

HEADLINERS

Are young people the solution to the Africa HIV/AIDS epidemic?

Two Children's Express reporters went to Kenya to discover how young people in Africa are using peer-education to help save lives.

Millions of children all over the world are affected by HIV/AIDS and as World AIDS day approaches young journalists Ella Parry-Davies, 17 and Ghizlan Akerbousse, 13, from the news agency Children's Express, report from Kenya on how young people there have taken matters into their own hands in the fight against the disease.

Nina and her five-year-old daughter, Diana, live in the slums of Nairobi and both are HIV positive. But it was not during childbirth that Diana became infected. It was when she was raped two years ago.

"She was three years old when she was raped," says Nina, aged 25. "I took her to the hospital and they examined her, and after six months she became HIV positive. She was raped by a neighbour who was 20. He was arrested and is still in prison. I blame him and I hate him. This is a small girl. He knew what he was doing, he knew he was HIV positive. So I blame him because he destroyed life for Diana."



There is a dangerous rumour in Kenya that if an HIV positive man has sex with a virgin it will cure him. As a result, cases like Diana's are not rare, and are on the increase. It is a disturbing example of just how desperately young people here need education to dispel myths and raise awareness about prevention, in a country where one in every five has HIV/AIDS, compared with one in every 1,000 in the UK.

Nina and Diana. With estimates suggesting over half of them could become infected by HIV/AIDS, young people in Nina's community are now recognising the need to address this problem. They are doing something about it and have used their own initiative to set up three different youth groups that aim to promote awareness about the disease. It is an example of young people from the same community helping and educating each other.

Amos, the chairman of one of the groups, explains how they spread the message: "We create awareness through seminars, football matches, dramas and debates. Before the football matches we talk to all the players about the dangers of HIV/AIDS. Many of them now know the dangers."

There are examples all over Kenya of young people fighting against the effects of HIV/AIDS. Mary is the mother at The Boma Family, an orphanage just outside of Nairobi. She was only 19 when she decided to devote her life to taking care of children who have been orphaned by AIDS.



However, not all young people are lucky enough to have the support of their peers. Agnes and Anne are sisters who lost their mother to AIDS three years ago. Agnes was just 15 at the time and as the oldest sister she had the job of caring for her dying mother.

"I had to wake up at 5am and go to school at 10am," she recalls. "I was supposed to come back at 2pm so that I could feed her and wash some clothes. She used to be fed from the bed and go to the toilet in the bed."

"After she died we experienced many problems because our house fell down and we became homeless. We stayed with my grandmother, but even now we are not comfortable, because our roof is made from iron sheets and when it rains water comes inside."

Agnes' sister Anne had a baby when she was just 14, they have both learnt about safe sex the hard way.

"I have learnt a lesson from that disease, because it is a killer disease," Agnes says. "I abstain from sex. I'll abstain until I'm married."

Anne and Agnes live in Thika, a rural district near Nairobi. Six years ago, at the time their mother got infected, it had the highest rate of HIV infections in the country. Among 20 to 45 year olds, three people in ten were HIV positive. The rate has now dropped to one in ten, and once again, young people teaching other young people about HIV/AIDS seems to have proved to be the best method of raising awareness.



Patrick, 23, is the chairman of the Juja Farm Future youth group in the village of Juja, in Thika. He explains how he his youth group are helping:

"People don't have any information about HIV/AIDS so we go to their homes. We invite people to gatherings and give them information. We do drama outreaches, show videos and print booklets to give to those who are illiterate. Previously people thought HIV was like a common cold because they didn't have the facts. But we gave them facts."

"Most of the people dying of HIV/AIDS in Kenya are youths. If we go to them and give our message aggressively it could have an impact. If we don't we feel that maybe in 50 years we won't have any youths in Kenya."

The Juja Farm project is sponsored by the children's charity Plan International, whose programme facilitator, Francisca Wambui, is all in favour of peer education.

Agnes."It really works," she says. "Young people are able to reach each other easily because they share the same language, the same feelings, and they can express themselves better. They are able to share freely without any intimidation or fear."

She works directly with the Juja Farm group, and explains how successful they have been:

"It was their own initiative, and they've been able to reach so many other youths within the area and also outside. The infection rate has really come down and that is quite a big achievement."

With under-25s now accounting for half of all HIV infections globally, the young community workers in Nairobi's slums, as well as the rural areas around Nairobi, are determined to try to prevent their peers from being added to those tragic statistics.



About the team

This story was produced by Ella Parry-Davies, 17, and Ghizlan Akerbousse, 13, from Children's Express, a programme of learning through journalism for young people aged eight to 18.

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