Published on ***sexgenderbody*** (http://sexgenderbody.com)

Maasai warriors take on AIDS

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Created ***29 Dec 2009 - 13:27***

[1]**It is not easy to tell morans to leave their girls, because they pass time talking about girls and sex, but today they know that condoms can protect them against HIV**

MAGADI, 29 December 2009 (PlusNews) [1] - Attempts to promote HIV awareness among Kenya's Maasai community have often foundered on the community's unwillingness to accept externally driven change; but a new initiative is using Maasai 'morans', or warriors, to spread the word.

"The Maasai are very traditional people and the best way to reach them is to go in without trying to dilute their culture - we give them free space to learn by using cultural systems to integrate reproductive health education," said Peter Ngura, programme manager for a nomadic youth project of the African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF), a health and development NGO.

"We train 'morans' as peer educators and use them to reach out to their fellow 'morans' because these are the only people culture allows them to interact freely with," he added. "'Morans' will only listen to their 'moran' chiefs and this is the reason they are the people we train to train their fellow 'morans' who are under their command."

'Morans' form an age set of male youths aged from the mid-teens to the mid-twenties; they have a duty to protect their community and livestock assets, and during this phase they are encouraged to have multiple affairs. 'Morans' spend much of their time in the bush, where they are largely isolated from the rest of their community, only interacting with girlfriends, elders and chiefs who visit them to impart traditional Maasai wisdom.

Lelein Kanunga is a 'moran' chief who has broken with tradition to spend his days educating 'morans' about the dangers of HIV as part of the AMREF programme.

"Because I have been taught about the dangers of sex without a condom and circumcizing girls and beating women, I have made it my duty to tell the same to my fellow 'morans'," he told IRIN/PlusNews. "There are things we have done like cutting women [female genital mutilation/cutting] but I think there haven't been valid reasons for doing it."

There are few statistics about HIV prevalence among the Maasai, who make up about 2 percent of Kenya?s population, but their relative isolation from modern society means it has remained quite low compared with the general prevalence of seven percent within the Rift Valley Province,where most Maasai live.

However, today, many young Maasai men leave the community to earn a living as drivers or traders in large, high-prevalence urban centres, returning home and continuing with traditional customs such as marrying several wives, putting the community at a higher HIV risk than in the past.

"It is not easy to tell 'morans' to leave their girls because they pass the time talking about girls and sex, but today they know that condoms can protect them against HIV and other sexual diseases and they are using them," he added. "It is not easy but now some of us say to parents of girls: 'We will only marry your daughters if they are not circumcized"'.

Using culture, involving the community

James Reteti, another 'moran'-turned-peer-educator, has started to use a traditional milk gourd to carry and dispense condoms to his fellow 'morans'.

"'Morans' value the gourd that is used to carry milk for them... They believe anything in there is precious," he said. "We have used these gourds as a traditional condom dispenser... This makes them know this is a precious thing for them."

According to AMREF's Ngure, one of the most important aspects of the project is involving the Maasai cultural leaders who wield strong influence in the community.

"Cultural elders make decisions and what they say goes, so we use them by imparting the knowledge about issues such as the dangers of encouraging many sexual partners, marrying off young girls, female genital cutting and the importance of family planning," he said.

So far, the programme has trained 70 'moran' chiefs as peer educators in the three districts of Kajiado, Magadi and Loitoktok in Kenya's Rift Valley Province.

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