Fifty-one year old Dalton Bontsi, a native of Botswana, admits he has always been drawn to working in the non-profit sector. He achieved a law degree at the University of South Africa and worked at the British Council for seven years, supporting Batswana students studying in England and Northern Ireland. In September 2008, Dalton moved from Botswana’s capital of Gaborone to the more rural Selibe-Phikwe with plans to establish a non-profit organization providing free legal advice to underprivileged communities. He found himself helping a friend who worked for Silence Kills Support Group, established in 2003 to provide services to people living with HIV, including palliative care, psychosocial support, and assistance to access and adhere to treatment. The organization also provides HIV testing and support to orphans and vulnerable children.

The organization was struggling to develop adequate systems and structures to sustain itself as an entity and expand its work. Dalton stepped in temporarily as the organization’s acting coordinator and was later given the position of Coordinator. “I am working hard to help Silence Kills Support Group become a strong organization,” Dalton says. “I want to make it easier for the person who will come after me.

BLC’s goal for its Key Populations Program in Botswana is to contribute to the reduction of HIV incidence among female sex workers (FSW) and men who have sex with men (MSM) in selected geographic areas of the country by strengthening the technical service delivery and organizational capacity of civil society organizations to establish effective, evidence-based, and coordinated responses to the HIV prevention and treatment needs of FSW and MSM.
My priority right now is to establish solid programming and standard operational plans and policies. This is a vibrant organization, and I want to ensure that it stays that way.”

Silence Kills Support Group began a partnership with the USAID-funded Building Local Capacity for Delivery of HIV Services in Southern Africa Project in January 2015 to deliver HIV prevention services to key populations at greater risk of HIV exposure. Silence Kills Support Group provides health services to female sex workers and men who have sex with men in Selibe-Phikwe, including HIV prevention interventions, HIV counseling and testing, and referrals to treatment. From January-March 2015, the organization provided HIV prevention messages to 1,199 female sex workers and men who have sex with men; of these, 80 tested for HIV and the 10 female sex workers who tested positive for HIV were referred for treatment.

When asked what makes the organization unique, Dalton states, “Silence Kills Support Group is run by people who are living with HIV—living examples of the challenges we are trying to address. We really want to make a difference…we are able to empathize and understand what it is like to live with HIV. People in Selibe-Phikwe are willing to disclose their status [to us] because they know we are also living with HIV. They know they won’t be judged.”

Silence Kills Support Group envisions “a nation that understands positive living among infected and affected people,” and seeks to motivate those infected with and affected by HIV to have hope, improving their quality of life through prevention, care, and support.

Engaging relevant stakeholders

When beginning the partnership with BLC, Dalton and his team employed a unique approach. “We realized that the best people to reach female sex workers and men who have sex with men were their peers. We sought out and hired eight female sex workers and five men who have sex with men as peer educators. We provide psychosocial support and counseling to clients and deal with difficult issues…This project is very important because we are seeing it change people’s attitudes towards others. Female sex workers and men who have sex with men are not different from anyone else. There is a greater acceptance among communities, and people are beginning to realize that they can accept others different from themselves. We still have cases of people chasing family members away, but now the community is joining the effort to provide services: they [female sex workers and men who have sex with men] are Batswana and have the right to access the same services as any other citizen.”

The findings of Botswana’s 2012 Behavioral and Biological Surveillance Survey (BBSS) on HIV and Sexually-Transmitted Infections (STI) among high-risk populations reinforced the need for specific, targeted interventions for female sex workers, and Dalton and his team used the findings from the survey to inform the organization’s programming.

Additionally, Selibe-Phikwe has the highest HIV prevalence in Botswana, at 25.1% among adults—emphasizing the need for intensified service delivery in this area.

