



## **“International input did not overshadow local perspectives”: Revocatus Joseph Sono of Amani Girls Organization on community-driven change, strategic partnerships and shifting social norms through radio dramas.**

**Sanne Breimer**

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**Sanne Breimer:** Could you introduce yourself with your full name, and please describe the problem that you are addressing, and how you bring attention to the issue?

**Revocatus Sono:** I am Revocatus Sono, the Director of Program and Operations at Amani Girls Organization (AGO), based in Mwanza, Tanzania, with operations extending across the Tanzanian mainland, including Zanzibar. Our organization's focus lies in the domains of education, social protection, and health for adolescent girls. With nearly a decade of experience at Amani, our commitment revolves around reshaping social norms to foster the holistic development of young girls.

In collaboration with global partners such as the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) in Tanzania, and organizations like the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and TCRS, we endeavor to amalgamate research expertise with practical implementation. While we are not primarily a research-focused entity, our organization emphasizes the convergence of practitioners, researchers, and medical professionals. Our efforts are geared towards preventing child exploitation and abuse on the Tanzanian mainland, and we aim to extend these interventions into other regions, including Zanzibar.

One of our key initiatives is the LINEA project—an acronym for the Learning Initiative on Norm, Exploitation, and Abuse—stemming from comprehensive surveys and data analysis in the country. Disturbing statistics reveal that girls and young women aged 15 to 24 face a threefold

higher risk of HIV infection, early pregnancy, abuse, and exploitation. To combat these disconcerting trends, we are dedicated to reshaping the social norms surrounding exploitation, thereby fostering a safe and supportive environment conducive to their growth within familial and community settings.

A critical challenge we are addressing relates to age-disparate transactional sex (ADTS) between very young adolescent girls and adult men. This grievous issue serves as a foundational driver, perpetuating outcomes such as early, undesired pregnancies, diminished educational attainment, heightened susceptibility to HIV, AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases, alongside impeding developmental prospects within family and community frameworks.

**Sanne Breimer: Could you briefly describe what LINEA does?**

**Revocatus Sono:** The Learning Initiative on Norm, Exploitation and Abuse is dedicated to reshaping societal norms to prevent age-disparate transactional sex. This type of sexual relationship involves a non-commercial and non-marital exchange, driven by the implicit expectation of material support or other advantages. Fundamentally, our initiative seeks to challenge the entrenched norms that perpetuate transactional sex, and instead, foster positive norms that will benefit the community and enhance the well-being of young adolescent girls.

**Sanne Breimer: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work? And how did you know that it was working?**

**Revocatus Sono:** In 2014, the establishment of LINEA marked the commencement of formative research aimed at comprehending the status of sexual exploitation among young children, particularly focusing on adolescent girls within the country. Subsequently, in 2018, extensive deliberations were undertaken to formulate a theory of change and intervention strategy addressing the issue of age-disparate transactional sex (ADTS).

The resultant program comprises two primary components. Firstly, a radio drama initiative was devised to tackle age-disparate transactional sex, while the second component encompasses the development of two curricula. One curriculum, comprising 18 sessions, targets adult men, while the other, consisting of 17 sessions, is tailored for young girls. Both curricula are thoughtfully designed to address the underlying issues surrounding transactional sex within the community and to present viable alternatives in supporting girls to thrive in education and safety within the community.

Following the program's implementation, a sub-study was conducted to evaluate the efficacy of the interventions. Notably, schools participating in the intervention reported a reduction in the number of pregnancies among girls, indicating a significant positive change attributed to LINEA's efforts, particularly in the context of Tanzania.

**Sanne Breimer: You have data to see the difference, or how do you know that it worked?**

**Revocatus Sono:** Before our intervention, a school in Misungwi District, Mwanza, reported an annual average of 11 to 13 pregnancy cases. However, following our collaboration, the reported cases have decreased to 3 to 5 per year. This change suggests that the implementation of the

LINEA program, including the curricula and radio drama, has had a significant positive impact in the trial settings.

**Sanne Breimer: Can you describe something that you tried that actually did not work, but that taught you an important lesson?**

**Revocatus Sono:** Upon completion of the radio drama "Msichana wa Wakati," (The Girl at the Middle) aimed at preventing ADTS and reshaping social norms within the community, we explored two delivery modalities. The first involved distributing radio episodes on USB sticks to be listened to within families using radio devices. The second entailed partnering with local community-based radio stations to broadcast the drama on a weekly basis, encouraging community-wide participation.

The distribution of radio episodes on USB sticks posed certain challenges. While each family with access to a radio device received a USB stick with the episodes, some families listened to the entire drama within a week, making it difficult to conduct reflection sessions and discussions due to lapses in memory. Furthermore, issues arose with the safekeeping of the USB sticks, as some were lost and radio devices encountered technical problems or were lost, broken, or stolen. These challenges highlighted the impracticality of scaling this delivery modality to reach a larger audience.

