

Peer educators in Mali spread the word about HIV/AIDS



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A group of HIV/AIDS peer educators on the playground of the Moussabougou School outside of Bamako, Mali.

By F.Thiam Diallo

BAMAKO, Mali, 13 March 2007 – Soraya clearly remembers the misconceptions about HIV and AIDS that her uncle passed on to her. She says he told her that the disease was “just a project to get money from developed countries,” that it “does not concern us” and that “white people invented it.”

Soraya, 15, is a peer educator in Moussabougou, a village outside of Bamako, Mali. She talks openly about HIV/AIDS to her classmates, friends and family members. “I had to really take my time and explain to him that anyone can be affected by HIV/AIDS – the rich, the poor and even the religious,” she recalls of her conversations with her uncle.

Persuading her friends is also difficult. “It is not always easy to convince my friends about the use of condoms or abstinence, because they often make fun of me,” says Soraya. “I keep talking about it and now most of them believe me because of all they hear on TV and radio. I don’t have a boyfriend yet, but if I do get one, I will not have sex without protection.”

Open and frank discussions

Soraya is the only girl in her family who goes to school; her two other sisters were married before the age of 18 and had to drop out. She enjoys her studies and wants to become a doctor when she graduates.

Her school is part of an HIV/AIDS awareness project organized in collaboration with ASDAP, a local non-governmental organization that supports community-based activities. Thirty-seven teachers from six schools, including Soraya’s, received nine days of training, followed by a three month-long sensitization programme during which they also trained 70 teenage students as peer educators.

The project has proven successful because most of the children in the school now know the basics about HIV/AIDS and are comfortable talking about subjects such as sexuality and condom use. Their open and frank discussions are even more impressive given the conservative religious and cultural setting of Soraya's village.

School project to be replicated

Mali is among the poorest countries in the world, and more than half of its population is under 18 years of age. The country currently has an HIV/AIDS rate of under 2%, but with the low rate of condom use among young people just 30 per cent for males and 14 per cent for females the spread of HIV is likely.

This HIV/AIDS awareness project at Soraya's school will be replicated in other schools across Mali to make sure children grow up knowing the basics of prevention and to help them avoid AIDS and other infectious diseases.

With the support of UNICEF and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, more than 400 teachers and 600 peer educators in Mali will be trained by the end of 2009.

Taken from UNICEF Information by country website,
<http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/index.html>