

Young European Women and HIV – a Challenging Situation for Prevention and Human Rights

Cologne, London, 28 June 2010. They are young women, they are HIV positive and they live in Europe. For the first time, a generation of young women who were born with the virus is growing up in Europe. They don't know what life is like without the virus. And yet HIV and its affect on European girls and young women is often sidelined and ignored.

"Actually, HIV is not just an African problem", says Matilda Lomas, a 20 year old Girl Guide from Great Britain, "Especially here in Europe we easily forget that HIV can affect absolutely everybody – even here on this continent. Particularly in Great Britain which has the highest rate of new HIV infections among 16 to 24 year olds among all Western European countries." Matilda is a member of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS), which supports girls and young women to stand up and speak out for their rights.

Advanced treatment for HIV is now available in most European countries and has led to the wrong presumption that HIV and AIDS are not an issue any more. Compared with sub-Saharan countries the number of HIV positive young women is indeed lower. But that is no reason to relax and become complacent. "Young women's increased mobility within Europe makes HIV a Pan-European challenge" says Bernadette Fischler, Advocacy Coordinator at WAGGGS.

Unsuitable or lack of sexual education and the common silence about HIV contributes to new infections among young female Europeans. The stigma that is still attached to the virus makes it difficult for girls and young women to talk openly about HIV or get tested. "Women often take the blame for becoming infected. If they receive a positive test result they are often denied their right to sexuality, partnership and family," says Harriet Langanke from Gemeinnützige Stiftung Sexualität und Gesundheit (GSSG).

The GSSG is also engaged in HIV prevention for young women. "Many young women use the pill for contraception and are therefore likely to not use condoms. But the pill doesn't protect from HIV infection," says Harriet Langanke, the founder of the Foundation. GSSG runs projects that raise awareness of the HI-virus and different methods of prevention. They will use the AIDS conference in Vienna to advocate for Human Rights for HIV-positive women.

During the International AIDS conference from 18 to 23 July many young women will gather to demand their rights. In particular, HIV activists from Eastern Europe and Central Asia will be given a voice to advance the fight against HIV. For example, Estonia and the Ukraine have the highest rate of new infections overall in Europe according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) report published at the end of 2009. According to WAGGGS and GSSG, the focus on young women increases the chances for HIV prevention for all women across Europe.

Further information:

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