In contrast, using community radio for broadcasting the drama proved to be more effective. By communicating the broadcast schedule to families, the community, and key influencers, we were able to ensure a higher level of engagement. Positive feedback was consistently received when utilizing community radio, making it a more viable option compared to the use of USB sticks. These findings were observed during the testing phase in Kishapu, in the Shinyanga region.

**Sanne Breimer: Apart from funding, what are the other main challenges that you have faced, or that you are currently facing? And how did you solve them?**

**Revocatus Sono:** The intervention faced challenges regarding its acceptability within the community due to the varied perceptions of LGBTQI initiatives. The community and Government exhibited divided opinions, with certain segments expressing skepticism while others showed receptiveness. Addressing social norms brought forth complexities when terminologies related to LGBTQI issues were utilized, leading to misconceptions within the community. It became imperative to navigate these challenges to secure community and Government support.

The Government's buy-in for the intervention also emerged as a significant challenge, particularly within the framework of the National Plan of Action to End Violence Against Women and Children (NPA-VAWC - I). Despite the NPA-VAWC-II's focus on addressing social norms, our unique approach encountered resistance, as the Government possessed its designated solutions outlined in the plan. Establishing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Tanzanian Government became crucial, with the draft MOU involving four ministerial levels to facilitate collaboration (Ministry of Community Development Gender Women and Special Groups, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education Science and Technology, and the Prime Minister's Office, Local Government Authority).

The current focus involves aligning the work with the NPA-VAWC-II at a national level and preparing for scaling based on the Randomized Control Trial (RCT) results. Engaging in the RCT alongside the LINEA implementation will provide insights into its efficacy, contributing to the strategy's potential expansion. The draft MOU is under review, with the aim to finalize the execution by mid or end of August, signaling our commitment to overcoming the challenges of government collaboration.

**Sanne Breimer: What strategies are most effective at shifting society's view of the problem?**

**Revocatus Sono:** Well, there are many because when you are working to transform gender norms, it is not an overnight activity, it requires some time. Researchers and evidence show that at least 3 to 5 years an intervention can be effective in addressing social norms and shifting some of the behavior in the community. But looking into our community, we have been working and using strategies like the SASA! approach, Good School Toolkit developed by Raising Voices in Kampala. Community members are exposed to several activities embedded in their daily lives and get repeated messages, an approach that is quite effective.

Looking at the LINEA, we are using a similar approach. If you look at the radio drama and the curricula, they communicate the same things, and can be run parallel in the community, or one after another. The reason is to try as much as possible to expose the community members to constant repeated messages on shifting social norms. We found that is an effective approach to use. And the other is using educational entertainment to address shifting social norms, and shifting behavior, and then they are more likely to respond, and they have high chances of good results.

**Sanne Breimer: What role do partnerships or coalitions play in pushing your work forward? And how do you cultivate and maintain the partnerships in the work?**

**Revocatus Sono:** Some of the partners we have collaborated and worked with in our agenda programming are divided into two arms. We have the financial supporters, who are also partners to our work, and we have the technical panel that we work with. Those who are providing resources like Oak Foundation, UNFPA, Global Innovation Fund (GIF), and the Tides Foundation under the Advancing Girls Rights Fund Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, are really important to our work in advancing what we do in the gender transformation aspect and preventing child exploitation and abuse in the community we work in because to put our theory of change into action, we really need those resources.

We have technical partners like the London School, the National Institute for Medical Research, IIDC, the Government, and local organizations we work with in the grassroots community like the Media for Development International (MFDI), Kiota Women's Health and Development (KIWOHEDE), and TCRS, Smash Adolescent Girls Community of Practice and many other Local CSOs.

They are also important to maximizing our reach and impact and taking our work at scale. Because when we are thinking of scaling our work, it is key to think of metrics that are good ingredients for maximizing our reach and impact.

To manage the partnerships, in most cases, we develop partnership principles with all the partners we work with. We develop those partnership principles to guide our collaboration. And for the donors, the people who are providing resources, we have contracts with partnership principles about building and cultivating mutual relationships and working collaborations. Those are some of the means that ensure the partnerships flourish and sustain in the long term.

**Sanne Breimer: What insights or teachable lessons can be taken from your work that others wanting to do similar work could learn from?**

**Revocatus Sono:** The development and implementation of the LINEA intervention are underpinned by evidence-based practices. Our approach involves ongoing studies and iterative development, emphasizing community engagement across various settings and technical collaboration with key partners. The intervention has undergone feasibility testing through two sub-studies to assess its effectiveness.

Notably, LINEA was co-designed by local partners, ensuring that it reflects the nuances of our context and is feasible within our community. International input did not overshadow local perspectives which were invaluable for shaping the intervention. This approach is crucial, as it allows us to address the evolving social norms and combat child abuse and exploitation effectively within our local context.

