories. Possibilities for taking action or creating change can be introduced at this point as well.

Mbizi. Following the sharing of stories, leaders introduce an activity that encourages group members to begin to consider how they can utilize their own internal and external strengths and resources to take action to overcome barriers and challenges that have been identified through the previous activities and discussions. Using an adaptation of *A Garden as a Metaphor for Change in Group* (DeLucia-Waack, 2008), the metaphor of *Mbizi* is used. *Mbizi* is a Kalanga term that refers to the tradition of neighbors cooperating and sharing the work load, particularly to get the fields cleared, harvested, and planted. Using an *Mbizi* story as a metaphor for their own growth and development in a collaborative group context, group members are encouraged to identify barriers they would like to remove from their lives (bushes that need to be cleared from the field), skills and strategies they would like to develop (crops or vegetables they would like to grow), and what support or assistance they need to share in order to achieve these goals (what food and drink they will share with others). See Appendix for the *Mbizi* story.

Skill building. Based on members' responses to the *Mbizi* activity, the next few sessions are used to promote skill development tailored to the specific needs of the group. Topics included here could range from providing detailed information about sexual health and HIV/AIDS transmission to teaching needed skills as identified by group members such as assertiveness or conflict resolution. Consistent with the goal of empowering group members, the knowledge and/or skills introduced must be driven by the expressed needs of the members themselves and not imposed by group leaders.

Goals, Interventions, and Strategies for the Termination Stage

The termination stage of this group is of particular importance. Members will leave the group with a new perspective on their lives and relationships, yet return to the same oppressive environment that previously existed. Careful attention must be given to how members can apply their newly developed awareness, skills, and sense of empowerment to addressing the challenges presented by that environment. Included in this discussion must be an identification of any potential or perceived risks members may face from male family members or others in response to the changes they have made. Members can be asked to predict potential barriers to implementing changes, including negative responses from family members. Leaders should assist members in planning for these barriers using role-plays, and identifying specific people and resources members can draw on. The group goal of developing a supportive peer network for dealing with ongoing challenges should be solidified during this stage.

To reinforce and extend their new awareness at the collective level, members work together to write or rewrite a proverb, story, or song that represents their new ideas and beliefs about gender roles. At the individual level, the *Mbizi* activity is revisited to help members identify their specific personal growth over the course of the group. Members should take turns reviewing their own "crops planted," "bushes removed," and "food and drink shared."

Extending members' growth and empowerment outside the group itself can also be accomplished by giving members the opportunity to consider how they might share it with others. For example, they can work together to write a letter to other girls, communicating what they have learned in the group and sharing their ideas to help empower others (see DeLucia-Waack, 2006). In a pilot group supervised by the first author, group members decided to seek permission from the school head to present what they had learned in the group to the entire school at the end-of-term assembly.

An important final consideration in conducting this type of group is the continuation of relationships beyond the life of the group. Culturally, connections made between individuals in Botswana are often assumed to be permanent. Group members may readily come to consider other members and leaders as true family and assume the connections made will be ongoing. As such, termination of relationships among members and leaders could potentially be considered insulting or offensive. Therefore, at a minimum, leaders have a responsibility to be aware of how the "generic" practice of group termination may clash with the worldview of the Batswana regarding the permanency of

interpersonal relationships (ASGW, 1999) and discuss the issue with members prior to termination. Leaders should also consider how they might stay connected to, and/or continue to support, group members after termination. A follow-up session (ASGW, 1998) may be effectively utilized for this purpose. Additionally, on a limited basis it may be appropriate for leaders to utilize other “potentially beneficial interactions” (ACA, 2005, A.5.d), such as attending significant school ceremonies or events, to continue their support of members and members’ efforts toward change.

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APPENDIX

Mbizi

You are staring into the sunset poking the earth with a piece of stick, contemplating what to do with the wealth left behind for you by your ancestors. The land that has been in your family for generations is finally yours. This land has been lying fallow for years since your parents passed on to the next world.

You are disillusioned, as this seems to be a farfetched dream with all the overgrown bushes. Suddenly an idea occurs to you. How about calling *Mbizi* so your neighbors could share the workload? Your neighbors cut down all the trees and bushes and prepare the wood meticulously to share during the cold season. The grass is burnt on sight to fertilize the soil.

Laughter, singing and conversation are heard over the hills. This mood makes the work less burdensome and the feeling of triumph can be detected within the group as they foresee abundance and reduction of poverty. The neighborhood will share in the harvest from this piece of land. You stare into the horizon with a lingering smile as the rainclouds gather.

What is missing from this story? After preparing the field, you also have to plant some crops or vegetables! Our group is like tending to the land left to you by your ancestors. We want to get rid of problems and situations that get in your way, like removing the overgrown bushes and trees from your land. But we also want to develop positive and useful skills and ideas, like planting crops and vegetables on your land. And we want to work together to support each other in making positive changes, like *Mbizi*—sharing the workload to make sure we each have a good harvest.