

# How Do We Increase the Participation of An Interview with Sisonke

BY SONJA KLINSKY

*Cet article relate une entrevue avec Sisonke Msimang, un étudiant à la maîtrise de l'Université de Cape Town qui a aussi été le coordonnateur du forum pour les jeunes au Forum pour le développement de l'Afrique noire qui a eu lieu à Addis Abeba en décembre 2000.*

*Sonja Klinsky (SK):* What are some of the challenges that limit the participation of youth, in particular young women in HIV/AIDS activism?

*Sisonke Msimang (SM):* One of the biggest challenges is not one that you can blame on young people themselves but one that has to do with the attitudes held by the people who work with youth. Young people are incredibly engaged and involved in HIV/AIDS activism at the service level, although in developing countries they are not so active at the policy level. Quite often however, the people who work with youth are extremely condescending towards them and limit their decision making power. It is a real challenge to get youth to attend regional meetings as they lack the credentials that more senior participants have. Once they are at these meetings they are often greeted enthusiastically by other members of the community but the actual structure of the meetings are not changed so that they can fully participate.

In the African context youth participation also has the added challenge of communication difficulties. There are few networks that allow young people to travel and telephone and email infrastructure is often not as available to youth as it is to other organizations and individuals.

In addition, the quality of young

women's participation is often determined by the young men who are also participants in discussions and meetings. When young men are present there is often not space left for young women to also participate and speak—young men do not often realize how much they talk and how much space they can take up. Importantly, they often feel that discussing gender issues detracts from discussing youth issues. The attitude is that "we are so marginalized as it is, why should we be favouring girls over boys?" So there's a clear need to educate boys about gender.

*SK:* How might some of these challenges be overcome?

*SM:* When we were organizing the Youth Forum for Addis Adaba, UNICEF was very gender-sensitive. As part of the registration process we asked participants to indicate their sex and we had to apply pressure to countries and organizations to send more young women. Unfortunately however, the decision about who is going to participate is made at the organizational level, and not at the level of the UN country office. So in some cases we had to go back to these organizations and explicitly ask for female participants. This step simply addressed to challenge of getting young women there but it did increase the number of young women who could participate.

The other large challenge is about the ways in which young men and women interact and participate. This was much more difficult to deal with, because boys talk a lot and girls are socialized to listen. These are learned

behaviors that take years to learn, and in the short time we had, it was difficult to adequately address this. The meeting was short and so there was limited time to get into in-depth participation issues but there were a number of extremely strong young women who really spoke out and were heard, which was great.

*SK:* What are some of the strongest contributions that young women make to discussions on HIV/AIDS?

*SM:* When young women are not in the room young men often talk in a way which is extremely gender blind—it is assumed that everyone is male. Young women generally seem to be more attuned to this and although many of them do not explicitly call themselves feminists they do encourage gender inclusivity and have very strong ideas about the need to have strong female participation. Young women have often been major players in issues of condom negotiation, peer education, and safety.

*SK:* Do you have any recommendations that might increase young women's ability to be heard in HIV/AIDS discussions at UNIGASS?

*SM:* Considering the controversy around the current UN special session on AIDS, I think that there needs to be more attention paid to the connections between young women and other civil society members and between young women and young men. This year within the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNIGASS on HIV/AIDS) there has been a great deal of discussion whether civil society organizations were going

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## Msimang

to be allowed to participate meaningfully at all. No one is listened to who is not government and big governments are not listening to little ones—young women are basically at the bottom of the heap. Even though UNIFEM is doing a lot to ensure that there are more young women attending the conference than there otherwise would be, we will need to strategize about how to draw attention to the fact that their voices will not be heard in the rooms where decisions are made.

Of course, our job will be to make sure that they are heard loud and clear in the corridors, and everywhere else. Young women have too much at stake in the epidemic to allow themselves to be silenced.

What we need to do is to increase the discussion and connection between young women and organizations as well as between young women and young men as these are forums where changes could be made and where young women could develop a greater voice. As part of this we also need to recognize that AIDS is a gendered epidemic which means that we need to look at how funds are being used and distributed and how this will effect young women in particular. We need to start lobbying for some specific commitments from governments that relate to young women and youth in particular. Right now some NGOs are sitting at important tables but young women are not. We need to make sure that young women are somehow represented at all levels. I think it is also important to encourage more participation in meetings that are not directly related to HIV/AIDS as well.

*SK:* Are there any websites that people could go to for more information?

*SM:* I am currently the moderator of the African Development Forum youth electronic discussion forum in which people can get involved <http://www.bellanet.org/lyris/helper/>. This forum started out as African but there are loads of people on it and we are expanding beyond the continent so no matter where you're from, sign up! In addition, they can also sign up for the "Break the Silence" discussion list which you can sign up on by going to [www.hdnet.org](http://www.hdnet.org). There is also a web page that is focussed on the upcoming special session (<http://www.un.org/ga/aids>). This website has information on the special session and general assembly.

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*Rochelle Rubinstein, untitled, hand-coloured linocut print, 6" x 4", 1999*

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