

Cultural Beliefs standing in the way of Communication for HIV/Aids in Africa

By David Omwoyo for WACC

Cultural beliefs among African communities stand in the way of effective communication and sharing information on HIV/Aids and sex education. The lack of such information leads to increased cases of stigma and discrimination

During a one Week training workshop for youth in schools and colleges to become peer counsellors and communicators in Nakuru diocese, the challenge came out as some teachers found it hard talking to their students about sex education since their culture does not allow parents and children to share information on sexual matters and in fact messages on HIV/Aids.

This has consequently led to a situation where 20 years since HIV/Aids was first discovered, some communities in Kenya still do not know the basic facts about the scourge.

In most Kenyan and African communities, parents cannot share much with their children about their sexuality; the same parent to child gap is replayed in schools where the teachers are treated with much reverence like parents. This was the reason why the Catholic diocese of Nakuru and WACC employed the peer to peer approach and interactive theatre in the HIV/Aids peer communication, stigma and discrimination project.

The diocesan travelling theatre group, group counselling sessions and school festivals and video shows proved more effective than the traditional teacher - student approach.

The programme focussed on training of youth leaders, students and teachers on HIV/Aids Prevention, Communication tools in appropriate languages and for specific audiences against HIV especially the use of theatre to pass across different messages and the effects of stigmatization on the community.

It was quite hard to convince some teachers and students that they should freely discuss matters of their sexuality. In one occasion during the students training one teacher flatly refused "to talk about those issues because my daughter is in that group".

The overall aim of the project was to reduce the level of discrimination and stigmatization of people living with HIV in the schools and community by employing gender sensitive communication strategies and involving the PLWHA in the programme activities.

The messages were passed across by employing youth and user friendly media and training for students and teachers in the target community.

The activities were aimed at reducing the incidences of stigmatization of PLWHA and gender discrimination in the fight against HIV.

Emphasis was put on the feminisation of the scourge especially in the schools and institutions of higher learning hence increasing the community's response to Aids. Great success was achieved as after the training, a group of women have publicly declared their status and formed an association for morale boosting and sharing of experiences.

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