

Charlize Theron's HIV Project to Help Youth in South Africa [VIDEO]

The actress talks about her organization, which creates safe spaces for young people and helps break down stigma.

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In South Africa, an estimated 7 million people are living with HIV, the highest prevalence of the virus in the world. This is why actress Charlize Theron, a native of the country, took action 10 years ago and established the Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project (CTAOP). She recently sat down with [South Africa's Eyewitness News](#) to discuss the project and its progress.

Since 2007, CTAOP has worked closely with South African organizations whose goal is to prevent the spread of HIV among adolescents. Today, it provides grants to seven local groups, including Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village, WhizzKids United and HIVSA.

“Really, what we’re trying to do is find out—through them—what they think the drivers are of becoming HIV positive,” Theron explained. “And what we try to do with CTAOP is eliminate those drivers as much as we possibly can, to [help the participants remain] HIV negative for the rest of their lives.”

Some of the drivers identified by the organization are stigma, sexism and racism. “Stigma is very much alive and well,” Theron said. “The idea of becoming HIV positive carries such an element of being ostracized within your family and your community that nobody wants that.” To counter that, she said, the project tries “to normalize HIV and to normalize taking ownership and pride in knowing your status.”

When asked whether there’s been progress in breaking down stigma in the country, Theron acknowledged that, although great strides have been made, there is still more work to do. “We have the largest treatment program in the world,” she said. “That’s incredibly positive. But we still have 53 percent of our people [living with HIV] not on treatment.”

According to Theron, a major goal of CTAOP is to create safe spaces for young people, including girls, who are at greater risk of contracting HIV. During her visits to CTAOP’s grantees, she often meets young women with the passion and skill set to become incredible leaders in South Africa.

“I see these women who walk up, and they take a mic, and they have a sense of control of the room,” Theron recalled. “They’ve experienced things in their life that they can articulate and talk about. There’s an intelligence there that you want to nurture. We are definitely looking at how we invest in young girls educationally. We want the ripple effect. We want them to continue this [work].”

To hear more from Theron’s interview, check out the video above. And [click here](#) to read about why young women in South Africa have such high rates of HIV infection.

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