

Precious Life in the Mountain Kingdom

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by *Kim Haughton*

Jumbo jets don't usually land in Lesotho. On other days, they pass over the rugged snow capped peaks which form a roof over the highest country in the world enroute to Johannesburg or Durban. Last Tuesday was different however. Bono's RED circus came to town, to wake the tiny kingdom in the sky from its peaceful slumber.

To Mankopane Phafoli (28), the rocky landscape is a familiar sight. Every week day, the mother of two passes the herd boys with their cattle and the glowing faces of early risers, warming their hands on crackling fires, as she makes her way to Maseru, the smokey capital, through Lancers Gap, a jagged pass through twin sandstone peaks.

Threads of people merge into a sea of woolly hats and patterned blankets weaving their way through the angry beeps of rush hour traffic, all heading towards the Precious Garments textile factory in Maseru West. By 7am, an hour after Mankopane has left her sleeping children tucked up on a mattress in the kitchen, she is at her sewing machine on a production line. Today, like every other day, she will sew the side seams of 800 t-shirts which will be sold in retail stores across America.

This week, humanitarian rock star Bono brought his colourful campaign to Mankopane's factory. He was in Lesotho to promote GAP's involvement in his (Project) RED campaign. Half of all profits from Gap's RED t-shirt will go to the Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB and malaria. The fund, set up in 2002 has so far committed \$5 bn to more than 350 programmes in 130 countries.

The Chinese owned textile industry in Lesotho is booming. Employing 42,000 people, it has grown to become the biggest employer in a country with a population of only 2 million. Lesotho attracts the textile industry because labour is cheap, the workforce is experienced and the factories enjoy favourable tax reductions due to AGOA, the African Growth and Opportunities Act, a US programme set up in 2000 to allow duty-free access to the American market for exports from Sub-Saharan African countries.

Maseru's railway cuts through the industrial area where Mankopane works. Hauling huge containers full of clothes, trains slowly creek their way to South Africa's ports bringing with them 26 million pairs of jeans and 80 million knitted garments annually from Lesotho's 42 garment factories. 98% of these will be put on cargo ships bound for the USA where clothing giant GAP INC. buys at least 30%.

To look at her, you would never know it, but Mankopane is HIV positive. She is enthusiastic and fast on her feet. Her 68kg frame today is a very different one to the skeletal 40kg she had dropped to prior to her diagnosis.

Her decision to get tested in 2002 when her third child was sick was a brave one. Despite the epidemic prevalence of the disease, there is still an enormous stigma attached to being HIV positive in Lesotho.

Her best friend Mai Tumeleng works on the same production line. “I was shocked when she told me that she was HIV positive but it’s okay now” she says. “People have been cast out of their families or even killed for declaring their status” she says.

“She was the first person in the factory to introduce herself as being HIV positive and is a very good role model for others. There is a union in the factory and she is a member of it. The union works hard to make sure that every HIV+ person is not discriminated against or stigmatised.” says Mary-Ann Mafile, an active trade unionist and HIV/AIDS champion at Precious. “We teach the workers and run awareness programmes for them. We explain how HIV affects and infects the workers” We realise that many of them want to be tested” she says.

HIV testing is still voluntary here, despite the enormously high infection rate and the results remain confidential. In December 2005, the Government of Lesotho launched the “Know Your Status” (KYS) campaign with the aim of making every adult in Lesotho aware of their HIV status by the end of 2007. However, a combination of stigma and fear prevents many from taking a HIV test. Only 3% of young men aged 15-24 know their HIV status.

In Thabana Morena, a rural village in Mafeteng district, chronic sickness is everywhere. Motseki Machachamise (32) lies dying on a concrete floor. Too weak to move his tiny frame, his mother tries to spoon feed him with nutritional food aid provided by the World Food Programme. It is a pityful sight.

His only surviving child sits beside him. The tell-tale lesions on her head betray the awful truth- she has the virus too. When his first wife died in 2003, Motseki remarried. The only child he had with his second wife has died. He has never been tested for HIV.

Mankopane’s husband has never been tested either. He blames her for contracting the virus. “He says I’m the one who brought it to the house” she says.

She suspects that her husband contracted HIV through an extra marital affair. “Sometimes he wouldn’t sleep in the house claiming that he was doing a job and he couldn’t come home. His mistress and her baby have died. He is still in denial but is showing signs of the disease” she says.