Silence Kills Support Group has engaged the police in its interventions. In Botswana, it is illegal for anyone to benefit from income generated through sex work, and BLC’s civil society organization partners acknowledge that police are known to harass female sex workers, requiring bribes or ‘payment in kind.’ However, the station commander in Selibe-Phikwe participates in community meetings, promoting the rights of female sex workers. Dalton states that the project provides a forum for female sex workers and men who have sex with men to come together and unite as a group to stand up for their rights, providing mutual support. “This project is restoring their self-esteem. They have faced major challenges, including stigma and desperate situations which led some women to engage in sex work. Our peer educators feel valued now and enjoy the opportunity to use their experiences to help others. They have told me that they are amazed they are being employed to reach out to their peers.”
Cultivating excellence

Dalton says the organization has cultivated its reputation for providing the best services in the area by employing highly-qualified and experienced staff. Other service providers, such as the government social workers and police, regularly refer clients to Silence Kills Support Group. Secondary schools call on the organization to provide HIV prevention training to students as well as teachers providing career guidance and counseling, who address challenging situations such as youth engaging in sex work to provide funding for alcohol and substance abuse. Silence Kills Support Group understands and is willing to address difficult issues, such as students engaging in sex work to earn money.

Facilitating opportunities to make choices

Silence Kills Support Group recognized the need to address HIV among female sex workers several years ago, conducting a baseline survey in Selibe-Phikwe in 2009. The organization learned that many of the female sex workers had previously worked in textile industries in the area and began to engage in sex work primarily for income when these businesses shut down abruptly in 2006.

Silence Kills Support Group began to offer livelihood and business training: Dalton shares that some of the organization’s beneficiaries have been eager to pursue other business opportunities. “It gives them the choice to decide whether to engage in sex work or not, whereas before they didn’t have any choices.”

Silence Kills Support Group offers economic empowerment support, and now has nine support groups, with 10-36 female sex workers per group. The initial four groups have at least three members who are running their own businesses with support from the Ministry of Gender Affairs and Ministry of Youth. Other groups employ a revolving fund to generate income for members, supporting each other in fundraising events where a member sells a product she has made.

In April 2015, Silence Kills Support Group engaged the local entrepreneur’s agency (LEA) to provide a one-week training course on business planning and management to 35 female sex workers.
Increasing impact

Silence Kills Support Group recently decided to expand its services to other areas. “We realized that some female sex workers in Selibe-Phikwe are living in other areas and traveling here to provide sex work. To increase our impact, we are now expanding to provide services to surrounding areas, including Martin’s Drift, which contains a border post between Botswana and South Africa and is on a long-distance trucking route.” Silence Kills Support Group plans to establish five satellite offices, each with two peer educators. These teams will receive weekly support from the organization.

Organizational growth

Silence Kills Support Group uses a well-documented peer education model. Dalton underscores the importance of training staff to provide standard messages, consistent approaches, and guidelines for relating to beneficiaries. Through support from previous donors including Project Concern International, Research Triangle Institute, and Botswana’s National AIDS Coordinating Agency, Dalton says he now better appreciates the importance of monitoring and evaluation—presenting evidence and using data to inform programming and advocate for support. The organization’s partnership with BLC continues to facilitate organizational growth: “The approach BLC uses is commendable, and makes us feel comfortable,” Dalton shares. “We are part of the same program and working toward the same goals. We can always rely on them [the BLC team], and feel that we have definitely developed as an organization.”

“I believe this project will reduce new HIV infections,” Dalton declares. One of the organization’s activities is condom distribution, and Dalton predicts that Silence Kills Support Group will have distributed 500,000 condoms by June 2015. He says accessibility is key: the organization is making condoms available in areas where female sex workers gather. Dalton says beneficiaries already on anti-retroviral therapy are more serious about adherence. “We are providing hope to people, who now see a better future for themselves and are consequently more serious about taking care of themselves, accessing health and other services.”

Launched in 2010, the USAID-funded Building Local Capacity for Delivery of HIV Services in Southern Africa Project (BLC) strengthens government, parastatal, and civil society entities to effectively address the challenges of the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

Throughout the Southern Africa region and with specific activities in six countries, BLC provides technical assistance in organizational development, including leadership, management, and governance in three key program areas: 1) care and support for orphans and vulnerable children; 2) HIV prevention; and 3) community-based care.

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This publication is made possible by the generous support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the Leader with Associates Cooperative Agreement GPO-A-00-05-00024-00. The contents are the responsibility of the Building Local Capacity for Delivery of HIV Services in Southern Africa Project and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

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