



## PRESS RELEASE

### Higher education cautions on ‘blessing’

Pretoria, date – “Blesser” relationships seem to be a topic that is taking over the South African media and social media space.

This is a situation that concerns the higher education sector because many young women who are – or could be – in tertiary education are also the primary target for this form of transactional sex.

Research conducted in 2014 in the TVET education sub-sector suggests that 14% of relationships are considered as transactional sex.

Typically an older, wealthier man is the blesser. A young woman is a blessee. He provides her with goods, money or lifestyle experiences in return for sex. They rarely expect a longer-term bond to develop through the sponsored relationship.

“Our role and objective is to protect youth of both sexes as they exit puberty and enter young adulthood. This is a sensitive time for both genders but women are undoubtedly in a less advantaged and more risky position in many ways,” says Dr Ramneek Ahluwalia, director of the Higher Education and Training HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS).

“Transactional relationships are an international, age-old practice. They become particularly complex and alarming when they lead to the disempowerment of people participating in them. South Africa has a high level of socio-economic disparity. Patriarchal attitudes and social norms impact on young women’s educational and career prospects. Let’s recognise that this is where the allure of blessing lurks,” says Dr Ahluwalia.

As suggested by media reports and personal testimonies, the practice of blessing is helped along by the always-awake social media – there is very little hiding place from its attractive and desirable images which provide the backdrop for the demand-supply nature of this relationship.



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Dr Ahluwalia explains that HEAIDS' core aim is to provide on-campus education and services which empower women, and men, so they are confident they have the knowledge and the means to protect themselves and to make their own decisions regarding personal relationships.

This way women can avoid entering into a relationship that will disempower them and put their physical or emotional wellbeing at risk.

Research attests to the fact that when it comes to sex, women are more vulnerable than men as they are often not empowered enough to ensure that they are protected.

The Human Sciences Research Council's National HIV Prevalence, Incidence and Behaviour Survey 2014 showed that the HIV incidence rate among females was four times higher than among same-aged males. It also indicated a higher probability for female teenagers aged 15 to 19 to have sex with older partners compared to males. Also the HIV prevalence for women aged 15 to 49 is 8.7% higher than for men in the same age group.

Dr Ahluwalia says that HIV and STI infections and unplanned pregnancies are more likely to happen among youth of university and TVET-going age than in other age groups and they are directly linked to a student's prospect of completing her or his studies. Women are disproportionately affected in this regard because of the nature of the HIV epidemic, physiological differences and social norms.

"We want to send a strong message to the female students and their families and friends that if you are making a choice to become a blesee, then be aware of choices. Also be aware of the dangers of a blessed relationship and know how to protect yourself from its frequent and unwanted side-effects including infection and violence, because these will sooner or later affect your education and future."

"Choose education," advises Dr Ahluwalia. "Education has a protective effect. It provides prospects and hope. Through the HEAIDS interventions students in all public education and training institutions have access to information about health promotion and the tools they need including condoms, HIV and STI tests, counselling and contraception.

"We understand that the dire economic position of many of our students leads many to seek alternatives but we assure you that persevering with your studies is worthwhile. And when you need help, we can provide it."

Dr Ahluwalia says that HEAIDS and its partners will this year prioritise addressing the health, safety and wellbeing of some 58 percent of the women students at the 429 campuses that belong to the HEAIDS programme. He emphasises that just like transactional sex, coerced sex



and rape also increase the risk of infections and threaten women's dignity, health and educational outcomes.

"We cannot watch from the side-lines as our girls continue to be exploited and used as commodities. We have to show them a better way of living that will keep them healthy and safe from harm. The real blessing is finishing your studies and getting to the end of your academic year," concludes Dr Ahluwalia.

### **About HEAIDS**

The Higher Education and Training HIV & AIDS national programme (HEAIDS) aims to develop and support HIV/TB/STI mitigation initiatives and promote health and wellness across South Africa's public higher education institutions (HEIs) and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges.

It is a programme of the Department of Higher Education and Training that is undertaken by Higher Education South Africa (HESA), the representative body of the 26 HEIs, in partnership with South African College Principals Organisation (SACPO), the representative body of 50 public TVETs.

As part of an increasingly comprehensive HIV/TB/STI mitigation programme in the higher education and training sector, HEAIDS implements the following projects in partnership with a range of public and private sector role players:

- First Things First HCT/TB/STI General Health & Wellness Programme
- Men Health and Empowerment Programme
- Women Health and Empowerment Programme
- Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Programme
- MSM and LGBTI Programme
- Academic Capacity Development Programme
- Future Beats Youth Development and HIV prevention through campus radio and social media.

