BIG SISTER
FAITH HOPE THIPE

Today’s Friday Youth Activist feature story brings to a close the spotlight on the region’s young activists who were awarded as National winners and runner ups in the Adolescent Activism Awards (AAA) campaign undertaken by SAT as part of International Youth Day this year. It is perhaps fitting that as next week we see the start of the global 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence (GBV), we end the AAA series with a young lady from Botswana who has a lot to say about what she believes lies at the heart of the violence we have perpetrated against women and young girls.

Faith Thipe only started her activism journey in 2019, but she is already making waves in Botswana. “I became involved with the Dreams Movement last year, because I had been searching for something where I could make a difference. At the time I was really all over the place, not knowing which organisation would be the best fit for me. But when I attended an information session, I just knew that their vision of empowering young girls to achieve their dreams was aligned with what I want to see for young girls in my country.” The Dreams Movement is programme within the Stepping Stones International organisation where Faith works as a mentor to young girls who are in need of support, guidance and most importantly, a friendly young person that they can relate to, or one that judges them. “We really try to create a safe space for them, where they can access our Social Asset Building package. This offers comprehensive sexuality education, which is really important, as it helps increase their knowledge about sex and sexuality and equips the girls with relevant information so that they can make informed decisions about their bodies and their sexual health.” She adds, “We also do referrals for girls who are at risk of contracting HIV, as well as child protection services to support the welfare of children that we work with.”

In addition to her work at the Dreams Movement, Faith also works as an SRHR Champion for the YouthWyze movement in Botswana, and, acts as a ‘Big Sister’ in the Sisterhood Retreats initiative. “I love being a ‘Big Sister’ to young girls in my community. That is where you can see the impact that you are having on a young girl’s life.” The initiative places education at the center of girl empowerment. Faith shares the unique approach. “We identify and locate girl child-headed families and then we sponsor that young girl to go back to school. We also assist the family with basic household needs for their survival. Our aim really is to ensure that we end the problem of children staying at home and not attending school.” Faiths says that education is the way to empower young girls to become independent women, who can then one day become entrepreneurs who are able to contribute meaningfully to the economy and even the food security of our country. Set up at the beginning of the year, the fledgling initiative had started to see some early gains with one girl child being successfully returned back to school, but efforts have been largely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions in the country. “This is a great initiative and I know that once we move out of the restrictions, we will see even more girls being placed back into schools to get their education on track again.” It is clear that being a big sister is something very close to Faith’s heart, as she draws from her own deep personal wounds and experiences to gain the trust and build relationships with the young girls that she works with.

When asked about the challenges that young girls are facing now, Faith is in no doubt that the lives and security of adolescent and young girls has absolutely been blighted by the massive increase GBV in Botswana. Sadly, this has become a global phenomenon, with many countries battling with...
rising numbers and cases of GBV. Faith believes that a big problem is that women and girls don’t have the power to fight back. “I see if all the time. We have young girls who find that they can do nothing for themselves and they have to depend on the perpetrators for shelter, food, clothing, basically their existence. The power dynamic is totally unequal and it’s gotten worse.” She is hopeful that the organisations she works with, will be able to use their programmes to break down the stereotypes and tackle the ‘customs and traditions’ that have entrenched the ‘entitled mentality behaviour’, as she calls it. “We see that because the man is ‘seen’ to be providing for the family or is the only source of support, then he believes that as he is the head, he now has the right to treat the children and young girls in any which way he wants to.” There appears to be an unspoken quit pro quo rule, where the man provides the support, with an expectation of getting something in return. Faith believes that patriarchy and cultural practices plays into the sense of entitlement that young and older men feel towards girls and women. “Culturally we are not supposed to question what a man says, you are supposed to bow down to him and accept whatever behaviour he displays, and that’s not acceptable!” She adds that Botswana’s society appears to ‘cushion’ the perpetrators, with rampant victim shaming of the girl or woman who have tried to lodge complaints of GBV. “It’s never about the actions of the perpetrator, it always comes down to questioning and blaming the victim for ‘encouraging’ the actions of the man. They ask what the girl was wearing, or why was she walking alone, or what did she do to provoke the man?” For Faith, it has to be about men taking responsibility for the actions that they have perpetrated. “No women or child, or baby asks to be molested or raped. Period.”

One of the causes that Faith believes is linked to this deep-seated sense of entitlement, is an unfolding ‘identity crises’ that she believes men across Botswana are experiencing. “We are struggling with knowing who we are and one then sees insecurities boiling up. Men look at another man who appears to know where they want to go and they are doing it successfully. It then makes them want to bring that person down. Society has embraced the fact that in order to be seen as a man, you need to have material things and power and when you don’t have these it leads to an identity crises, as you have issues with your sense of self-worth.” She believes that there is a morality crises in the country, with many men having lost their sense of right and wrong, adding that the epidemic of young boys growing up without a father figure to guide them and teach them about the roles and responsibilities that men have towards their families has fundamentally changed the way in which many fathers relate to their offspring. The high rate of divorce and disinterest in playing an active parenting role, has left women to fend for themselves or to find men who are willing to take on a wife with children from a previous relationship, often with disastrous consequences. Faith says that social media has also played a big role in pushing this false sense of self-worth, but more dangerously, it has upped the ante on the unequal and blaming narrative of GBV victims, with many being openly and aggressively castigated and hounded on social media if they even dare raise issues on GBV.

So when asked, how this seemingly insurmountable problem can be fixed, Faith is optimistic. “We need to re-instil the value of being a father and what that means. We need to work with young male adolescents before they have developed bad
behaviours, about things like respect, equal value, equal power and equal responsibility. When you are born you take on your father’s name, he informs your identity and is supposed to pass on the values of being a father and what it truly means to be a father.” Faith believes that government needs to step up and take on a more invested role in helping to change the behaviour of men towards women and girls. “They need to be part of bringing the solution to the table, to change the stereotypes and imbalanced power dynamics between men and women in Botswana.” If our short time spent with Faith tells us anything, is that she is going to use her platforms of advocacy, to push for reforms and changes to harmful policies and practices on GBV and other related health and rights issues that affect young people in Botswana. Through her efforts she wants to ensure that young girls are given every opportunity to access education, SRHR services in a non-threatening environment that values their contributions as girls and women to society.

Follow Faith on:
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You can also follow the organisation she works with:

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