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Soweto Peer Counsellor Dispels Fear and Myths

Mmagokgoshi Morema, 23, is a volunteer peer educator at a Planned Parenthood of South Africa (PPSA) youth centre in Soweto (see press release: HIV/AIDS Now a Disease of Young People, Especially Girls and Women). The facility has an after-school “chill room” where teens can listen to music, read manuals or talk to someone.

“A young girl may come for information about sexuality or relationships. She feels free when she talks to me rather than an older person,” Morema says. “If she goes to a clinic, they think she is sleeping around.”

“We teach them about positive life styles, informed choices, STDs, and that drugs kill. But we don’t choose for them.”

Part of her job is to dispel misconceptions. “Many girls believe that when you use the pill, you’ll become infertile, or you will get cellulites. When they realize it won’t ruin their body, they use it.

“Some believe that if you have sex with someone standing up you won’t fall pregnant. Or if you jump, or have your fingers crossed. They don’t understand the menstrual cycle, or know that on certain days in the month you can’t conceive. We teach them about their reproductive parts and show them charts of male and female organs.”

Parents also come to the centre. “One mother thought they were teaching children to have sex. “I gave her our brochures and showed her what we are really telling them. We tell mothers and fathers that if a youth comes to clinic, it doesn’t mean she is having sex.

“We teach parents how to talk to an adolescent: you don’t have to scare them,” Morema says. “If you tell them the truth they will understand you better.”

“Most youth know about STIs but not how harmful they are. When they learn, most are shocked by what they didn’t know. I’m happy because now they know.”

“We teach about ABC. Many young people believe abstinence is key; they abstain. Some reduce the number of partners. Many young people come to the clinic to get condoms; they are afraid of dying. We demonstrate how to use them.” Others resist using condoms. ““You can’t eat a sweet inside the plastic,” some say. But they get STDs and see the light.”

Morema is part of PPSA’s “Million Voices” initiative, which aims to reach 3 million young people within three years. “We negotiate with principals to get invited to talk to students. Those out of school, we recruit outside at places like supermarkets and clubs.”

The work is demanding and the hours are long. Why does she do it? “I have a son,” she explains. “I didn’t have enough information about pregnancy. My mom told me in a scary way—‘When you have sex, it’s painful.’ I didn’t know about clients’ rights. She used to tear apart my room looking for contraceptives. You have to keep a card to go to a clinic; I was afraid she would find it, so I was scared to go. Instead I used a menstrual chart; maybe I made a mistake. I was 20.”

“I love working with youth; it’s a passion. I believed in those myths. My goal is to remove the black clouds from their eyes. You can see it.”

Above excerpt is from *The State of World Population 2003* report, *Making 1 Billion Count: Investing in Adolescents’ Health and Rights*, published by UNFPA, page 34.