

More Youths Exchanging Sex for Gifts, Money

A recent study shows that more young people are exchanging sex for gifts and money, a trend which youth leaders last week said needed urgent "social interventions".

The youth leaders made the call during last Wednesday's Youth Action Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Development at the Mona Visitors' Lodge, University of the West Indies, where the 2008 study was discussed.

"Transactional sex is a problem for us in Jamaica," Andre Robb, project manager of the Jamaica Youth Advocacy Network (JYAN)/ Global Fund Sex Ed: Best Said campaign, told the gathering. "It is sex in exchange for gifts, money among other favours. However, it is not the same as commercial sex where it is your sole means of income," Robb said.

The forum was organised to identify the challenges and progress being made by youth leaders in their efforts to contribute to the sexual and reproductive health and rights of youths. Sannia Sutherland of the National HIV/STI Control Programme supported the concern raised by Robb, while explaining the focus of the latest study for 2008. "The National HIV/STI programme carries out a Knowledge, Attitudes, Beliefs and Perceptions survey every four years. What we do is measure sexual behaviour among the risk groups and transactional sex is an overriding issue in the 15-24 age-groups," Sutherland said. Young persons between the ages of 15 and 25 were identified as a high-risk group due to behavioural, social and cultural factors which continue to fuel the HIV epidemic. The high risk tag has caused concern among the youth leaders. "In every one thousand people, 16 are HIV-positive. An estimated 27,000 people are living with HIV. Unfortunately, an estimated 14,000 people are unaware that they are HIV-positive," said Robb, who noted that in 2004, HIV was the second leading cause of death for Jamaican males and females aged between 15-24. Multiple partners and a decline in condom use among youths were identified as the major factors contributing to the high prevalence rate. The forum served as a medium for youth leaders from JYAN, The National Secondary Students' Council, Portmore Youth Council and the International Youth Speak Out Council.