

## **Record number of youth mobilized at aids 2006 conference**

*By Felicity Boachie-Danquah*

Young people now account for half of all new HIV infections; with over 1,000 youth delegates attending the conference, more than twice the number in Bangkok, young people at this year's conference have a powerful presence.

To increase youth participation, conference organizers drastically lowered registration fees and awarded 384 youth scholarships, up from 100 in 2004. The strength of the youth contingent, however, will not come from numbers alone.

The AIDS 2006 Youth Programme reflects the meaningful involvement of young people, with the most robust youth-focused activities of any international conference. Over 40 young people are presenting and moderating in plenary and abstract sessions, poster presentations and skills building workshops at the conference.

The youth have urged adult delegates to make specific commitments to work in partnership with the youth to improve youth focused HIV/AIDS programmes and policies. The youth programme at the conference which includes youth-focused sessions and presenters, youth-adult commitment and a media campaign, reflects the input and energy of the AIDS 2006 youth advisory committee.

It was in one of this workshops "young adults living with AIDS" that I met Mercy (not her real name). Mercy is a 21 one year old who found out that she is HIV positive two years ago. She said she got ill four years ago and it never crossed her mind that she could be HIV positive.

Mercy says after 2 years of searching to find out what is wrong with her, she went to another hospital with her parents, where they run a lot of HIV tests and she was diagnosed with AIDS. For fear of being stigmatized and discriminated, Mercy's parents and a friend she trust are the only ones who know about her status. According to Mercy, who has a boyfriend who is also HIV positive, "it is always good to have some one right next to you so you can share experience to make life easier".

Mercy has not given up hope; she is still in school and hopes to become a sports teacher and work with people who are disabled and have chronic disease. My goal is to combine sports and create awareness on HIV/AIDS issues, she says. Mercy who is very beautiful and looks healthy and happy, advised the youth to "first of all have safe sex, and for the young woman to be strong, be positive and keep hope".

"One day I hope this conference does not exist, it is not necessary for 24,00 people to gather to find a way to stop AIDS. I really hope that one day is not necessary any more", she emphasized.

In her eyes was hope for a better and brighter future, where there will be no aids.