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**Breaking the Silence:
Dec. 1st broadcast of HIV-prevention video
created by St. Lucian girls**

You might see her standing on the side of the road near her school, waiting to catch a bus home. Sometimes you'll see her at the market, buying food for her family. You might also find her at the bank, behind the counter, counting change for a customer. Sometimes she will be out dancing, surrounded by her friends, a big smile on her face. Or maybe you'll run into her relaxing on the beach, watching the sun set. In fact, she is everywhere in St. Lucia – she is a young woman or girl at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS.

**Half of all new HIV infections around the world are among women.
In the Caribbean, girls are 7 times more likely to contract HIV
than boys the same age (UNICEF).**

Why are women and girls increasingly vulnerable to HIV? The answer is far more complicated than a lesson in biology. In most societies, it is the legal, social and economic disadvantages faced by women and girls that intensify their HIV vulnerability. Many women are denied the knowledge and tools they need to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

In St. Lucia, we have been diligently learning our ABC's (abstain, be faithful, consistently use a condom). But until a woman clearly understands the facts of HIV transmission, until she develops the self-confidence and communication skills needed to negotiate safer sex, until she secures the financial independence and basic human rights that enable her to refuse unsafe sex, a woman in St. Lucia is not necessarily in control of her own fate.

What can we do about it?

Last year, thirteen teenage girls from all over St. Lucia participated in a media literacy and HIV prevention program called *Breaking the Silence*. After six weeks of intensive training, these girls created a 30-minute educational video. This video was written, shot, directed, and edited by the girls themselves! Because the video was created by girls, in their own language and on their own terms, the messages presented speak directly to those most at risk.

From the beginning, the *Breaking the Silence* program has focused on the issue of gender inequity as a major risk-factor for HIV/AIDS. The program was designed to raise discussion about stereotypical gender roles that place girls at even higher risk than boys. *Breaking the Silence* seeks to change the fact that young women often have little control over when, where and how sex happens in their lives.

What does putting a girl behind a video camera have to do with preventing HIV/AIDS?

By providing highly transferable vocational, creative thinking, teamwork, communication, and leadership skills, *Breaking the Silence* addresses the spread of HIV at its root causes, empowering girls with tools they can use both in their intimate relationships and in community advocacy. *Breaking the Silence* helps St. Lucian girls face their future with the protection of education, the practical training of video production, and the power of voice. These voices, in turn, are helping break the silence around HIV/AIDS in St. Lucia and beyond.

In the year that since the *Breaking the Silence* video was first created, the girls' HIV prevention messages have traveled around the world – making noise in Grenada and Santo Domingo, playing on tv and theatre screens in various cities across the United States, and even reaching audiences as far as Geneva and Bangkok, Thailand. The video is also being used as an awareness-raising tool for thousands of viewers in classrooms, health centers, and television broadcast audiences – drawing much-needed local, regional, and international attention to the spread of HIV among youth, and particularly girls in the Caribbean.

In recognition of World AIDS Day on December 1st, 2004, *Breaking the Silence* will be broadcast on several television stations in St. Lucia (call for times and other details). Also look for an article about *Breaking the Silence* and the story of a young St. Lucian woman who is living with HIV in the January issue of Seventeen magazine, which begins hitting newsstands all over the world in coming weeks. The international theme for World AIDS Day this year is women, girls, and HIV.

More information is available at www.breakingthesilence.info.

Breaking the Silence is a special project of 911 Media Arts Center in collaboration with the St. Lucia Red Cross Society.
