

Case Study: Island-to-Island Program

St. Vincent and the Grenadines Island-to-Island Program

Project objectives:

- To improve the reproductive health and HIV prevention behaviors of young people, aged 14–24 through the implementation of a peer-to-peer program
- To develop new dialogues around protection during sexual activity
- To reduce intergenerational sex between young women and older men
- To help reduce the level of domestic violence present in many households

Location of project: St. Vincent and 15 islands of the Grenadines

Implementing partners:

- Youth League of St. Vincent and the Grenadines
- Vincentian Girls Against AIDS
- National Banana Growers' Association

Funder: An international development agency, managed by a cooperating INGO

Project description:

In the islands of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, young people go to school irregularly due to seasonal harvest variations. Unemployment is high in the country, therefore, great economic pressure exists for youth to help their families and communities when bananas are harvested each year. During harvesting season, males tend to work on the plantations, which often entails migration from island to island trying to find work, while women sell agricultural products to small stores and markets in their communities. A 2001 national survey showed that young people on the various islands rarely made it past tenth grade, and, of those who did, girls were two times more likely than boys to make it that far in school. More and more, couples are having children outside of marriage, with first babies being born between ages 17-20 for girls and ages 18-20 for boys. While strong religious and social norms have traditionally discouraged premarital sexual activity, over the past several years, the age of sexual debut has decreased to as low as 15 for girls and 14 for boys. A recent community assessment revealed that a large portion of first sexual experiences may be coerced or forced. However, couple communication around sexual issues is often rare, even between consenting partners. There is also normative pressure for young women and men to have sex without contraception, because much social value is given to becoming a mother or father. Throughout the Caribbean, parenthood signifies an important transition to adulthood, thus, becoming a parent at a young age is not always considered to be a negative consequence. For young

women, in particular, it can bring new found status and economic security, especially if they have more than one child with different "baby fathers." For young men, becoming a father can help to prove their maturity and virility and improve their status among peers. In many instances, boys are pressured to "sow their seed," while girls are encouraged to find someone to help support them financially. Although much sexual activity takes place among peers, intergenerational sex is not uncommon, as older married men often seek out younger women as mistresses. Because households tend to be headed by women, young women frequently get involved in these intergenerational relationships, because it brings additional financial security to them and their children.

Coupled with the pressure to become parents, youth also face much pressure from the media (television, radio, etc.) that encourages/promotes irresponsible sexual behavior, multiple partners, power imbalances between males and females, violence against women, and increased violent behavior, in general, especially among young men. Community groups suspect that these behaviors have led to an increasing spread of HIV in the region. HIV rates are as high as 5% on some of the islands.

The St. Vincent and the Grenadines Island-to-Island Program seeks to improve the reproductive health and HIV prevention outcomes of young men and women in the area. Young people are reached on their own islands through lectures explaining the reproductive system and how HIV "works," pamphlets describing prevention measures, and peer-to-peer activities. The primary message is "Plan and Protect." Young women are taught communication skills and methods for negotiating contraceptive and condom use more easily. They are encouraged to think about their future and what it means to be a "baby mother" early on in their life. Young men are taught communication and anger management skills and the importance of using condoms to protect against pregnancy and STIs/HIV. Like girls, they are also encouraged to think about their future and the increased responsibilities of becoming a baby father at a young age. Through the NGO, Vincentian Girls Against AIDS, young women are rallied to support each other against sexual pressure from the opposite sex and peer pressure that make it favorable to have babies early. Vincentian Girls Against AIDS also provides access to contraceptives and referrals to voluntary counseling and testing centers. Young men are reached through the National Banana Growers' Association during their bi-monthly plantation meetings. The Association encourages young men not to take advantage of young women, to think about their future, their finances, and the great risks involved if they do not use condoms to protect against HIV. They are also told about the negative consequences their behavior has on women – particularly younger women, and that they should treat women more equitably and avoid any sort of violent behavior. Twice a year at the Banana Growers' Association Fair, young men compete (by island) by putting on theater pieces for their peers. The winning island then travels to Kingstown to participate in additional training put on by the Ministry of Health each year.

The Youth League of St. Vincent and the Grenadines is the NGO that coordinates activities of the Island-to-Island Program. The Youth League is a dynamic group of adults and young people who are committed to youth development.

Indicators:

- Number of young women reached through outreach sessions
- Number of young male peer educators trained
- Number of young men reached through peer education
- Percent of intervention group reporting premarital sex
- Number of young women and men reached accepting modern contraceptive methods.