



acet UK
Championing healthy relationships
and sexual wellbeing

You are the salt of the earth You are the light of the world let your light shine before others and glorify your Father in heaven

Salt and Light

November 2019

Leaving no one behind

Over 30 years ago, a small, dedicated group came together to act on the HIV pandemic in the UK. Through forming relationships, providing home-based care and establishing community with those living with HIV, they helped turn the tide on HIV in the UK.

This group were the first acet UK team, and 31 years on, we continue to work alongside communities of people, addressing the HIV pandemic globally.

In the UK today, less than 1% of the population are living with HIV, and 98% of those are on treatment.

However, the HIV pandemic is far from over, as AIDS related deaths are the leading cause of death of young people in Africa. Every day in Sub-Saharan Africa, 750 girls and women are newly infected with HIV.

Three of the countries most affected by this are Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe. In these countries, acet UK's international partners, ACET Nigeria, ACET DRC and the Nehemiah Project, Zimbabwe are embedded within communities that are

affected by HIV. By equipping church leaders, peer educators and counsellors to raise HIV awareness and provide testing and support, these organisations are empowering young people to be agents of change, helping them to contribute to the UNAIDS goal of no new HIV transmissions by 2030.

In 2020, the Nehemiah Project will train 50 girls and women, who are currently engaged in sex work, as peer educators. These ladies will then share sexual health messages with 3,400 of their peers, and provide access to HIV testing and treatment.

The project will also provide business and vocational training, enabling peer educators and others to exit sex work.

ACET Nigeria will provide HIV education through their community outreach, including weekly Kids' and Esteem youth clubs, creating safer communities for children and young people, and challenging key drivers of HIV such as gender inequality. They will also address the gap in access to key services, by providing testing and referral to hospitals for treatment.

ACET DRC will train individuals who hold influence within their own communities, such as church leaders



The theme for World AIDS Day 2019 is 'Communities.'

Communities make the difference to the HIV response by keeping people at the centre and leaving no one behind.

Wear your red ribbon on Sunday 1st December to show your support.

and teachers, and will train young people as peer educators, promoting quality relationships and sex education through lessons, radio discussions and life skills clubs. They will also provide this education in schools for the deaf, ensuring 'no one gets left behind.'

Your support will help us make this all possible, transforming the lives of children and adults as we invest in communities to curb the tide on HIV.

UK

Public Health England published encouraging figures in September: new HIV diagnoses in the UK are at their lowest level since 2000 and, in 2018, 94% of UK people diagnosed with HIV, and on antiretroviral treatment, had an undetectable viral load - so could not pass on the virus.

These figures are testament to the quality of HIV care and treatment in the UK, but there are a number of challenges that risk this progress.

Funding: cuts to HIV and sexual health funding has affected access to HIV prevention and support services.

Stigma: HIV-related stigma and discrimination prevent many people accessing the services they need. Almost half of new HIV diagnoses in the UK in 2018 were at a late stage of infection, increasing the risk of death within a year ten-fold.

Lack of education: knowledge about HIV is decreasing. A 2014 NAT survey found only 45% of people could correctly identify how HIV is, and is not, transmitted. An increasing number of people incorrectly believe HIV can be transmitted through kissing.

acet UK is passionate about keeping HIV on the education agenda. The new statutory relationships and sex education (RSE) guidance requires schools to cover HIV as part of their RSE curriculum, so we hope this will increase teaching on HIV.

We have a dedicated HIV section in our training; encourage schools to book specific HIV sessions, alongside other RSE topics; and provide our Esteem network members with HIV teaching materials.

"The 'what's the risk?' activity always works well as it really helps the young people consider transmission routes and where personal stigma may creep in without even realising it."
Esteem network member

Nigeria

Despite significant progress in addressing HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria still has the second highest rate of HIV in the region, and one of the highest rates globally, which led to 150,000 deaths in 2017 alone.



Children and young people carry the greatest burden.

In 2017, 220,000 children (under 14 years old) were reportedly living with HIV, and Nigeria is the only country in the world where AIDS related deaths amongst young people is on the rise.

