



Dr. Babacar Fall, an associate professor of history at the University Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar, Sénégal, delivered a presentation entitled "The Window of Hope: Population, Health, HIV/AIDS & Education in Africa" in the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art on Thursday.

Africans face AIDS crisis, speaker says

Dr. Babacar Fall offered his views on educating the youth about health

Freelance Reporter

Posted: 5/12/06

Using innovative educational approaches aimed at youths is the only way to halt the rapid spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, an African scholar said Thursday.

Babacar Fall, an African professor of history in West Africa's leading university, gave a lecture Thursday afternoon about the prevalence and impact of HIV/AIDS in Africa among youths and what people like himself are doing to give them a future free of the disease.

The lecture, titled "The Window of Hope: Population, Health, HIV/AIDS and Education in Africa," took place in the art museum's lecture hall and is part of the Baobab Lectures, a series devoted to African studies.

Fall spoke of his grassroots organization, the Group for the Study and Training of the Population

"We can change the face of HIV/AIDS in the continent," Fall said as he began his lecture, explaining the rapid population growth occurring in southern Africa. "Fifty-seven percent of the population is less than 20 years old."

African youths have an increased vulnerability to contracting HIV/AIDS because of their sexual curiosity, which, Fall feels, is fueled by the lack of education on HIV/AIDS in schools.

Fall noted that 60 percent of new HIV infections occur in youths ages 16 to 24, compared to .6 percent in the U.S. In Senegal, the West African country where Fall lives and teaches, the rate of HIV among youths is the same as in the U.S. Senegal's low rate of infection reflects the essential work by both the government and community, said Fall, who also mentioned Uganda's recent successes in decreasing HIV's prevalence because of unified efforts from the country.

Most sub-Saharan countries, however, do not yield such promising conditions. Swaziland, a small country in Southeast Africa, ranks highest in the world for its HIV prevalence of 38.8 percent, and Botswana compares

with a rate of 37.3 percent.

"The tipping point is 3 percent. After that (HIV) just explodes," said Anne Williams, a former USAID worker and retired University international programs coordinator.

Williams said that while working with USAID, promoting condoms presented challenges because AIDS had, and in some cases still has, a stigma.

Advocates like Fall work to eradicate the stigma and lack of information surrounding HIV/AIDS, especially in schools where youths need to learn the facts, Fall said.

"If we are successful with education we can preserve youths' generation of HIV/AIDS," Fall said.

New approaches to save youths from the epidemic focus on changing people's behavior by teaching them life skills and information on HIV/AIDS. Many governments and organizations have begun to implement education-based programs, including the World Bank, which help African countries accelerate the education available for youths.

"Youth is the key to change," Fall stressed, pointing out three reasons they are more vulnerable to HIV: the way they are socialized, their early sexuality and use of drugs and alcohol. Socialization presents a major problem because they often cannot look to their families and schools for sexual advice and answers.

Fall's grassroots program uses "community education to promote health awareness," said Dennis Galvan, chairman of the University's African Studies Committee.

Fall started the program because youths were forced to look to the media and Internet for explanations because current school curricula, influenced by conservative beliefs, fail to address the epidemic. He recognizes many youths feel uncomfortable or simply cannot seek help in their homes, so he establishes community youths groups that provide important information about HIV/AIDS, life skills and alternative options to having sex.

"We have a wall between the youth group and the family and school," Fall said. "It is important to develop a critical mass among youth."

Galvan wrote in an e-mail that the organization "puts him in direct contact with the leading development challenges and successes in Africa."

Fall also has created family life education clubs that teach youths how to become leaders. They put on extracurricular activities like drama and painting.

However, this approach to education faces skepticism from school authorities and parents.

"We are aware we have some resistance and conservatism from teachers and parents," Fall said. "Parents need to discover by themselves the real face of the youth."