



Providing Support for the Girl Child through Girl Guides:

Psychosocial Support and Addressing Reproductive Health and HIV
Prevention with Pre-Adolescent and Adolescent Girls in Zimbabwe

Presented by:
Mildred T. Mushunje
12- 15 June 2006
Durban PEPFAR Conference
(Zimbabwe)

Presentation Outline

- Catholic Relief Services' Activities in Zimbabwe
- Issues of Concern around Pre-adolescent and Adolescent Girls
- Impact of AIDS on the Girl Child
- Response to the Challenges
- The Girl Guides Concept
- What Girl Guides Provides
- Challenges of the Girl Guides Initiative
- Recommendations

Activities of Catholic Relief Services in Zimbabwe

- Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is the official international relief and development agency of the United States Catholic Conference.
- CRS has been operating in Zimbabwe since 1989, with its main office in Harare.
- The agency works with local partners on HIV and AIDS, economic strengthening, livelihoods and food security, and justice and peace initiatives, with the aim of strengthening and improving the lives of the disadvantaged in Zimbabwe.

STRIVE

- Within CRS, the STRIVE project's mandate is to work with local partners to increase the care and support for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children.
- This is done by supporting programs which strengthen the capacity of communities to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS, especially among children and youths, and to mitigate its impact.

Cont...

- The main means of reaching children within STRIVE has been through the education system.
- The need for care and support arises out of the recognition that AIDS has completely changed the face of rural communities and extended support systems have also been affected.

Cont..

- However, one of the challenges that STRIVE has had to contend with is the provision of quality care and support for pre-adolescent and adolescent girls, which to a large extent is lacking within the education system.

Pre-adolescent and Adolescent Girl: Issues of Concern

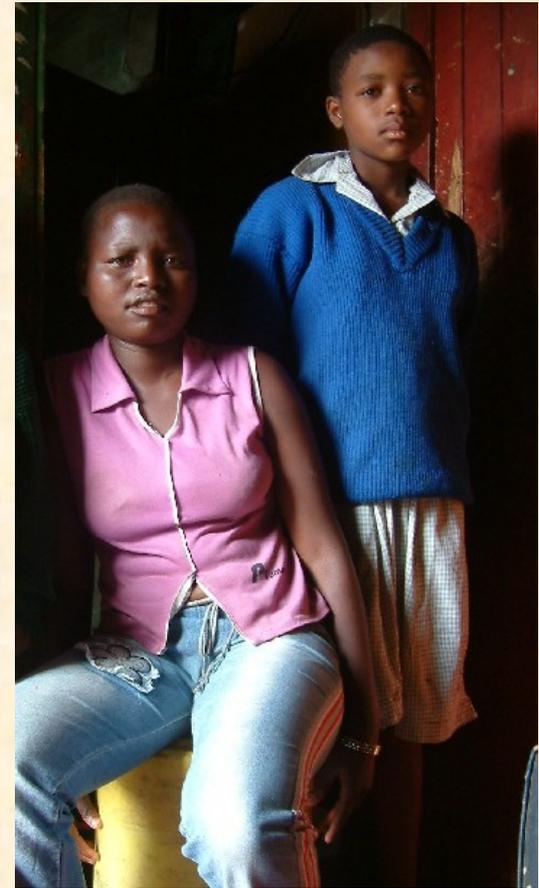
- The continued disintegration of the extended family as a result of AIDS puts the girl child at great risk of abuse and contracting HIV/AIDS. Coupled with this is the impact of AIDS on households. Some factors that put the girl child at risk include:
 - The aunts who used to impart life skills such as reproductive health education and knowledge to young girls and youths are no longer readily available.
 - As a result, the girl child has little or no guidance in acquiring life skills knowledge and education.

Cont..

- Girls in the rural areas are even less likely to access the information they may require on any topic because of limited information technology systems.
- The community in which the girl child lives is taking on responsibility for the care of these girls, especially in circumstances where the girl lives in a child-headed household. Predatory members of the community may take advantage of the absence of a consistent adult person who provides guidance and protection.

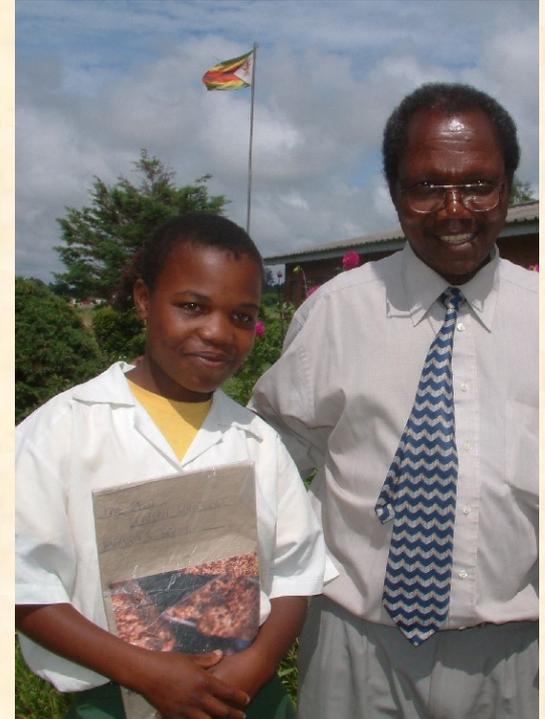
Cont..