The increased access to smart phones has also made pornography prolific.

As Sunday Musa, Director of ACET Nigeria says, 'Many children in Nigeria don't have 3 meals a day, but they are consuming pornography with access to cheap smart phones.'

As well as providing HIV testing, counselling and treatment adherence support, ACET Nigeria works across the generations in underserved, rural communities to address the drivers of HIV, including stigma, poverty and gender inequality. Children and young people are very involved, as trained community volunteers run weekly Kids' and Esteem clubs, providing education about HIV and other relationship and sexual health issues.

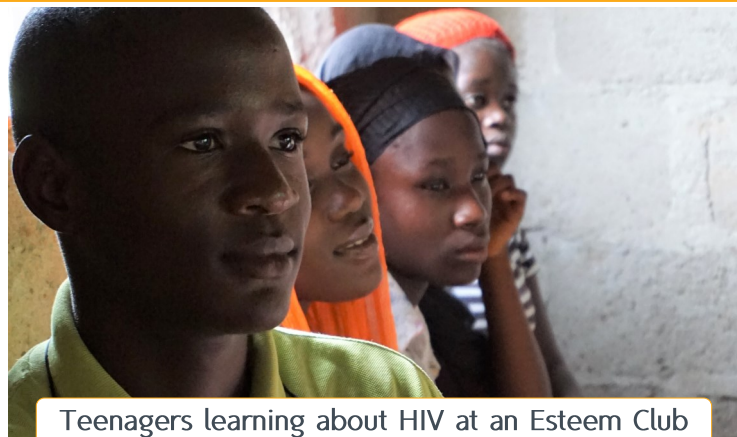
Sunday gives a little more detail:

"Our approach is holistic. We are involved with children, forming Kids' Clubs - and then we have Esteem Clubs that target ages 13 to 17. We give them prevention messages that are value based, and then we make them to realise who they are,

how precious their body is, how they need to take their choices into their own hands, how they can delay sex. And for those who are already sexually active, it's a good number of ages - 14, 15, 16 - for various reasons. In many cases due to sexual violence against children. Incest happens. In recent times, we have seen increasing rates of child rape, and child neglect continues to go on.

So, because of that, we help them to realise who they are. We help them to identify dangerous environments. We help them to develop confidence to be able to share whatever is happening with them with their parents, or other significant adult that they trust.

Nigeria is one of the countries with the highest new infections of mother to child transmission of HIV. One of



Teenagers learning about HIV at an Esteem Club

the major factors is ignorance of safer baby feeding practices and, of course, stigma.

We are mobilising pregnant women and women of a reproductive age and we are encouraging them to go for antenatal care enrolment. The Nigerian government has it that every woman gets tested to know their HIV status and, if they test positive, they are encouraged to enrol on PMCT services (Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission).

We had 29 pregnant women that tested positive in 2017, and all of these were enrolled on ART (antiretroviral therapy) and PMCT. And we are very happy to say that the 29 all had a baby born and, after 18 months, each of these babies' testing came out to show that they had a good outcome, not having HIV. For us, that's very rewarding.

And, of course, we mobilise churches and communities to go for tests generally, so that people of all ages get access to know their HIV status and then do what is needed."

"I have learnt that I have value beyond anything the eye can see. Before, I used to look down on myself, but in the club I am helped to value my existence.

I now know that HIV is all over our country and my knowledge about HIV is deeper than before. I learnt that it is possible for people of the opposite sex to be just friends and not have sex and that pre-marital sex is risky as one can get infected with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Though we were taught puberty development in my junior secondary class I didn't remember anything, until I started attending the Esteem Club. It all came to me fresh as if I never heard anything. Now I understand that the changes such as pimples, changes in voice, hair, breast, sizes, etc. that occur during puberty are normal things."



18 year old, Alex

Zimbabwe

Vulnerability of the poor in Zimbabwe has heightened since the dashed hopes of the 2018 elections. The economic crisis means unemployment is around 90%, with 63% of households living below the poverty line.

