

SELF ESTEEM AND RISK ASSESSMENT: A WAY FORWARD IN PREVENTING AND REDUCING HIV/AIDS AMONG FEMALE YOUTHS IN NIGERIA

Akanbi G. O. (Ph.D) and Olayanju, O. J.

Abstract

HIV/AIDS is one scourge too many. It has devastated nations of the world especially Africa, tearing several millions of people dead. However, the impact is felt more among women than men with proven statistics, and this is why building self esteem and assessing risks by female youths is imperative to stem down the scourge. The paper discussed what self esteem is and how it can help young girls to avoid being intimidated by their male counterparts into having sex. The need for youths to assess their risks of contracting HIV/AIDS is also stressed. The new sexuality and the new morality in the society have exposed young girls to unwarranted sexual harassment by male folks leading them to contracting the disease unknowingly. It is hoped that if girls could develop certain negotiation skills and have proper understanding of what relationship/friendship is all about, HIV/AIDS scourge could be prevented and reduced in our society.

Introduction

That HIV/AIDS is a deadly disease is no more a fiction but a fact. It is also a fact that no cure has been found yet for HIV/AIDS. With the above facts staring us at the face, several innovative efforts are being made all over the world to reduce the scourge as people research daily on the pandemic. The Nigeria government like other African nations has taken bold steps towards the prevention and control of the epidemic. Government among other things established the National Action Committee on Aids {NACA} which is an umbrella body responsible for the information dissemination, provision and distribution of retroviral drugs at subsidised rates.

Majority of those that have contracted HIV/AIDS, especially female youths never bargained for it and it is a fact that if they had been exposed to certain principles, facts, knowledge or education about the scourge, the story would have been different. According to Uduka (2007), recent HIV/AIDS sentinel survey of 4.4 per cent in Nigeria may have indicated a decline from the previous 5.0 per cent recorded in 2003. However, there is a growing concern on the recent rating of Nigeria by an international agency as the third most infected country after India and South Africa respectively. This is why developing self-esteem and assessing risks by female youths should be included in the several approaches at preventing and reducing the pandemic.

What is HIV/AIDS?

Human immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is the virus that causes AIDS. HIV is a member of a group of viruses called retroviruses. It infects human cells and uses the energy and nutrients provided by those cells to grow and reproduce to the extent that the immune ability of the body is grossly compromised. There are three major modes of transmission of HIV, They are: sexual transmission, blood transmission and mother to infant transmission.

What is AIDS?

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is a disease in which the body's immune system breaks down and is unable to fight off infections. This means that; people with AIDS can get many kinds of diseases which a healthy person's body would normally fight off quite easily.

Why the Focus on Female Youths?

HIV virus which is causative agents of AIDS was first recognized in adult homosexual in 1981, in USA. The disease was identified in Africa and also in Nigeria in 1986, and since then, the AIDS pandemic has affected all parts of the world. Women who are about twice affected by HIV/AIDS pandemic constitute about half the population of this nation and no developmental goal can be achieved without them.

Though HIV/AIDS is a critical socio-economic issue, it is also a gender issue. Available statistics prove that both the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS is not random. It disproportionately affects women and adolescent girls who are socially, culturally, biologically and economically more vulnerable at the same time as men are. One of the striking features of HIV/AIDS is its impact on the female gender. At the beginning of the pandemic, women and girls were at the periphery, today they are at the centre. According to UNICEF (2004), globally, the incidence of HIV/AIDS among women has risen at a shocking rate. In 1997, 41% of HIV infected adults were women, but this figure rose to 49.8% in 2001.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the rate among women has already surpassed that of men, and AIDS is now a leading cause of death among women aged 30-40 years in Europe and North America. Half of all new HIV infections are in young people aged 10-25 years, with adolescent girls in some places as much as five times more at risk than adolescent boys. Added to the above are the facts that; (1) many young girls engage in unsafe sexual practices without taking precautions. (2) Many young girls are economically disadvantaged as they are not gainfully employed, and they therefore, exchange sex for money or favour. Thus, many function as commercial sex workers. (3) Most traditional communities do not readily discuss sex with youths, thus, allowing room for misinformation on reproductive health issues, including HIV/AIDS, (4) Female youths are a very mobile population and once infected, they can spread HIV to different people and places.