The ripple effects of the AIDS crisis in Lesotho touch all sectors of society. Children are left without parents. Schools are short of trained teachers. Hospitals have not got enough qualified nurses. When harvest time comes, there are not enough farmers to collect the yields from the treeless land. Children are burdened way beyond their years with young girls heading households while their brothers tend the livestock. Missing out on their education, the spiral of poverty continues. Approximately 29,000 people died of HIV/AIDS in 2003, representing almost 1.5% of the population.

Despite her illness, Mankopane hardly ever misses a day at work but absenteeism is a huge problem for the management at Precious. On any given day, 500 employees may not show up. In a country with an unemployment rate of 58%, there is no doubt that people need jobs. So, why are the lucky ones that have jobs not coming to work? “They have probably died of AIDS or need to go to the hospital for ARV treatment”

says Mkopane Monoyan, group regional manager for P&T textiles and Precious Garments in Maseru. "The output, the staff and the absenteeism are affected by HIV" he says.

Lesotho, totally surrounded by South Africa, has the third highest HIV prevalence in the world. With 29% of adults infected, it comes only after Botswana and Swaziland and is the poorest of the three. According to the WHO and UNAIDS, around 330,000 adults and 27,000 children in Lesotho have HIV/AIDS. In Mankopane's age bracket, the prevalence rate is probably the worst in the world, 38% of 25-29 year old Basotho women are infected.

General poverty and migrant labour are thought to be the driving forces behind the HIV epidemic which is showing no signs of stabilizing. Having more than one sexual partner at a time is normal here for both men and women. For teenagers, it's considered cool.

At a basketball game in Maseru, 16 year old Damela is watching two girls' teams battle it out for a place in the Lesotho schools final. "Kids are only allowed to play in the basketball teams if they have completed a lifeskills programme" says Joanna Rea, a young enthusiastic United Nations Volunteer intern from Dublin. "We use themes like drugs, violence and gender to teach young people to make informed decisions so that they won't engage in risky behaviour" she says.

Damela hasn't done the lifeskills programme. He is busy "checking out the chicks". "I have a girlfriend but I would like another one" he giggles. He refers to having sex as "doing that thing between the sheets" and he has already done it with four girls, or maybe five. "When I was 10, I started playing Mantloane, the game between the sheets with my neighbour. She was 9 years" he says. "I pretend I'm the father and she is the mother, it's natural. I didn't really know what it was we were doing but I know now" he chuckles.

Girlfriends don't come cheap for local boys in Maseru with limited means. "You have to buy her a pair of sunglasses or a necklace and she will be your girlfriend" he says. "Then she will ask for a mobile phone. If you don't buy it for her, another boy will and she will not be your girlfriend anymore" he says. In Sesotho, the official language of Lesotho, there is no word for love.

Bono also added celebrity to the the launch of the first phase of the ALAFA (Appareil Lesotho Alliance to Fight AIDS) initiative, a public-private partnership set up to fight the effects of AIDS on the clothing industry. One of the aims of ALAFA will be to open up access for HIV positive factory workers to private doctors on an appointments basis. Under the current system, going to the public clinics for treatment is a headache for both workers and employers. Under Lesotho's current labour laws, workers who attend the hospitals and clinics for check-up's lose a day's pay. For the employer, a skilled worker is absent from the production line.

Irish Aid is donating €100,000 to the first phase of ALAFA. This forms part of Ireland's total HIV/AIDS budget for Lesotho of €2 million per annum. The rest of the money is channelled through the National Health and National Education programmes and other NGO's working with HIV/AIDS in the country.

For Mankopane, having access to private doctors through ALAFA for her ARV treatment and check-ups will bring peace of mind. The RD650 (€80) per month which she earns is poor, even by Lesotho's standards, and there are no overtime opportunities.

In her house, there is a green plastic vegetable rack. In it there is a melon, four onions and an empty egg tray. Besides her cooking pots, parafin and utensils, the house is bare. Her son Molefi looks very weak and coughs a lot. His breathing is heavy. He is on ARV treatment too. "We had another child who passed away in 2000 called Kopane, she says. He would be 7 or 8 now. He was very very sick"

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