

MY SPEECH:

By Andile Mthombeni (Young Women's Leadership Project member, Wits University)

I would like to tell you a short story of one of our success candidate from our research program. Ladies and gentleman I introduce to you a young woman who has a story to tell. She is from a township, raised by a strong single black woman. Her childhood was very simple, watched her mother work hard, struggle up and down trying to provide for her family. They didn't have much, still don't but they are content, because after all that is the norm in most townships. This young woman had a close relationship with her mother when growing up and still maintains that relationship, however just like any normative mother-child relationship, sex and sexual reproductive health issues were of no communication. Sex and boys were never a subject of discussion, If anything there is one memory that she vividly remembers of her mother threatening her by saying "if you ever come here in this house pregnant, you will raise that child alone in the streets, I am telling you". Hehe, although she laughs about it now, that threat might somewhat be what prevented her from falling to the trap of unplanned teenage pregnancy, who knew that threats sometimes work.

Fast tracking to her high-school (teenage years), she had her first talk about sex, sexual reproductive health and boys. No she didn't learn about this in the classroom (sadly) but from friends who heard so and so say that so and so had said. Now that she looks back, she laughs as she sees the blind leading the blind straight to the pit of the den. And sadly this is a shared experience for most young women who learn about sexuality and their bodies through peers who are no experts whatsoever. Through this talk about sex, boys and etc, this young woman would be curious about this nice thing that everyone is talking about and doing; however she would not dare do it, because just like in cartoons, an image would appear on her forehead of her mother threatening "if you dare I will kick you out". That is how she got through high school and looking back she thanks her mother for those threats.

After high school, she had applied for university and thanks to government funding she got in, although not sure of what she was getting into, she enrolled for her B.A degree in psychology. All she knew was that she had a loan to pay back (a black people loan, if you black you will know what she is talking about – for those that are lost, this is the study, make money and spend your life supporting your family, getting them out of poverty, building your mother a house, caring for your nephews, etc....the university is the lottery ticket out).

Little did she know of the challenges she would be faced with at university, the pressures of keeping up with the Kardashians, in this case the Kardashians are the university girls that have it all, the I phone the eye this, and anything and everything with an eye in it. The struggle was real, but because her mom can't afford such let alone sustain herself, what does she do, her friends are doing it and are living the so

called life, and yet once again she decides not to. However a bigger obstacle lied ahead of her, when she came near to finishing her undergraduate, and with no employment or internship to look forward, the fear of going back home with a degree and doing nothing got her panicking. Push came to shove, she felt cornered and she saw no way out but to do what the others had always been doing, which is throw herself to the male predators' who drive around nighttime (in nice Be My Wife cars (BMW) more like be my side dish type of car if you ask me) driving around in the streets around students' campuses and res's, lurking for their next victims. This young woman was at the tip of her ice berg, and just about to throw herself in that pit, someone reached out to her and grabbed holding onto to her saving her from herself. Yes so far this is one of those fairytale happy ending stories. I say this with boldness because ladies and gentlemen that young lady is standing right here in front of you today sharing her story. Everyone has a story to tell.

My superhero that saved me from myself I like to believe is God that sent my mentor my way. A mentor that is the advocate of young women's sexual reproductive health, under the Young Women's Leadership Program (YWLP), which is one of the African Gender Institute (AGI) projects being funded by the Ford Foundation Organization. So I say thank you to my mentor/my supervisor/professor, I thank you AGI and importantly I applaud and thank Ford Foundation for the work their doing, because without their funding, this project might not have been. . However I would also like to thank the organizers of this conference for scouting and unveiling young people like myself, to be presented with such big platform and I thank the Minister of Health, I think you are onto something great minister by involving and engaging with the youth, and not just any youth but those that are at risk, the statistics that is us and for that I applaud you.

Now before I take my seat, I would like to highlight very important outcomes that programs like AGI/SRH YWLP do for young women who are at risk like myself: This is what I would like for you to take home with you: AGI has done the following for me:

- Growing up I was never encouraged to have a dream, dream beyond the township, why because my mother herself was never encouraged to dream by her mother. AGI taught me to have a dream for myself as a young woman, dream beyond depending on a man for financial survival.
- It taught me the importance of mentorship, we all can dream but not all can make them come true, and having someone to hold your hand and guide you is of extensive importance. And I cannot emphasis this enough, sometimes instead of money investing time and believing in someone is all that it takes to transform and inspire change.
- It opened my eyes to discovering my love for research as well as identifying my passion of reading – young South Africans don't like to read, and trust me when you engage in the culture of reading novels, boys you will have no time for.

- It empowered us as young women to take responsibility for our own sexuality, educating ourselves and others amongst us about our SRH
- There's a common saying that goes "Do not do for us without us, and I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to involve young people in the fight against HIV/AIDS epidemic.
- This program is an intervention for and an investment in young black women and in return it is reducing the number of young black women that are at risk of engaging in unhealthy relationships that put them at risk of HIV infection (just as Dr Shisana mentioned in her presentation yesterday).
- Empower young women, give them responsibilities, inspire them to have dreams and aspirations, invest in them and keep us busy, and sit back and watch the reduction of high risk of HIV incidences amongst young black women.

I will tell you one last story for the day. Someone very smart once introduced me to the research of other people's cultures. If ever you've been to South America (I haven't but have read about it) you will know that in Peru there is a tribe of people called the Inca, (the Incan Empire) that is well known for their world site city MACHU PICHU. This was a very great Empire that united over 80 different groups speaking different languages who were divided by the mountains. The Incan Empire had to be in communication with all the different groups, but because there was no technology in the mountains, they devised forms of sending messages had to be sent back and forth, and there were 'Inca warriors that were positioned in-between the centre of the Empire and the other villages. These messengers would run back and forth with messages, running for days and kilometers, without ever tiring. They called them the Inca warriors". Ladies and gentleman I ask you to look to your neighbor and shake their hand for being an Inca warrior, I stand before you as an Inca warrior/princess that is spreading the message of SRHR for young women and thanking you for your hard work and efforts to empower young people and inspire change. Stay being warriors that you are, we are the future and there is hope for our country, let's keep producing young warriors like myself and my fellow AGI sister warriors all over the SADC region.

Going forward we aim to produce PHD scholars, and Minister Nzimande, we will hold you to your promise of scholarships😊

I thank you very much.