Self Esteem

Many people have questions about their feelings and thoughts and often doubt themselves. This happens to everybody and is a way of weighing up oneself against one's society to see whether one is "normal" or "abnormal/acceptable or not. Building high self-esteem is one of the most important ingredients of a happy life.

What is Self-esteem?

- If you like and value yourself, and have confidence in yourself, you are said to have self-esteem.
- When you see yourself in a positive way and accept both your strengths and weaknesses, there is self-esteem.
- Being aware of yourself as a person, is self-esteem.
- Having self-esteem does not mean that you behave as if you are better than other people; rather, it is that you have accepted yourself as you are.
- Self-esteem is the value placed on oneself. It is the way an individual feels about himself/herself and how he/she relates to other people. It is pride in oneself in which one is aware and accepts ones imperfection whilst cherishing ones inherent strengths and qualities.

Characteristics of a Person with High or Low Self-esteem

High Self Esteem	Low Self Esteem
• Assertive	• Very arrogant
• Confidant	• Critical attitude
• Caring attitude	• Rebellious
• Interactive	• Suspicious of people
• Respect authority	• Has an inferiority complex
• Authoritative	• <u>Allowing oneself to be pushed around</u>

It is the knowledge of oneself that makes one to stand firm when one's group members try to influence one's behaviour negatively. Building self-esteem is a necessary skill which helps to resist peer pressure which is very high in the society now and develop positive attributes.

Risk and Risk Assessment

Schonert-Reichl (2000), opined that 'risk' now is understood to be complex-that is, it involves environmental, neurological and social factors rather single or separate factor, behaviours and outcomes. Adolescent-behaviour research supports focusing on the importance of youth having 'assets' in their life-that is protective factors [e.g. a caring and stable family, a safe school, positive peer influences that increase their resiliency and reduce the likelihood that they will engage in high risk behaviour.

A risk can then be simply put as an exposure to certain factor wherein there is the possibility of being affected or not being affected by the factor.

Risk assessment is thus, a review of the risk an individual, group or entity undertakes with respect to a specific factor.

A huge number of people go about their daily activities, business and social interactions without thinking they may be at risk of contracting HIV. It is therefore critical for every individual, most especially young girls, to conduct a risk assessment on themselves in order to motivate necessary behavioural change

How to Assess Risks

Assessing risk of exposure to HIV can simply be done by honestly responding [Yes or No] to certain questions.

1. Do I have sexual partners?
2. Has my current partner had more than one sexual partner?
3. Do I dislike using condoms when having sexual intercourse?
4. Do I exchange sexual intercourse for other benefits or favour?
5. Have I ever had Sexually Transmitted Infection [STI]?
6. Has my partner ever had an STI?
7. Did I or any partner manage the STI without professional assistance?
8. Do I seek health care services from quacks and unregistered health centers? Etc.

A positive answer [Yes] to any of the questions above places an individual at risk of contracting the virus and the higher the number of positive responses the higher the individual's risk.

The New Sexuality and the New Morality

Fafunwa (1974:21), submitted that Indigenous African education places considerable emphasis on character training. Indeed it is the cornerstone of African education. Can there be any doubt that the moral values of our society is eroding at a frightening pace? The greatest threat to our society and invariably our youths is "moral decay" coming from within and from forces outside our : borders.

Prior to the 1920s, our society shared a certain God-consciousness. People recognized there were absolute standards for human conduct; faithfully they adhered to those standards. Beginning in Europe and spreading West, humanism, and with it evolution, started to take hold. Out went moral" absolutes; morality became dependent on the situation of the moment. Out went the truth that people are sinful by nature; in came the idea that humanity evolved from lower life forms without God and was constantly improving, so there was no need for a saviour.

The social changes of the past few years have resulted in serious upheavals and transformation in many areas of life, including the domestic and the religious. Among these changes none have been more alarming than the rapid changes of attitude concerning such things as sexual morality and the traditional role of men and women. Morals have been thrown into the winds and unfortunately the female youths are always at the receiving end.

