



A PRESENTATION BY ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN (AGYW) TO MINPROFF ON BARRIERS FACED BY AGYW IN ACCESSING HIV SERVICES AND PROPOSED WAY FORWARD

We are here under the umbrella of Hope for vulnerable Children Association (HOVUCA) and we are adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) HIV ambassadors working for adolescent girls under a project HER Voice Fund

HER Voice Fund is a project dedicated only to Adolescent Girls and Young Women (AGYW) and was created because the Global Fund and ViiV Healthcare organization found evidences that AGYW are highly infected with HIV. The rate of HIV among AGYW, is alarming. Statistics according to The Global Fund shows that 24 girls against 9 boys within an age range of 15-24 years, are being infected with HIV each day, according to a report from the Ministry of Health, 10–15% of girls compared to 4–6.5% of boys of the same age are infected with HIV virus.

Given the aforementioned, The Global Fund and ViiV Healthcare decided to fund 6 projects in Cameroon which HOVUCA happens to be one of the grantees all aimed at reducing the rate of HIV among AGYW.

The political leadership in Cameroon has expressed a clear and strong commitment to the fight against HIV/AIDS among AGYW since early 1986. In this perspective, Cameroon has adopted the 2018-2022 national strategic on HIV/AIDS and STIs, a catch-up plan to accelerate the response to HIV and AIDS. Under the ministry of health, Cameroon has equally adopted the “90-90-90” target by 2020 put in place by UNAIDS for the fight against HIV.

This target constitutes of 90% of people living with HIV knowing their HIV status, 90% of people with diagnosed HIV infection receiving sustained antiretroviral therapy and 90% of people receiving antiretroviral therapy have viral suppression. In other to achieve these targets, the government has adopted an inclusive approach, involving all stakeholders; - health professionals, -scientific and academic communities, including the ministry of women empowerment and family and many others.

Despite the effort put in place by the Cameroon government, UNAIDS, and other international bodies, the rate of infected cases AGYW keeps prevailing. This high rate of HIV among AGYW is due to the barriers they face in accessing HIV services.

I) Poverty

One of the barriers faced by AGYW across the globe including Cameroon in accessing HIV services is poverty. Majority of adolescent girls and young women are financially incapacitated, hence when HIV programs are launched, they are unable to take part in this program and access the services offered to them. For example, even though the government provides free HIV screening; this is only available in public hospitals. Hence, adolescent girls living in areas where there are no public hospitals are equally deprived of knowing their HIV status due to their



financial situations. Also, out of desperation due to poverty, some adolescent girls have embraced sex work as a profession, hence increasing the rate of spread of the diseases in their societies.

II) Education

Education which is the most powerful weapon used in changing the world, happen to be another strong barrier limiting adolescent girls. According to UNESCO institute of statistic, 70% of girls in Cameroon are illiterates. This simply means that even when information on issues concerning HIV is passed on, these girls won't be able to understand this information due to their inability to read.

III) Dissemination of information

A great number of AGYW lack basic knowledge on HIV and the services provided. According to the National Strategic Plan 2018 – 2022, MINPROFF is charged with mobilizing women to demand for care and prevention services with a focus on rural areas. The challenge we AGYW are facing is the we are not aware of where and when these mobilization programs are being organized. I personally, since my days in secondary and the University, I have never heard of an HIV program held in school by MINPROFF.

IV) Gender-based violence

Violence against women and adolescent girls is both a consequence and cause of HIV. Violence or the fear of violence can stop women and girls from negotiating safer sex, accessing HIV, sexual reproductive health services and disclosing their HIV status to their partners, family members and health providers. Studies show that women living with HIV who have experienced intimate partner violence were significantly less likely to start or adhere to antiretroviral therapy. For example, I have heard of stories about cheating men, who beat up their partners, just because they made demands for condom usage during sexual intercourse for their own safety.

WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD? PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

In other to address the above mention problems, we the adolescent girls and young women, stand to advocate on the fact that MINPROFF should:

- **Multiply Economic empowerment programmes for adolescent girl and young women.** We are aware and we equally appreciate the great job done by MINPROFF in empowering AGYW. But due to the fact that, the prevailing rate of HIV keep increasing, we are advocating on the fact that MINPROFF should multiply their economic empowered programs. So that many underprivilege girls especially those in the rural communities, will have this empowerment and generate income for themselves. Hence this will help them afford for HIV services especially in those structures that do not offer free HIV services like in the public institutions.



• **Double effort in advocating for the education of AGYW.** MINPROFF is so concern with the education of AGYW. We can see this through the various effort they put together to ensure education among AGYW. They provide writing materials and schools fees every year for a great number of adolescent girls especially those in the remote areas, to ensure they go to school. They equally advocate for the education of AGYW. But due to the fact that the continues increase in the rate of HIV infection is link to illiteracy, we are pleading with the MINPROFF to double their advocacy effort in ensuring that every AGYW should at least obtain a basic level of education.

• **Creation of a focal point for adolescent girls.** we know that MINPROFF has a focal point for HIV but due to point AGYW have been earmarked as a population group highly infected with HIV. we call on MINPROFF to ensure that adolescent girls and young women have their own focal point for HIV who will be able to pass out information to their peers on HIV programmed/activities organized by the ministry - from the ministry, to regional, districts and every part of the country where adolescent girls are found. And equally, forums should be created at the regional and district level where adolescent girls can communicate on matters concerning HIV. This will help in the appropriate dissemination of information and timely demand for services by AGYW.

• **multiple sensitization programs on gender base violence for AGYW.**

Knowledge they say is power. A great number of AGYW are not even aware of the fact that gender base violence is a crime, and its punishable by law. They go through this violence, and they keep it to themselves. Some are a shame and afraid to open up about their situation in public. Some die in depression because they don't know the right source to channel their problems to. On this note we plead with MINPROFF to multiply sensitization programs where AGYW can be enlighten more on gender base violence. How to identify violence, what to do when experiencing violence and who is the right source to channel this problem to. We are equally aware that MINPROFF is doing a lot for AGYW as far as gender base violence is concerned, but because it happens to be one of the major reasons for an increase rate in the number of cases among AGYW, we advocate for multiple programs to create more awareness among AGYW.

As HIV ambassadors and advocates for adolescent girls, we call on the Ministry of women empowerment to look into these barriers limiting adolescent girls and young women in accessing HIV services by so doing, we believe we the prevalence rate of HIV among AGYW will drastically decline.

Thank you all for listening

This paper is the work of the following AGYW

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