

Throwing light on

“Masikhanyise” means “let’s bring light”. And that is exactly what a group of women in Cape Town are doing. They meet three times a week to look at ways of improving their lives. *SPEAK* takes a closer look at the project



Photo: PPA

For the past two years, over 100 women from Khayelitsha have been meeting every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, to discuss and find solutions to their common problems. The most important thing about Masikhanyise is the community involvement. When the group meets, they talk about women’s health, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), family planning and child abuse. Here they can share their life experiences, problems in the community and hopes for the future.

The Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa (PPASA) has been part of setting up the project. Their main aim is to empower women through self-help projects. In 1992 a group of women from PPASA went to Khayelitsha to ask women what their needs were.

After the survey was carried out, PPASA looked at the most important issues women raised, and went on to launch Masikhanyise. The results helped women work out their programme of action. Today there are four groups in Khayelitsha, each with 25 members.

“The women meet to share ideas and experiences about responsible sexual behaviour, family planning and reproductive rights. They also talk about other social problems such as teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, cervical and breast cancer and child sexual abuse,” says project co-ordinator Vivian Gongota.

Four field workers assist the women’s groups. After having group discussions, the women go back into their communities to educate people. Sometimes the women go door-to-door to speak about these issues.

Women in the Masikhanyise group in a discussion on AIDS



These pages have been sponsored by PPASA. The Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa is a national non-governmental organisation working in the fields of family planning, reproductive health and sexuality education. It has branches throughout the country. The telephone numbers of their offices are:
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our lives



Family planning can benefit both men and women

"The response from the community has been very encouraging," says Gongota.

In May this year, a group of men approached her. They wanted to form a group. They too wanted to talk about issues such as STDs and HIV/AIDS.

"I was surprised when they came to see me, because most men do not worry about such things," says Gongota.

"It is a starting point and with time, more men will become involved. It is a good idea to have programmes aimed at men and women because most men are shy and feel uncomfortable about going to family planning clinics because they are aimed at women only," she adds.

The project also prepares women to be self-reliant by

teaching them skills such as sewing and knitting. Using donated sewing and knitting machines, the women make garments for themselves and their children. They also sell some of the items to other residents at low prices.

"Since I finished my dress-making course, I make clothes for my baby," says Nomzimasi, a member of the project.

Another woman from the group, Mantombi, is using her new skills to improve her home.

"I'm specialising in bed linen. Husbands don't buy linen, they just want to sleep comfortably without thinking of what makes a comfortable bed."

The women from Masikhanyise want to have greater control over their lives. Through this project they feel they have, in some ways, achieved this. They now have confidence in themselves and know what they want for them-

selves, their husbands and children.

Although large families are traditional and contraceptives are rejected, Maxaba says this should change:

"In-laws and church people won't be able to meet the needs of your children. They won't feed, clothe or send them to school. They won't even shelter your big family."

Patience agrees with her and adds: "The information I get here, I pass on to my neighbours and young sisters. I am a victim of teenage pregnancy. I've been through depression and frustrations of being a young mother.

"The most terrible thing for me is that I'm supposed to be a child but, after having a child of my own, I've lost my rights as a teenager," she says.

"Since I joined the Masikhanyise group, I tell people about the benefits of using contraceptives and of having safer sex."

The project is perhaps best summed up by Adelaide, one of the fieldworkers: "When I joined this organisation two years ago, I knew very little about family planning and STDs, and nothing about AIDS, but I received effective training from the PPASA. The training has developed me and, through workshops, women are developing high-quality life skills."

Gongota says working with the project has been very rewarding for her.

"Personally, I feel great. We are on the road to achieving our goals. Women are changing their attitudes and behaviour. I am positive that through such projects we can empower South African women," she said. ☺