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Youth views on sexual violence put them at high risk of HIV infection & AIDS

Johannesburg (4/11/2005). – Misconceptions about sexual violence among South African youth feed into the high levels of violence against women and children in the country.

This was said by Dr Neil Andersson of the non-governmental organisation CIET. In late 2002, his research team conducted the largest study ever on the links between sexual violence and HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

"We are seeing evidence of a culture of sexual violence in South Africa," says Dr Neil Andersson, CIET's executive director. "Our youth have learnt to live with our country's endemic of violence – but it is taking its toll. It is making them more susceptible to perpetuating the cycle of violence - and making them more vulnerable to HIV infection and AIDS."

Andersson's statement comes at the beginning of Children's Month, and on the eve of the 16 Days of Activism Against Violence against women and children.

CIET's national youth survey involved more than 269,905 learners aged 10 to 19 years in 1,418 schools across the country. The study documented some alarming facts:
- 16% said they would spread HIV intentionally if they knew they were infected;
- One third of the respondents thought they might be HIV positive already - even though some youth who thought they were HIV positive were not yet sexually active;
- Only 60% of learners said they would be willing to be tested for HIV;
- One half of all learners did not know or did not believe condoms were effective in preventing pregnancy or the spread of sexually transmitted diseases or HIV;
- 12.7% still believed the myth that sex with a virgin will cure AIDS; and
- 34% of learners said they never talk to anyone about sex.

The study described the culture of sexual violence:
- 58% of boys and girls alike think it does not constitute violence to force sex with someone you know;
- 30% said girls had no right to refuse sex with boyfriends and 26% said girls enjoyed forced sex;
- Many learners also believed that a person has to have sex to show love, that girls mean yes when they say no, and that girls like sexually violent guys;
- Overall, 8.6% said they were raped in the past year;
- Around 11% of boys and 4% of girls admitted to forcing sex with someone else;
- Some 66% of these boys and 71% of girls had themselves been subjected to forced sex; and
- Learners who had been forced to have sex were more inclined to believe they were HIV positive and more likely to say that they would intentionally spread HIV.

"Young people probably feel cornered by all this violence, and they respond by seeming to takesexual abuse for granted, by treating aggression almost as something they expect",

says Dr Andersson. "When they should be learning how to say ‘no’ and how to negotiate their way out of threatening situations, the attitudes of many young people seems to increase their risks."

Fortunately, the study also brings good news: the classroom as a source of HIV risk education was consistently associated with reduced misconceptions.

The results of the study have already been used to develop life skills education materials, called Beyond Victims and Villains, adapted to meet the standards of the Revised National Curriculum Statement and available free to departments of education. CIET's director says it is important that those responsible for educating youth about HIV take into account that learners may be changed by their personal experiences and environment.

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