The intervention's potential is evident, and we eagerly await the results of the upcoming randomized controlled trial (RCT) to further inform its scalability. In line with our experience, I recommend that any effective intervention should encompass four key elements: being evidence-based, iteratively developed, feasibility tested, and co-designed with local partners or within a local context.

Furthermore, advocating for community-driven change and the localization of interventions is pivotal. By placing local stakeholders at the forefront of intervention design and implementation, we anticipate more impactful outcomes within our community.

**Sanne Breimer: What do you think has the potential to make a significant impact on the fields in the next five years?**

**Revocatus Sono:** The development of a network of interconnected initiatives within the community, involving a variety of partners, organizations, stakeholders, media platforms, radio, and notably, donors and governmental bodies, constitutes crucial groundwork for the expansion of our LINEA interventions. The establishment of partnerships and collaborative efforts with diverse stakeholders is pivotal in ensuring the success of our endeavors and in maximizing the impact of our work within the community.

**Sanne Breimer: What would it take, you think, to get businesses, communities, institutions to care about or feel responsible for the issue you work on?**

**Revocatus Sono:** When considering various stakeholder groups such as investors, community members, government bodies, financial institutions, and corporations, it is evident that they are all driven by the pursuit of specific benefits. Therefore, the establishment of partnerships becomes a pivotal factor. Clearly articulating the benefits that each party stands to gain from a

collaborative initiative and fostering synergies represents a quantifiable measure of transformation.

By enlisting the participation of corporations, financial institutions, community members, local organizations, faith-based groups, development partners, and governmental entities, all of which anticipate deriving benefits, it is possible to identify common advantages that will be mutually beneficial to each stakeholder. This, in turn, lays the foundation for the development of robust and proactive partnerships capable of driving the desired changes within the community.

**Sanne Breimer: How do you phrase the benefits, for example, for the government?**

**Revocatus Sono:** The current policies of the government address school re-entry, but fail to allocate sufficient resources to re-enroll dropout girls and provide them with necessary support. Channeling funds into preventive measures, such as intervening with programs like LINEA, would not only save money for the government but also proactively address these issues.

Furthermore, national data indicates a high prevalence of HIV among youth aged 15 to 24. This trend could be mitigated through increased investments in implementing interventions like LINEA and other community-based solutions, rather than solely budgeting for post-incidence recovery.

By investing in children's development, ensuring their sustained presence in school, facilitating their growth, and fostering supportive communities and families, the government could reduce expenditures on criminal justice and social welfare programs. These actions would yield numerous benefits for the government.

**Sanne Breimer: And could you say similar reasons for businesses or financial institutions that support you? How would you phrase it for them?**

**Revocatus Sono:** The failure to invest in solutions such as LINEA may result in a decline in the customer base for corporates, financial institutions, and other businesses. Economic struggles among community members can lead to a decrease in savings, reduced banking activity, and limited participation in entrepreneurial endeavors, ultimately impacting the workforce. Sustained exploitation and abuse within the community can further diminish the workforce, an essential resource for corporations and financial institutions. Moreover, the required skills and knowledge for these entities may become scarce due to disrupted education stemming from exploitation and abuse. It is imperative to clearly communicate to corporate and financial institutions, as well as other businesses, that investing in solutions like LINEA is necessary to mitigate these potential consequences.

**Sanne Breimer: And the strategy for you to do that? What is the main strategy? Is it like you're doing now, explaining the issue to them? Or do you have other strategies to convince them?**

**Revocatus Sono:** In addition to emphasizing the advantages, it is imperative to present substantial evidence and impart knowledge to ensure that stakeholders are well-informed about the potential risks affecting their business and objectives. Sensitizing them about the significance of adopting such solutions will form the cornerstone of our approach to garner their support.

**Sanne Breimer: Regarding your approach, who or what did you take inspiration from?**

**Revocatus Sono:** There are several organizations with initiatives similar to ours. One such initiative in Rwanda focuses on social norm transformation. Additionally, Raising Voices in Kampala, and Beyond Borders in Haiti, have also been working on gender transformative solutions. I have also come across an organization in South Africa, although the name currently escapes me. Learning from these inspirational organizations has greatly benefited our own efforts in this area.

**Sanne Breimer: Is there anything we didn't cover that you feel is important to add to this conversation?**

**Revocatus Sono:** It's crucial to prioritize the fortification of the team responsible for implementing a scalable solution while considering both horizontal and vertical intervention scaling. A team aiming to expand a project or program must enhance their capabilities to undertake such work. We are currently in the initial phase of enlisting the expertise of an external consultant, Spring Impact, to assist us in amplifying the program's scope. Their support will be instrumental in collaborating with government entities and devising a comprehensive communication strategy aimed at engaging with diverse stakeholders, groups, and institutions to garner their support.

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*\* This conversation has been edited and condensed.*