South Africa has “globally unprecedented” levels of violence against women (Medical Research Council, 2009). Despite the country’s progressive constitution and support for women’s rights, the Rape Crisis Cape Town Trust estimates that up to 500,000 women are raped each year. Oxfam is partnering with Rape Crisis to support their peer education programme, which trains high school students as peer counsellors and educators to support rape survivors and fight sexual violence in their schools and communities.
INTRODUCTION

“Are we there yet? Are we there yet?”

The atmosphere on the way to the camp is upbeat and full of anticipation. 23 teenagers from schools in Khayelitsha, a township in Cape Town, are on their way to the annual youth camp, ready for four days of fun and learning, a well-earned reward after months of training. Oxfam is partnering with Rape Crisis to implement their peer education programme, which trains high school students to stand up to sexual violence and support survivors of rape.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

“Rape is a big problem in Khayelitsha. Sometimes it’s like people are used to it, that it’s normal. Also, many think the person being raped is to blame, that they did something wrong and got raped.”

Samkele, Peer Educator, Khayelitsha

Widely held to have the most progressive constitution in the world, South Africa nevertheless has a “globally unprecedented” level of violence against women. Rape Crisis estimates that as many as 500,000 women are raped each year.

Survivors face difficulties in accessing justice and emotional support. Many know very little about the criminal justice system, and it can be complicated and confusing to navigate. It is therefore not surprising that conviction rates for rape are low – one study found that only 1 in 25 women who had been raped reported it to the police, and only 7% of reported rapes in the Western Cape result in conviction.

In Khayelitsha and Athlone, the communities where Oxfam and Rape Crisis work, poverty, gendered power inequality, substance abuse, unemployment and high HIV rates create an environment in which violence against women is prevalent. Gang violence is rife, and a patriarchal culture contributes to myths and stereotypes that normalise rape and violence.

Young people are routinely exposed to violence in their schools and communities: 40% of rape survivors are under the age of 18, and up to 28% of young South Africans report that their first sexual experience was forced. Over 60% of men in South Africa who have forced women or girls into sex did so for the first time between the ages of 10 and 19. Interventions with youth therefore play an important role in the fight against all forms of sexual assault.
THE BIRDS AND THE BEES

“Often girls think that they should not wear a skirt, or walk alone, or do different things at school because it could get them raped. Part of the problem is that our parents and other people tell us this. They don’t know better. But I tell them that rape is not their fault, that there is never a reason for rape, it is always wrong.”

Yoliswa, Peer Educator, Khayelitsha

Established in 1976, the Rape Crisis Cape Town Trust is the oldest women’s organisation in South Africa dealing with adult rape. The organisation began as a volunteer-run feminist collective, and the empowerment of women is at the heart of all their programmes. Their holistic approach incorporates counselling, training and awareness programmes, and advocacy for legal reform. Rape Crisis works to reduce the stigma of rape, challenge myths and stereotypes and increase the support available for survivors.

Oxfam in South Africa is committed to ensuring that more women and girls can claim their rights, take control of their lives and live free from violence. Oxfam has been partnering with Rape Crisis for over a decade. Through this partnership, Oxfam has provided funding and support to specific activities, as well as capacity building and leadership training to enable Rape Crisis to develop and grow. Since 2012, Oxfam has supported their peer education project, The Birds and the Bees.

The Birds and the Bees trains high school students to raise awareness about rape in their schools and support survivors. The project began as an annual youth camp in 1999. Today, it is a 13-week programme, involving a series of interactive workshops, and culminating with a camp retreat where newly trained peer educators from different schools can come together, share their knowledge and experiences, and plan activities.

The programme reaches students as young as 13. “If you start as early as that, you can make a difference,” says Kholeka Booi, Training and Development Coordinator at Rape Crisis.

Rape Crisis opens the eyes of young women and men to the negative effects of violent behaviour and myths about rape. The programme challenges them to take action to respond to the needs of rape survivors in their schools and communities.

The camp is an integral part of the programme. The four-day event involves workshops, discussion groups, art and music, allowing the peer educators to engage deeply with the content of the course.
IMPACT

“Rape Crisis changed me a lot. I used to touch girls, you know, how boys do, like touching them or calling them names – making all those kind of things. Now I can stop, like if my friend is doing the same, the things like calling girls or touching them, I can go to him and say, ‘No man. Don’t do this. This is wrong.’”