Dramatic changes in the past quarter of a century have resulted into much more liberal attitude toward premarital sex, pornography, virginity, public sex education of children and youths, birth control, abortion, masturbation, homosexuality, and prostitution. There are no simple explanations for the present day sexual revolution, moral decadence, and general confusion resulting from the breakdown of accepted standard. Some of the major reasons are:

- > The new sexual freedom on the part of the women who no longer fear unwanted or illegitimate pregnancies as a result of the development of the contraceptive pill.
- > The legalization of abortion, surgical method of birth control and increase in the availability of other contraceptive devices and methods has contributed to the "new morality".
- > The decline in parental control over the moral life and social activities of their wards. The failure of parents as a whole to teach their children what responsible moral conduct and behaviour consist of, together with parental "permissiveness" has resulted in a generation of young people preoccupied with such things as drugs, Sex, protest and revolution.
- > The almost total preoccupation with sex by the media [movies, TV, radio, printed literature] has perhaps done more than anything else to bring about the contemporary moral decline. Youths see music star standing on stage surrounded by backup singers wearing skimpy lingerie. They also

observe another music star, wearing a completely see-through outfit singing about her empty bed and the man who just left her. According to the Act Right Initiative [2003] Research studies done a few years ago concluded that the average person sees 9,230 actual or implied acts per year on television. and 81% of that sexual activity— 94% on day time operas is extra-marital. That means an average teenager, watching television for ten years between, say, the ages of eight and eighteen, would see almost 75,000 acts of illicit sex.

- > The sexual stimulation resulting from the modern provocative dances [gyrating hips, suggestive movements] and rock and roll music.
- > The modern trend is also to emphasize sexuality in clothing styles seen in such things as the miniskirt, low-slung slacks revealing the navel, see-through blouses and blouses without a brassier, the bikini, and low-cut dresses designed to reveal the cleavage.

The Need for Self-esteem and Risk Assessment among Female Youths

There is no gain saying the fact that female youths are the more affected and are caught in the web of the so-called civilization. As a sort of promotion, it has become the order of the day in the music and Nollywood industries to use girls who will dance or act almost naked, exposing vital parts of their bodies, this is a pointer to the fact that such girls are confused and lack self-esteem. Hardly will you see a man exposing his body this way, indeed it is the further bastardization of the female gender. In the process of their involvement in these promotions most of these girls are lured into illicit sex affairs with the promoters or the artistes who have had sex with several other girls, not minding their HIV status. Female youths need to assess the risks involved in such acts have a rethink so as reduce the prevalence of HIV/AIDS.

In schools, female youths are the object of sexual harassment, cases abound at all levels-primary to tertiary. Girls are coerced by teachers and lecturers into having sex or are threatened with failure or intimidated, this call for building self-esteem by female youths. Some teachers have failed today in their responsibility as surrogate parents or role -models, there is the need for a change. An eleven year old female student protested on sexual harassment to the Hon. Minister of Education in Nigeria recently when she said;

Please Madam Minister, tell male teachers to stop harassing female students. Tell them to leave us alone to study. Tell male teachers that we are in school to learn not to be sexually intimidated and harassed. (The Punch
13/02/2007)

Generally speaking, education aims at transmission of values, skills and attitudes including moral and sexual values desirable to the society, these desirable values, skills, attitude and practices will help the youths especially females to enjoy a better and satisfying life free from regrets. Value has its cost. As a matter of fact nothing valuable is free. A level of self determination to be successful is needed by youths despite all odds.

According to Gupta (1998), worldwide, in 1997 alone, around 3million young people aged 15 to 24 become infected with HIV, about two-thirds of them are girls , and this is high enough to encourage self-esteem and risk assessment among female youths.

The culture of male preference is not solely a Nigerian or African problem, but it is prevalent around the world. Males are preferred to be sent to school and females are made to work for the upkeep of the family. Where girls have the opportunity of attending schools they are withdrawn at times in time of economic recession in the family and forced to work in order to augment the family income thus exposing them to risk. Worst still, some girls are in the school without enough financial support by parents and they see some other girls from rich homes displaying affluence on campus, to avoid coveting such girls, self-esteem must come into play. Poverty must not make female youths to turn to commercial sex workers thus exposing themselves to the risk of contracting HIV, rather they should think of other innovative means of meeting their needs.

