

## Linking HIV and reproductive health: messaging on sensitive issues for young women's campaigns

### A discussion in the Women's Networking Zone during the XVIII International AIDS Conference organized by IPPF-WHR and Ipas, July 2010

These notes summarize a discussion that took place during the XVIII International Conference on AIDS on 22 July 2010. The participants (about 10 in total) came from diverse regions and organizations.

#### Background to the discussion

Since the last international AIDS conference in 2008, support has grown worldwide for efforts to link HIV/AIDS programs and services with different aspects of sexual and reproductive health. Young people, particularly young women, are beginning to take a leading advocacy role in such efforts and this session explored what kinds of messages and strategies could be used to address two sensitive issues in the reproductive health field: comprehensive sexuality education and abortion for unwanted pregnancies.

The session was organized by IPPF-WHR and Ipas and had six facilitators, four of whom were young women:

- Emily Hagerman (IPPF-WHR), moderator
- Jovana Rios (APLAFA – Asociación Panameña para el Planeamiento de la Familia, Panama), moderator
- Karima Sauma (ADC – Asociación Demográfica Costarricense, Costa Rica), note-taker
- LaToya Cadogan-Williams (BFPA – Barbados Family Planning Association), discussion leader regarding comprehensive sexuality education
- Luize Ratniece (Y-SAFE – Latvia) – from “I  being a girl”, discussion leader on girls' leadership
- Maria de Bruyn (Ipas), discussion leader on abortion care.



#### Comprehensive sexuality education

LaToya kicked off the discussion by giving the participants some ideas on kinds of messages that might be used:

- T-shirt with message: When did you talk about intercourse with your child? (back) - Support sexuality education! (front)
- Poster with message: Not only girls but some adult women don't recognize the early signs of pregnancy. Comprehensive sexuality education is a must!
- Radio spot: voice of young woman: my friends told me that you can't get pregnant if you have sex standing up. I'm now expecting a baby and I'm only 13 years old.

A number of participants remarked that it is important to make comprehensive sexuality education more comfortable as a topic – both for young people and, for example, teachers who are required to provide this in schools.



There is also a need to create more safe spaces where young people feel they can participate without problems. The youth pre-conference for this meeting was a great example of a place where a variety of issues could be raised without fears of repercussions.

Some participants commented on the need to make condom use more “cool”. For example, could someone devise a campaign that has condoms that can be color- (and otherwise) coordinated with jewelry that young women and men might like to wear? Condoms could be promoted as a fashion accessory.

A noteworthy point raised was that in some places young people may now have good information but they still don’t have access to services; for example, the requirement to be

accompanied to services by an adult should be abolished. Sometimes, they have difficulties with services when they are able to access them because the providers use technical language that is not understandable to them.

## I ♥ being a girl

Luize explained that this program helps young people speak out about what happens to girls and what their needs are. It also breaks down barriers – there are boys who wear T-shirts with this slogan and it leads to interesting discussions about gender. The program has shown that it helps empower young women and they are able to more easily access information that is important to them.

## Abortion

Maria initiated the discussion about abortion by providing some examples of messages and strategies to address this topic:

- Wearing a T-shirt with the message: I had an abortion and recording people’s reactions. This was done by a young woman in Brazil; she did not start conversations about it but responded when people reacted to her T-shirt, giving information on unsafe abortion and the need to reform the abortion law. When young people in Namibia were asked if they would be willing to do something similar, the girls felt it would be too difficult but the young guys said they would do it to create situations in which conversations on the topic could take place.
- T-shirt with message: Unwanted pregnancy - is adoption the answer? (back) Why are our orphanages full? Support access to legal abortion (front)
- Radio message: voice of young man: My sister was raped and not offered emergency contraception. She became pregnant and was lucky to have a safe but illegal abortion. Our family would have been so angry if she had been reported to police and put in prison. Would you want your sister - or mother - to go to prison for ending an unwanted pregnancy?

A couple participants offered examples of strategies they know are being used in different countries. In some places (e.g., Ecuador), there are hotlines that young woman can call to find out where safe services are offered or what the correct dosage of misoprostol would be. [Misoprostol is a drug sold for gastric problems that can also induce -abortion; it is available over-the-counter, with a prescription and on the black market in various countries.] Another way to advertise such services is to stamp the hotline's name and number onto money.

One participant mentioned the use of jingles as being very effective; if catchy and appealing music is used, the jingle and its words (e.g., a 1-800 number) will be easily remembered.

The idea of involving young men in programs was thought to be a good idea. Maria gave the example of the group Decidir (“to decide”) in Mexico, a group of young men and women who provide information on sexuality, condom use and abortion via an Internet site that is appealing to youth. [A member of Decidir was among the participants but she did not contribute due to a lack of English fluency; she said afterwards, however, that she was very pleased with the reference to their work!]

### **Inter-generational work!**

The young women also broached the idea of promoting more inter-generational work, stating that it is not necessary for youth only to work with other youth. It is important for young people to have a variety of mentors and to be able to exchange views and information.

One participant mentioned a discussion she had with her grandmother about condoms, something the older woman knew little about. It brought them closer and was a great example of how a younger person can educate an older person.



This led to a question posed to Maria: did she and other women of her generation receive any good education when they were children? Maria said she was lucky and unlucky – her mother provided her with very factual information on how pregnancy was caused when she was quite young (about 10-11 years); unfortunately, when she shared this information with her peers, they informed her categorically that her mother had to have been lying as that simply was not possible!

She said that she thought it was great that young people are now taking greater leadership roles than her youth; young women in those days **were** leaders on certain issues, but not on reproductive health. For example, the Girl Scouts were good at talking about environmental issues. A representative of WAGGS (World Association of Girl Guides) said that nowadays such groups fortunately do address sexual and reproductive health issues – the organization has come a long way!

Luize said that young women need to hear more about the past to motivate their advocacy now. In Europe, for example, there is a certain amount of complacency among young women, who feel that we have already achieved a lot. However, she said that if young people take achievements for granted, they will not anticipate possible regression initiated by conservative groups in society who are urging governments to take away things like access to safe abortion and to comprehensive sexuality education.

Another example of an area where younger and older women can usefully have dialogues is that of violence against women. Older women may be willing to talk about it but they often are restricted in what they actually see as being violence (e.g., not counting psychological or emotional abuse as violence). Younger women may be more aware of the different types of violence but find it very difficult to speak openly about it. By joining forces, the two groups can together promote more opportunities for addressing the issue in a comprehensive way.

The session ended with a call for everyone to do more to improve inter-generational dialogues!