Luzuko, Peer Educator, Khayelitsha

Peer educators have shown astonishing openness and readiness to change their ideas and behaviours. Feedback from the students has indicated positive change in attitudes and beliefs about sexual assault, and a consequent change in behaviour. Boys in the programme have reported changing violent and abusive behaviours towards girls, and challenging the boys around them to do the same. Students note that their ideas about gender roles have been challenged, which has had an impact on how they think about relationships.

Participants in the programme have also developed an understanding of rape’s impact on survivors and the opportunities for legal redress, and are enthusiastic about offering their support and sharing their knowledge with their peers.

Box 1: Nkota’s story

At school there are children who have been raped. Some of the other children laugh at them and they end up leaving school. There are a lot of gangsters in the community and they take girls away and rape them. This happened to a girl I know and she came back crying and then stayed at home for a week and we were all worried about her.

Before I was a Rape Crisis peer educator I didn’t know much about rape or what you were supposed to do if you had been raped. I also didn’t think that anyone would listen to me because I am a child and they will say that a child can’t tell an elder what to do.

In the Rape Crisis training and at the camp we learned a lot about our rights. Everyone has rights and the children in the community have the right to be protected from rape. We learned the important things that someone must do if they have been raped. With that friend we were so worried about, I called her friend and gave the friend all the information I had and told her that she can call Rape Crisis if she wants support. After a while she did come back to school.

I think that I can use all the things I know now to protect myself better. I know what my rights are and I know the steps I need to take after rape if I ever have to so that I can get medical help and so that there is evidence for the case. We as peer educators are a team and we can help to fight rape in our community because we have the knowledge. I hope that people will listen to us now that we are trained.

Nkota on camp. Photo credit: Ewart Mouton/Rape Crisis.
The course has also fostered life skills such as communication, leadership, self-confidence and respect for others. Some participants have left gangs since beginning the programme, while others have stopped using drugs and directed their energies instead into positive activities in their schools and communities. “They’re becoming change agents in those spaces,” says Nazma Hendricks, Operations Manager at Rape Crisis.

**Box 2: Nkosinathi’s story**

There were many things that changed for me in doing the Rape Crisis peer educator training. As a man, I didn’t know that if your wife or girlfriend doesn’t want sex and you force her then it is rape, even if you have had sex many times before. Anyone can say no to sex at any time. You can’t own a person and they can still choose for themselves what they want to do.

I used to believe that it is sometimes a woman’s fault that she is raped if she always wears sexy clothes. I thought that if women dress like that then they are encouraging men to look at them and the men will eventually try to rape them. This is not true for a lot of reasons. Most people that are raped are not dressed in sexy clothes; they are normal people wearing normal things. If a woman wants to be looked at, that is a very different thing from wanting to be raped; no one wants to be raped. Also, people should be free to wear what they choose and not be blamed for it.

For me, the skill I will use the most is talking to people who have been raped. I know a lot about rape now and all the practical things that people can do. But I also want to encourage people who have been raped to be strong because being raped is not the end of your life. You can put it behind you and be the best person that you can be in life.

The Khayelitsha group has already been featured twice on popular youth talk show Hectic Nine-9, where they have spoken out against rape myths live on air. Ntombentsha Thomas, a 19-year-old student, used the opportunity to challenge victim blaming and discuss the role the programme played in transforming her own attitudes towards rape.
THE FUTURE

“Now I know better... I was trained by Rape Crisis. It is my responsibility to help them see that they are wrong in many things they think. It is not true that women are to blame for rape. We must change this.”

Samkele, Peer Educator, Khayelitsa

The Birds and the Bees has shown great promise. Many of the participants have expressed interest in continuing to work with Rape Crisis, and to this end, nine former peer educators began training in August 2014 to become facilitators, so that they can share the programme with others in their community.

The programme’s training manual is in the process of being developed for publication. Once completed, it will allow the programme to be adapted and run in schools around the country.

Meanwhile, the programme is ongoing. Through the training of peer educators and facilitators, The Birds and the Bees continues to build a generation of young activists to join the fight against rape in South Africa.

Ntombentsha speaks on Hectic Nine-9 about victim blaming. Photo credit: Rape Crisis.

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ii Gender Links and the Medical Research Council, “The war @ home: Preliminary findings of the Gauteng Gender Violence Prevalence Study” (http://www.mrc.ac.za/gender/gbvthewar.pdf)

iii Rape Crisis, “Rape in South Africa” (http://rapecrisis.org.za/rape-in-south-africa/)


vi The peer educators’ stories originally appeared on Rape Crisis’s blog (http://rapecrisisblog.wordpress.com/2013/07/03/shaping-the-voices-of-tomorrow)