In building self-esteem, female youths must have convincing answers for the following questions;

1. What do I want to become?
2. What am I capable of becoming?
3. What do others [parents, peers or siblings] want me to become?

The answers to these questions will go a long way in channeling the course of their destiny and to say no to negative activities including sex before marriage, thus reducing the risk of their exposure to HIV/AIDS.

In developing self-esteem and assessing the risks associated with illicit sex, female youths also need to develop certain life saving skills like negotiation. When they have conflicting ideas or practices to their peers', the ability to stand up for their values and beliefs is very important. Friends and colleagues may come up with unacceptable or dangerous suggestions and put pressure on youths to accept them. This is where negotiation skills such as; effective communication, listening, observation, critical thinking, peer resistance and problem solving skills are useful. They must understand that they have the right to demand the HIV status of whoever wants to marry them. They should not be lured into marriage with money or material things.

Relationships/friendships are normal. Relationship between adolescent males and females are important aspect of human sexuality. However, limits should be set, and individuals in the relationship should take the appropriate line of action if it is no longer healthy. Female youths need to understand and operate the principles of good relationship to build and avoid exposing themselves to unnecessary risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. The following boundaries must be set in any relationship, which are characteristics of persons with high esteem;

- ❖ Agree on how the relationship will be conducted and what you expect from each other.
- ❖ Friends should respect each others beliefs and values.

- ❖ Friendship is reciprocal and based on trust and honesty.
- ❖ Relationship does not mean falling in love. You can love your friends, both male and female as you love your family.
- ❖ Relationship does not mean having sexual relationship.
- ❖ If your relationship with someone of the opposite sex is developing into a closer physical relationship, you will have to agree together whether to continue or discontinue the relationship.

Agreeing to the total abstinence message by female youths is the hallmark of their self-esteem. They should learn and be determined to say no to sex before marriage as this involves a lot of risks.

Conclusion

Preventing and reducing the HIV/AIDS pandemic is the concern of all nations of the world today. This is because of its devastating effects on human and economic resources, no effort is therefore little if it is directed towards the prevention or reducing the scourge. Encouraging self-esteem among young girls and charging them to assess their risk of contracting HIV/AIDS should therefore be a welcome development in the society. All stakeholders in the upbringing of the female youths must play their roles satisfactorily. There must be the determination on the part of the female youths also to adhere to moral standards peer pressure notwithstanding. Time Magazine recently issued a poll result showing 56% of USA teens now saying they want to abstain from sexual intercourse until they marry. Nigerian female youths can also follow this noble decision.

References

- Akanbi, G.O. and Olaleyc, P.O. (2005). HIV/AIDS education and Nation building: A gender perspective *Journal of Contemporary Issues* Vol. 3, No. 1. pp. 103-111.
- Akinboyc, .I.O. (2006). AIDS: A Biosocial problem with social solutions A paper presented at a training workshop for Drillers and Prospective Site geologists, organized by geological survey agency of Nigeria, Abuja.
- Deeper Life Bible Church (2003). Sex Playing safe act right initiative campaign, symposium paper. Fafunwa, A.B. (1974) *History of Education in Nigeria*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Gupta,G.R.(1998). Progress of the Nations UNICEF p.21.
- Naphew, T. (2007). Sexuality is from cradle to grave. *The Punch*, February 14, p.53
- Schonert-Reich, K.A (2000). Children and youth at risk: Some conceptual considerations [http: // www.cmcc.ca/stats/para/sympesium 2000/ .sciionet.cn.paf](http://www.cmcc.ca/stats/para/sympesium 2000/ .sciionet.cn.paf)
- Sperling, A. (1982) *Psychology Made Simple* London: Heinemann.
- Stuart, G. and Kadiyalc, S. (2005) "HIV/AIDS and Food and nutrition security: From evidence to action Food policy review, international food policy research institute, Washington D.C [http: www.ifpri.org](http://www.ifpri.org)
- The Punch. OMOBA Tuesday, February 13,"2007. p.64 Uduka, B(2007). Fighting AIDS/MIX' scourge" *The Punch*. March 18, p. 16
- UNICEF (2004). Training manuals on integrating HIV/AIDS education in colleges of education Curriculum. BINS Motel, Benin City.

