



## WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT . . . .

### HIV/AIDS IN KENYA, NIGERIA AND ZAMBIA

As part of World Aids Day 2001, Voices of Youth held an Internet dialogue with 20 young people from Kenya, Nigeria and Zambia. Some of the young people were peer educators working on HIV/AIDS issues in their communities. The purpose of the live chat was to look at attitudes around HIV/AIDS and why, when among the young people who have information on how HIV is spread, are some of them still getting infected. Much of what was said speaks directly to this especially under the below mentioned *Young women and life skills* and *Community support* sections. In the section on *Prevention* young people gave their opinions on what they felt was working to help stem the spread of HIV. They were also very curious about the situation of HIV in the United States. Finally, VOY sought young people's ideas for a more focused series of chats in the future. The following is a summary of the points that were made in the 4 December dialogue. Participating from UNICEF were VOY staff and Kirstine Nojgaard, Assistant Programme Officer in the Adolescent Development and Participation Unit.

#### Prevention

With respect to methods of prevention that are having some effect on the spread of HIV infection, abstinence and condom use were discussed. Young people were asked how effective the message of abstinence is in their communities. Their responses to this method of prevention were quite favourable especially for young people 18 and under. They suggested, however, that for abstinence to have maximum effect, young people must hear that message as children and "grow up with it". It is less effective to introduce the abstinence message into the middle of a young person's life and expect a massive impact on HIV infection rates. They also linked prevention to life skills and the need to target young women who are often not the decision-makers when it comes to sex. One participant from Nigeria said "young people should abstain from having sex as they are called young people. Young people if not married should abstain."

With respect to condoms there was some disagreement. While some participants suggested that using them correctly prevents the spread of HIV/AIDS, others suggested that they are not 100 per cent reliable and still others suggested that the HIV virus is capable of penetrating porous condoms. One participant voiced doubt saying, "I don't believe condoms are 100 per cent reliable because they have larger microns than the HIV virus." Another concurred, "yes, we heard that the Virus is 50 per cent smaller than the spermatozoon." Others made reference to two kinds of condoms one to prevent pregnancy and another to prevent the spread of HIV. Participating UNICEF staff were able to clear up some of the misperceptions with respect to condom use saying that they are effective if used as directed.

Other issues such as remaining faithful to one partner and masturbation also were brought up by young people. Attitudes around the issue of masturbation as an option to abstinence and risky sexual activity were discussed. Some young people felt it was a viable alternative and a safer and healthier behaviour while others suggested that it eventually leads to an increased desire for sexual activity. Above all young people were interested in knowing how masturbation was perceived in each other's countries.

Finally one young person suggested that preventing HIV infection through unwanted or risky sexual behaviour could be helped if young people had “more important things to do, such as college or a job. You know something to occupy their time.”

### **Young women and life skills**

Picking up on the idea of life skills and targeting young women, the participants discussed gender differences. Young people were asked how young women who protect themselves by carrying condoms are perceived. The response was negative. Some participants suggested that young women would be perceived as “sluts, truants, loose and promiscuous.” Many believed that young women should abstain from sexual activity rather than carrying condoms around. Another participant said that their programmes have an emphasis on young men as young women “are not really sexual decision makers especially in slum communities.” When asked how things would change if young women had more economic independence, participants suggested that this would give young women more confidence and their sexual decisions would not be “under duress.”

In general when asked if young people had the knowledge skills and confidence to be able to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS, young people said, “we need more than information, there needs to be skills in discipline, assertiveness, negotiation, poverty reduction, self reliance and values for young people to be able to practice safe sexual behaviour with confidence despite pressure.”

### **Community support**

When asked if young people are able to talk about HIV/AIDS with their friends and family, many young people said that discussions with family members are not very likely and that even among friends, this is still carried out in a secretive way. However, the most important thing here is not whether discussions were with a friend or a family member but that young people could only confide in those who are sensitized to issues of HIV/AIDS and preferably a peer. They all expressed much support for peer to peer programmes and lamented the lack of support for youth led programmes. They were glad to have the Voices of Youth Internet dialogue but said that their youth led programmes need to be better supported. Nigeria also reported the existence of parent/elder education and peer education to help bridge the gap that exists between youth and adults.

With respect to ways in which young people mobilize their peers, direct community based rallies, dramas, symposia, learning forums and other methods were cited. Also, Nigeria reported that since the UNGASS on HIV they have established the youth against AIDS network. Zambia mentioned the Say Yes for Children campaign and workshops on HIV/AIDS.

When asked how young people living with HIV/AIDS are perceived and treated in their communities, young people said that people either laugh at or shun them or, don't interact with them. People with HIV/AIDS are isolated, stigmatized, feared and terrorized. In Kenya, being HIV positive is a secret that most people don't even tell their best friends. In Zambia, young people living with HIV are discriminated against by name calling, and prejudice, “they are finished products in the community.” Despite this, Nigeria reported that there are programmes that promote interaction between infected and non infected youth.

With respect to medical and psychological support for young people living with HIV/AIDS, responses varied from a fair amount of support in Zambia to Kenya where access is limited and expensive. A Nigerian participant said that often the nurse in the health clinic knows your mother or friend so you “wouldn't dare to go.” Following on from that, HIV testing is still difficult to access for young people. Some positive developments like a youth friendly center and NGO networks were reported but young people say that the cost of testing is not affordable and information around the issue of testing is not available or not clear.

## Questions about the HIV in the US

Participants wanted to know what the situation was like in New York and enquired about some of the programmes that are in place in the United States. They were especially interested in the reasons for higher rates of infection in the African-American community.

A discussion on pornography also took place. Young people wanted to know why there is a lot of pornography in the US and in western media and how countries deal with this. They cited women posing nude in magazines and in movies. Some young people suggested that a ban on pornography would help to change attitudes that promote “bad” sexual decision making. Others suggested that a total ban would be expensive to enforce and that community based information and empowerment could be more effective.

Young people also brought up the question of anti-AIDS drugs and their costs stating that if the West allowed for cheaper drugs it would make life more bearable for those living with the virus. Young people in Nigeria reported that the federal government of Nigeria has ordered the importation of anti-retroviral drugs worth millions of dollars to be provided through organized networks however these networks will need more help from donors to do their job properly.

## Other issues

- Young people were asked if alcohol and drugs are problems in their countries and if they included these issues in their HIV prevention messages. Participants said they did include alcohol and drugs awareness messages in their prevention campaigns because drugs involved needle sharing and both drugs and alcohol cloud judgement that could lead to an unwanted or unprotected sexual encounter.
- Both Kenya and Nigeria say that awareness levels for in-school youth is at 90 per cent yet many myths still surround HIV/AIDS like curing yourself by having sex with a virgin, that AIDS is a punishment from God and that HIV can seep through a condom even if used as directed.
- Young people suggested that local media continues to be an effective communication channel for HIV prevention messages. But said that they only have contact with the media when they themselves seek it out.
- Kenya reports that last week a law was passed that allows doctors to inform married spouses of HIV infected people.
- Young people said that more has to be done in rural areas to get the word out.

## Ideas put forth for future chats

- harnessing support for youth led organisations/initiatives
- how to move from participating in “too many” conferences and gatherings to concrete action and support on the ground for youth led initiatives
- focus on dispelling the myths surrounding HIV
- how to target younger youth and children with HIV prevention messages and information
- explore more post test support for youth and the idea of youth as caregivers
- institutional support for youth led organizations in order to increase their capacity to combat HIV/AIDS
- more focused discussion on youth led programmes and concrete examples from their communities

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### **Voices of Youth**

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