

★ Education

SEX EDUCATION

BY PAULINE ODHIAMBO

Sexual health education can be an awkward affair, but when it comes to teaching it to the deaf, it becomes even more complicated, hampered by the lack of a standardised sign language for specific issues pertaining to sex.

In a continent where millions of people are living with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, it has become necessary for the government to legislate training manuals that can be easily understood by the Kenyan deaf — many of whom have low literacy levels and may not be trained in the formal education system.

The existing prejudices and other cultural misconceptions about physically challenged and handicapped people may also facilitate the sexual abuse of deaf people in society.

Subsequently, the Deaf Peers' Education Manuals — books that aim to enlighten the deaf on sexual health, HIV and Aids, have been distributed in at least 30 deaf-training institutions across the country since its launch in September last year.

Developed by Sahaya Deaf International in conjunction with the Kenyan Deaf

people are pictured signing words such as 'clitoris', 'foreplay', 'fallopian tubes', 'abortion', 'erection' and 'orgasm' among other sex-related words.

Jackie Odwesso, project manager of the Sahaya Deaf Programme in Kenya says that because the majority of deaf people originate from Western, Nyanza and Rift Valley provinces, the manual has been modified using cultural symbols associated with people from those areas.

"A deaf person enjoys sex just like any other person. The problem is that most deaf people in the country are enrolled in schools at late ages and some of them don't get to learn about sexual issues until their well into their 20s," Odwesso says. "They (the deaf) are

submissive'."

Odwesso says that misconceptions about the deaf often result in incidences of physical and sexual abuse, adding that people in the deaf community are often abused by their relatives or friends and neighbours.

Consequently the sign language for words like 'incest', 'rape', 'abuse', 'condom', 'vaccine', 'transmission', 'sugar daddy', 'sugar mummy' and 'abstinence' have been created to standardise sexual health education within the deaf schools in the country.

"There are some situations where deaf teenage girls have fallen pregnant as a result of rape or other forms of sexual abuse. The manual teaches young girls and even boys on what to do

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FOR THE DEAF

as they are referred to in the manual, have been placed at various deaf schools across the country to sensitise students on sexual health issues.

“Having a deaf child is considered a cultural taboo by many communities, that’s why people who give birth to deaf children tend to hide them from the rest of society. The individuality of deaf children is suppressed from an early age because they are ignored by the rest of society.”

She adds that because of such cultural taboos, some people do not feel it necessary to educate their deaf family members. Deaf children born into poor families have fewer chances of being exposed to decent education from an early age.

“Even with free primary education, deaf schools are still expensive. One of the cheapest deaf schools charges about Sh9,000 a year in tuition fees.

This money is too much, especially for the poor.

cially for the poor people who live in rural areas.”

The master educators who are often members of the deaf community are trained on how to use puppetry, pictorial illustrations and other student-interactive teachings that focus on issues on sexual health and the different preventative and

treatment measures that are related to sexually transmitted diseases.

A sign language for words like ‘pap smear’, ‘sanitary towels’, ‘genital sores’, and ‘pre/post-HIV test counseling’, have also been included in the manual.

“For years deaf people called HIV and Aids ‘the Thinning Disease’ and the deaf community lacked an effective sign language to encompass the various aspects of sexual health. That’s why we needed a teaching manual of some common signs to communicate well and sensitise the deaf in the country, especially in marginalised areas where many do not have access to an education system that is tailored to their needs.”

Odwesso is optimistic that the manual will help the deaf to overcome some of the challenges that arise when trying to fit within the society.

