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Finding Inner Strength in the Face of Adversity Kgopolano GROW Group Empowerment Journey: Botswana

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how numerous studies in Botswana have found high levels of poverty among women, in particular, those in female-headed households. Extreme poverty among women continues despite government programme interventions designed to end poverty. This article reports the findings of an initially donor-funded women's empowerment project in an urban village, Molepolole, Botswana. At the center of this project are 14 women who are experimenting with the GROW model to transform their lives. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions the women's views on the past, present, and future of the project were solicited. Content and thematic analysis were utilized on the data. The results confirm the potential of the GROW model in transforming the lives of women facing insurmountable hardships. The Grow model inspired women to gather inner strength and break the cycle of poverty by continuing the project beyond donor funding.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, women's empowerment is anchored on various national and international instruments. At the international level, such instruments include: The United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985); United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979); the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action (1995); Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015); In Botswana, a legal and policy environment exists to promote and advance women's empowerment.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7311-1.ch082

This includes, inter alia, the National Policy on Women and Development (1998); the National Gender Programme Framework (1998); the Advocacy and Social Mobilization Strategy for the National Gender Programme (1999). In recent times, the National Policy on Gender and Development (2015) and Vision 2036 are the most important policy instruments highlighting critical issues that affect women and require urgent attention. Examples include; women and poverty, education and training; women and health; decision-making and violence against women (Vision 2036; National Policy on Gender and Development, 2015). In addition, the Government of Botswana has, over the years, initiated legislative reforms such as the Abolition of Marital Power (2004); the Domestic Violence Act of 2008 and associated guidelines, amended Citizenship Act of 1995 and Deeds Registry Act of 1996. These initiatives sought to advance and achieve gender equality in Botswana (Quansah, 2005). Women's empowerment initiatives have placed women at the centre of development, affording them the right to make decisions and determine their own destiny. Further, these initiatives are meant to empower women and protect them from any form of oppression and discrimination.

The above notwithstanding, significant challenges remain, revolving around the official definition and application of the concept of "empowerment". Evidence on the ground with respect to the application of the concept of empowerment in the implementation of the various government projects suggests a flawed definition of empowerment. It would appear from the perspective of the government of Botswana, to empower essentially means providing hand-outs in the form of grants or food hampers. Government programmes meant to empower women have deliberately and continuously ignored the critical aspects of the verb "to empower". As a result, the government approach has attracted sustained criticism, in that it is contrary to the true definition and application of term empowerment, which means to "enable" people to be self-empowered and to depend on their own efforts rather than depending on government for sustenance.

The women studied are poor rural women from Borakalalo Ward, Molepolole – Botswana. The Kgopolano GROW Group came into existence in 2011 with support from one of the local NGO's Hope Worldwide Botswana (HwwB), and an international development organization – Project Concern International (PCI). The women deserve attention because they represent the poor who have tirelessly worked together to reach goals of transforming their lives from poverty to improved socio-economic wellbeing. Most of them are single mothers or widows with few or no formal work experience, no background in running an empowerment self-help group and limited resources to take care of their children and families. Despite their background, they took the opportunity presented to them and mobilized themselves into a self-help group known as *Kgopolano* GROW group. The group's overarching goal is self-empowerment using the GROW model. Since its inception in 2011, the Kgopolano GROW group has provided a common touch, physical energy, local knowledge, and skills in attempting to achieve its objectives of transforming the lives of women. Their hope and confidence in the ability to change their lives for the better continues to be the source of inspiration for group members.

This article shares the empowerment journey of the women through active participation in the Kgopolano GROW group implementing the GROW model. The article tells the story of how the women have worked against all odds to create their own source of wealth and livelihood. It is important to point out that this article is not a critique of the empowerment journey in terms of achievement, rather, it articulates the GROW model's ability to empower and transform lives in marginalized contexts. It reports on progress (or the lack thereof) made by the GROW group since its inception in 2011. In particular, the article focuses on progress made since the end of donor funding and technical support in March 2016.

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