

Youths and HIV/AIDS

Opening remarks by Bene E. Madunagu, Coordinator, Girls' Power Initiative, GPI, Calabar Centre, at the Girls/Boys' Forum, organised by GPI on November 15, 2002

The girls/boys forum is one of the activities for public enlightenment and sensitisation about the growing-up needs of adolescents in the society.

This year's theme is on HIV/AIDS; not only because we are approaching the period of the World AIDS Day - December 1st, but because of the devastating toll AIDS has on young people.

Out of the 36.1 million adults and children living with HIV/AIDS at the end of 2000, 25.3 million of these came from sub-Saharan Africa alone. It is important, therefore, that everyone, especially the youths, is adequately informed about the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

It is important to note that a person does not develop AIDS as soon as he or she becomes infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) which causes AIDS. Hence, it is wrong to assume that because someone appears healthy, he or she is not a carrier of HIV.

There is also a long incubation period of about 3-10 years before symptoms or signs appear. Some people may even survive longer than 10 years with an HIV infection. Others may develop AIDS and die in two to three years after being infected with HIV. The average time from infection with HIV to the development of the disease AIDS, is about seven to eight years. In other words, an average healthy individual

may not develop AIDS until seven to eight years after having been infected with HIV. For most of these period, such a person may not even have any symptoms to suggest his or her status and so may not have a clue that he or she is infected.

This is why the spread of HIV is increasing at a fast rate, especially, among young people of 15-24 years since they often have multiple partners. Hence, they transmit the infection widely without realising it.

HIV is a virus that weakens the body's defence (immune) system until it can no longer fight off illnesses. HIV infects and kills the cells (CD4 or t-cells) in the body. These are cells that direct the immune system of one's body to defend it against infection. When the CD4 count is less than 200 (an average CD4 cell count in a healthy immune system is 1.150), the person is considered to have AIDS.

The virus is transmitted through semen, pre-ejaculate fluid, blood, vaginal secretions and breast milk. It is overwhelmingly a sexually transmitted disease, but can also be transmitted by sharing any body-piercing instruments such as razor blades, needles, including those used for injecting drugs.

To avoid HIV infection, one can take any or all of the following steps:

- * Abstain from sex
- * If you must, then have sex using a male or female condom
- * Have sex only with an HIV

negative partner (but one must be 100% certain, and the only way to confirm one's HIV - status is to get tested)

* Stay away from used or dirty needles.

If one is even slightly unsure about the risk of infection, one must use a latex barrier. There is no cure or vaccine for either HIV or AIDS. But there are drug treatments that can help people with HIV stay healthy longer and delay the onset of AIDS. These are called anti-retrovirals (ARVs) and are widely available only in developed countries.

It has been reported that Nigeria has one of the worst HIV/AIDS epidemics in the world, fourth only to India, Ethiopia and South Africa.

Youths, female and male have a right to accurate information about HIV/AIDS. They need to understand what it is, how one can get infected. How it is transmitted, how unprotected risky sexual behaviour can be harmful and how drug or substance use can put them at the risk of HIV/AIDS.

Young people have the right to know how gender discrimination, culturally-based ignorance and belief systems and male/female power relationships pose serious challenges to the prevention of HIV/AIDS transmission. Education and information for individuals'

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behavioural change without a change of gender prejudices against girls and women will again not solve the problems. Young people need to learn to be gender-sensitive and to show mutual respect to each other. Girls need to be educated with negotiation and refusal skills and about their rights as human beings to be empowered to protect their bodily integrity and protect themselves from HIV infection.

Examples abound, in all communities, rural and urban, illustrating the amazing potentials and capabilities that girls and women have. Women are found in all professions. These facts should assist society to overcome the mundane, old fashioned, false consciousness that determine the social expectations of female inferiority to male. With restaurants and hotels everywhere, men are almost out-numbering women in the

kitchen, since cooking has now become a profession that attracts wages.

Our government, like others in the United Nations made commitments through the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW) and by also signing up to the Programme of Action (POA) of ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo 1994); the Platform for Action (PFA), Beijing 1995); as well as the outcome documents of their +5s, to protect young people and offer them comprehensive sexuality education to reduce their vulnerability.

The Nigerian government has, to some extent, lived up to expectation by the enactment of the adolescent health policy and the

launching of the Sexuality Education Curriculum for Schools in Nigeria. GPI, with other actors, is taking on the challenge to join hands in partnership with government to train school teachers to be able to offer information and education on comprehensive sexuality education to youths in schools. It is our commitment also to work in partnership with the state government to provide youth friendly health services to enable youths to have access to modern health services, including counselling to reduce the risk of HIV/AIDS pandemic.

It must also be understood that the double standard social expectations of virginity for girls only, does not protect them and their partners, (boys and men) from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS. Indeed, with so

much of sexual/gender-based violence such as rape, virginity has stopped being the answer. "Virginity for girls only" norm, increases the risk for STIs and HIV/AIDS for girls in the sense that while observing virginity in the situation of ignorance and gender biases, they fail to adopt prevention and protective behaviour against social male pressure. Increasing poverty also puts young girls at risk in the attempt to assist in

PHOTONEWS



● Mrs. Grace Osakue, GPI Coordinator, Benin Centre (1st right) and guests during the recent media workshop held in Benin City, Edo State.

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generating income for family sustenance. Virginitly is closely associated with passivity and ignorance about one's sexuality and therefore puts girls at risk if they are not informed. Yet virginitly, if honestly applied to boys and girls with accurate information, and in the absence of sexual violence, could be a great virtue and a means of reducing HIV AIDS infection. Thus, both social and sexual inequalities in interpersonal relationships between male and female pose barriers to the challenges of HIV/AIDS prevention.

The social hypocrisy of condoning the acts of sugar daddy and multiple sexual partners for men starts with young boys exchanging girls as sexual partners in the false belief of being manly. This practice continues to worsen the spread of

HIV/AIDS. This forum and the theme for it has, therefore, been organised to assist young people, boys and girls to share and empower themselves to rise above social barriers towards reducing sexual risks and behaviours that facilitate the risk and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.

It also aimed at inculcating social responsibility behaviours among youths to encourage a healthier tomorrow. It is also aimed at sensitising adults to their social responsibility of demonstrating good interpersonal relationships for mutual respect to the young ones that they bring up.

If the HIV/AIDS pandemic is to be prevented from spreading, everyone (young and old, male and female) needs to take responsibility and, therefore needs accurate information on it. ♀