As a result, the country has seen growth in informal labour including sex work, as well as mining and trucking which, in turn, create hotspots for sex work.

A cash shortage is seeing women, and girls as young as 12, engaging in riskier sexual activity when offered more money: including unprotected sex, and having sex with clients in the home where children are, leaving them vulnerable to rape and drugging.

Sexual gender-based violence is also common and is a key driver of HIV. Stigma, poverty and gender inequality remove women's autonomy to request use of protection or access treatment, and adolescent sex workers are particularly vulnerable.

The psychosocial trauma of sex work is heightened when understood against the sexual health horizon. Zimbabwe continues to have one of the highest rates of HIV in the world, with approximately 1.3 million people living with HIV. The burden of this primarily falls on women, with 740,000 women living with HIV, and 60% of sex workers testing positive.

For girls and women engaged in sex work, access to information and services promoting sexual wellbeing is essential.

Shining Star's Viola talks about one of the factors that drives girls into sex work:

"We have men who work as soldiers in DRC, who built their houses in Cowdray Park (in Bulawayo) so they had to leave their children behind. And now there's child-headed families – they're now looking after their other siblings. And, because of that, they can't afford to look after their families, so they're now engaging in sex work."

Using their successful Shining Star peer education model, the Nehemiah Project provides girls and women involved in sex work with sexual health training. As peer educators, these ladies then share health messages with their peers, and provide access to referral pathways, including HIV testing, treatment and counselling services.

Weekly sex education workshops, facilitated by the peer educators, provide access to condoms, HIV and STI testing, and cervical cancer screening.

The peer educators are supported and counselled, to help them understand their potential and recognise their value and individual gifts. Business management workshops, and training in various vocational skills, help the peer educators create and sustain businesses of their own, so that they can find alternative sources of income and exit sex work.



Adolescent peer educators being trained in beauty therapy

"Back then, we used to drink a lot, not think about anything – just who you're having sex with. I would sleep with many guys with no condom or anything. But now, since I started coming to the Nehemiah Project, I was fully equipped with knowledge about protection, about safer sex. We're trained for vocational trainings like baking, beauty therapy, hairdressing. Now I can say that I am fully equipped to do everything. I can say to myself that I am empowered. I am a determined, resilient, AIDS-free generation kind of a girl!" 20 year old peer educator, Shona

DRC

With a complex history of civil war and political corruption, it's unsurprising that gifts we take for granted, such as health, education and safety, are struggles for people living in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In the Mbankana community where ACET DRC works, described by some as 'a city within the city of Kinshasa', most girls and boys become parents before they are 18 years old.

Rumours and misconceptions around sex, like elsewhere in DRC, are all around, such as: "the oil contained within condoms is toxic and will cause cancer" and "living with a person who has HIV is dangerous as they will end up infecting someone."

Yet sex is often a taboo subject in DRC. For example, before ACET DRC training for church leaders in Mbankana, not one of delegates could identify parts of the male and female genital organs; there was a complete lack of understanding about the female menstrual cycle; and AIDS was thought to be the result of witchcraft.

Women in DRC are disproportionately affected by HIV: of the 390 000 adults living with HIV, 72% are women, and,

in 2018, new HIV infections among women aged 15–24 were four times higher than among young men.

Challenging harmful norms, including gender inequality and sexual violence, ACET DRC volunteers provide relationships and sex education sessions for young people in schools and life skills clubs; and offer counselling for survivors of sexual violence at their 'listening centres.'



Sessions on reproductive health



The Esteem network of independent educators and organisations across the UK (and beyond) are trained, equipped and supported by the acet UK team in their relationships and sex education delivery. One of our longest running partnerships is with Blue Sky Trust.

Blue Sky Trust was set up in 1992 as a Christian response to HIV, supporting hundreds of men, women and children living with, and affected by HIV, in North East England and North Cumbria.

Whether it's providing help to come to terms with a diagnosis, peer mentoring, rebuilding confidence or becoming part of a supportive community, Blue Sky Trust provides a confidential and safe place to "find strength and go on with happiness."