- Girls often lack skills to negotiate for social relationships including safe sex.
- They usually have limited knowledge or access to reproductive health information.



Cont...

- The school setting provides limited information on reproductive health topics, life skills, physiological changes and how to manage these changes. When provided, information tends to be shared during biology lessons at the secondary level, and thus does not include the more hands-on, thoughtful guidance, advice and emotional support that the girl child needs.



Cont..

- Extra-curricular activities focus mainly on sports, which does not necessarily create a positive social space for girls.

Impact of AIDS on the Girl Child

- The impact of AIDS is felt most heavily by the girl child for the following reasons:
 - They are forced to drop out of school to tend to siblings.
 - Girls are often forced to become care givers in situations where the family is affected and has infected people within the household.



Cont..

- Evidence from Kenya, like in many other African countries, estimates that half of all new HIV infections occur among youth between the ages of 15 and 24 (CBS, MOH, and ORC Macro 2004; NASCOP 2003). However, many of these individuals are much younger when they initiate sexual activity. A survey of Girl Guides showed that that 13 percent of girls and 31 percent of boys have had sex by age 15 (CBS, MOH, and ORC Macro 2004).

Cont...

- Few prevention programs exist to help younger youth, specifically those between the ages of 10 and 14 years, to delay their sexual debut and develop the communication and relationship skills that will keep them uninfected (Horizons Report).

Response to the Challenges

- In response to these shortcomings, a local STRIVE partner, Bekezela, based in Inyathi (Matabeleland North), embarked on a project to rekindle the Girl Guides.
- Bekezela is piloting Girl Guides and Boy Scouts in two years and the programme will be expanded if it is successful.

Girl Guides Concept

- Girls come together and are then grouped into various age groups. The young girls, usually 7-10 years old, are placed into one group and become the Brownies, whilst the older girls are the Girl Guides.
- For each group, a Guider is trained who then becomes in charge of the girls and will, in turn, use her skills to engage the girls. The Guider is usually a respected adult member of the community, such as a teacher or local volunteer.

What Girl Guides Provides

- The STRIVE-related intervention has gone beyond the traditional Girl Guides concept and also provides a forum in which girls can seek and find knowledge on reproductive health issues.
- It aims to reduce HIV and AIDS among the youth and enhance their survival skills through skills transfer.
- It also is a means through which psychosocial support can be provided to the girl child.

Challenges of the Girl Guides Initiative

- Girl Guides as a programme had lost momentum in Zimbabwe.
- It is not part of the school itinerary, which means that private time has to be created by the teachers for this activity.
- Those girls who do not attend formal school are less likely to benefit from the Girl Guides.

Lessons Learnt

- Whilst it is too soon to speak of lessons learnt, what is evident is the following:
 - Girl Guides provides a safe and comfortable environment for girls to talk about themselves and issues that affect them.
 - Because the girls feel safe, they are able to share personal experiences with other girls which is a very cathartic process, especially for those who have had traumatic experiences.
 - The combined use of support materials such as the Auntie Stella pack gives the girls freedom to express themselves without feeling threatened.

Cont..

- There is qualitative evidence that those adolescents who are Girl Guides have increased self-confidence and self-esteem compared to girls who are not Girl Guides.
- Given that teachers are used as a source of knowledge, it is necessary to empower them with the requisite training to be able to impart life skills to pre-adolescent and adolescent girls.

Recommendations

- Girl Guides should not be an isolated intervention, but should be institutionalised within schools and other influential institutions, such as churches.



Cont...

- To ensure effectiveness and impact, the school system needs to absorb the Girl Guides concept and make it part of the school curriculum.

Cont...

- *Girls need to be taught about their rights and gender equality from the family set up and in school. -----"Catch them young"* (Vice Chairperson, Youth Round Table of Zimbabwe).
- Community members that have an interest in the empowerment of the girl child can be trained to be Guiders, and they would work with the out-of-school girls.

References

- Horizons Report, Evaluating the Kenya girl guides association's HIV/AIDS Peer Education Program for younger youth: Baseline results.
- Bekezela Baseline Survey, 2006.