

Perspectives

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'Aids is taking us out': Working with young soccer players

Targeted Aids Interventions, a non-governmental organisation based in Pietermaritzburg, is working with young soccer players to raise awareness on topics related to Aids. The director of the organisation, Gethwana Makhaye spoke to **Bridget Ducasse**.

"I concluded from a study that we did that men thought and behaved as though they owned women. The women were subservient and I realised then that I was wasting my time working with women. I needed to start with the men," said Makhaye.

Her role in Aids intervention and awareness gained prominence in 1997 when she began to work with women in rural areas, training them in home based care and advising them on various health care issues. "It was at a time when the Health Department wanted to upgrade hospitals around the country, so I organised a film crew to travel with me into the rural areas to show them that better health care facilities were needed there instead," said Makhaye.

She continued to set up networks between the community and the various clinics, encouraging the women in the community to help the nurses at the clinics in their work.

It was her work with women that led her to start the Shosholozza Programme in 1998, working with young soccer players in the hopes of raising male awareness on topics relating to Aids. "There were various reasons as to why I decided to start this programme. I had worked with a group of women in Applesbosch who were able to communicate with their partners with regards to their status," said Makhaye. She discovered that once the women disclosed their status, most were rejected by their partners whilst others were beaten. In some cases, mothers were too scared to tell their husbands that their sons or daughters were HIV positive and were often beaten when they did impart this information.

"We worked with women who were supposed to advise their family members on how to deal with Aids issues. Only five percent of them reported that there was a positive change in attitude which just was not enough," said Makhaye.

She noticed that whether the person was educated or not, rich or poor, the situation was always the same. "The partners were calling the shots. They would say what kind of birth control the women must use. They decided if or when they wanted children and, in some cases, even if the husband was having an affair, the wives were still too scared to ask him to use a condom," said Makhaye.

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At the end of the one year Applesbosch Programme, Makhaye made a recommendation to sponsors, Oxfam Canada, for a project aimed specifically at men. Oxfam Australia, now known as the Joined Oxfam HIV/Aids Programme (JOHAP), decided to fund the programme after a proposal was put forward by Makhaye.

"I wanted to understand men better, their attitudes to sex, their practices, what is love for them. I guess you could say that I wanted to do my masters in men," said Makhaye.

She decided to aim specifically at soccer players because she could work through an already built structure, the South African Football Association (Safa). In addition, men between the ages of 10 and 40 play soccer and it is one of the most popular sports in the country. "Dealing with Safa was hell at first because they didn't want to be labelled. They were very uninformed and they also felt that as a women it was not my place to speak to them on Aids," said Makhaye.

After a non-threatening presentation, Safa decided to join the programme and two Safa representatives were appointed per region, making eight in all, covering the Midlands, Southern, Eastern and Northern KwaZulu-Natal.

"I wanted the Safa officials to be involved and make the decisions. I didn't want to impose and make them feel like I was taking over. I told them what I needed and they were expected to organise everything," said Makhaye.

A baseline survey was done to establish what age group should be targeted as part by the intervention and where workshops should be held. Further surveys included questions to establish what the boys knew about Aids, whether they realised that they were at risk and what they were doing about it.

"I introduced myself to them as Gethwana, I dressed in shorts and a T-shirt and I asked them questions without being judgmental. I even joked with them about who had the most sexual partners. One had six and the others were not that far behind," said Makhaye.

After finding out the facts, a manual was made based on what Makhaye had discovered. "The manual starts from the outside of a person and goes in until it reaches the heart and mind of that person and that is why most of these soccer boys have changed their way of thinking," said Makhaye. She added that the manual discusses available choices and asks questions such as: Do I know my partners sexual history? What goals do I have?

"Many of the guys thought of the women as sluts and didn't realise that women also crave sex. I try to tell them that if they don't communicate with their girlfriends, then how do they know that they are up to scratch. That catches their attention," said Makhaye.

Safa helps Makhaye to identify groups of soccer players and then she travels out to them. "The Safa officials of the region organise the venue and they supervise the workshops. Many of the players have undergone project management training and so become peer educators among their team and school mates," said Makhaye.

For the past three years, Makhaye has worked intensively with boys aged between 15 and 20 and is now moving to aim at the 12 to 15 year old age group. She has found that some young boys sleep with older women for money. "We need to catch the younger boys before they begin to show interest in sex. We also need to start aiming at the older men to so that they can show support for

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their sons and daughters," said Makhaye.

Twenty-year-old Spha Mahlase from Mafakatini joined the Shosholoza programme this year. He said that there are many problems in the rural areas especially with the younger generation who he feels are irresponsible. "Many of them don't think that Aids will happen to them. It's someone else's disease. They need to be taught how to protect themselves," said Mahlase. He added that he himself did not have a girlfriend presently but would be extremely cautious should he choose to engage in sex with a future partner.

Mbongeni Zuma, who is aged 24, agreed that people in his community were stubborn and added that when someone was sick or dying, relatives and friends preferred to blame it on something else.

"Some people say that it's tuberculosis or even asthma. They don't believe that it is a killer and there is also a lot of peer pressure and pride involved," said Zuma.

He was surprised by some of the information that he heard in Makhaye's workshops, but after hearing it has decided to settle down with one girlfriend and remain faithful to her.

Their message to the youth of South Africa was simple yet effective. Concludes Zuma: "Aids is taking us out. The youth need to be faithful to one partner and if you can't then abstinence is the only answer. And remember to always use a condom."

Bridget Ducasse is a reporter on the Natal Witness.

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