They have a young people's group which has met consistently for many years, as newly diagnosed pre-teens meet others living with the same condition. This could be in the safe space of the Blue Sky Trust building, on a cinema trip, or a 2-day long residential. Significant friendships are formed, enabling young people to head into adulthood feeling educated, equipped and empowered to live positively with the HIV virus and to safely navigate relationships and manage their treatment and medication.

Blue Sky Trust's schools project 'Think for Yourself' is enjoying a period of growth and development. Originally set up to raise HIV awareness in schools across the North East region, their trained educators now cover a range of topics within the relationships and sex education curriculum, which will be compulsory from September 2020.

Besides HIV, topics include healthy relationships, consent, navigating the online world, the harmful effects of pornography, and sexual health. When delivering sessions on sexual health in secondary schools, Ben and Naomi, the Think for Yourself educators, ask the students to list any sexually transmitted infections they know of. The students

almost always incorrectly name AIDS as an STI. This illustrates how much work there is to be done with the general public around even basic knowledge of HIV and AIDS. It also confirms what the young people who access the support group say is the issue they struggle with the most: 'that HIV and AIDS are not the same thing.'

Others' lack of knowledge remains a key factor in those living with HIV feeling judged and isolated, with almost half of British people admitting they'd feel uncomfortable kissing someone with HIV (see the bustle.com survey).

When Ben and Naomi talk about HIV in schools, the students are very open, honest and take in information they simply didn't know before.

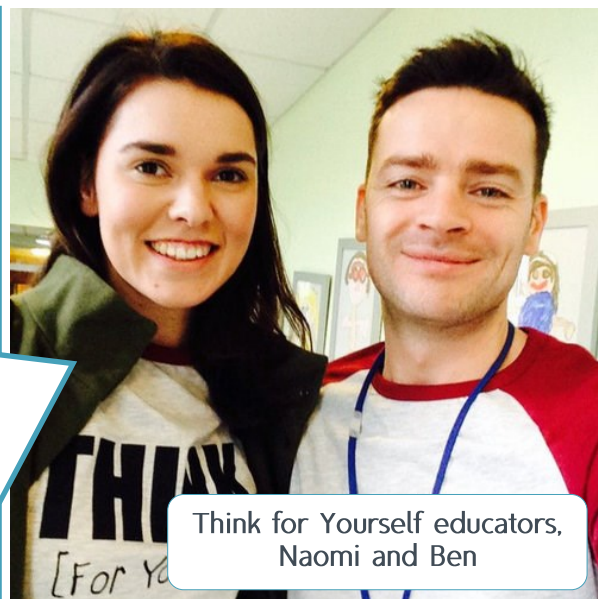
"I now know that for people with HIV, their life can be normal and healthy, as long as they take medication. I know anyone of any age can get HIV. I know to support people with HIV and not judge them."

Recent student feedback

As Ben says, "There appears to be a new wave of acceptance and genuine encouragement for people to be themselves. The U=U campaign ('Undetectable = Untransmittable') is gathering pace and respected Welsh rugby star, Gareth Thomas, recently disclosed his HIV status to an overwhelmingly positive response. There is hope that the stigma that continually attaches itself to HIV, which our young people correctly label as 'just a virus', can be fought, challenged and beaten."

"It's hugely beneficial being part of the Esteem Network. They show genuine interest in how relationships and sex education is delivered in different parts of the country, and value our input as well as provide us with consistent support and advice. Gareth's monthly emails are something I look forward to and truly inform and improve our work. There are articles, blogs and crucial news and updates on everything and anything related to RSE.

Following @esteem_acetUK on Twitter is also a great way of staying engaged and in the know. acet UK's Esteem resources around relationships, self-esteem and sexting (particularly the #1stok? activity) are used by us frequently in classrooms and enable pupils to engage in and understand this sensitive and problematic topic of sending nudes." Think for Yourself's Ben



Think for Yourself educators, Naomi and Ben



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