

**THE MEDIA, YOUTH AND HIV/AIDS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Adolescents and youth, ages 10 to 24, comprise up to half of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa. Such a large youthful population represents potential for development, for youth represents vitality, enthusiasm and creativity. But this potential for development is constrained by two significant factors: (i) the demographic weight and momentum of this segment of the population strains the social and economic resources of developing African countries; (ii) the present and future wellbeing of youth themselves is threatened by a number of socio-economic and cultural obstacles. This paper discusses three obstacles that threaten the optimal development of youth and their potential contribution to Africa's development. These are: (i) Reproductive and sexual health, with emphasis on HIV/AIDS, (ii) Sexuality and Family Life Education, and (iii) Gender Equity and Equality. The paper argues that mass media institutions in Africa have a responsibility and the opportunity to address these issues. The paper urges media professionals in Africa to take advantage of the newly positive global environment that favours addressing issues affecting youth (as underlined at the International Conference on Population and Development - ICPD), and harness modern media and communications technologies to tackle the impediments to the development of youth talent and energies. It proposes specific ways in which the media can help to overcome each of the three obstacles identified in the paper.**

# **THE MEDIA, YOUTH<sup>1</sup> AND HIV/AIDS IN AFRICA<sup>2</sup>**

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## **I INTRODUCTION**

*We do not inherit the earth from our parents.*

*We borrow it from our children.*

The youth today are the inheritors of the earth tomorrow. Therefore, it is important for African societies to prepare them to assume their role as protectors and guardians of this inheritance. But safeguarding the earth is not the only reason to address the needs of youth. Over half of the world's population is aged under 25 years. Developing countries account for 85 percent of this population. In many African countries under-25s account for up to three fifths of the total population. These numbers imply a demographic weight and momentum that African societies must recognise and reckon with. They also impose a huge responsibility on society to secure the present health and wellbeing and the future security of youth. For the direction which today's youth takes will have a greater impact and significance on the future development of African societies than at any other time in Africa's history.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "youth", "adolescents" and "young people" are used frequently in this paper. The paper adopts the WHO definition of these terms. "Youth" is defined as the age group from 15 to 24. "Adolescence" is defined as the second decade of life, from age 10 to 19, hence adolescents are those aged 10 to 19. The term "young people" is defined to cover both "adolescence" and "youth", that is, ages 10 to 24. The term "teenager" or "teen" describes individuals aged from thirteen to nineteen.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is based largely on an earlier paper titled *The Media and Youth and Sub-Saharan Africa: Towards a Partnership for Development* presented by the author at the Ninth Annual Training Course for Mid-Career Journalists organised by the Union of African Journalists in Cairo, Egypt in April, 1995.

**Africa's youthful population is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it signals opportunity and potential. To move into the next generation or two with a population that is vigorous, enthusiastic and creative offers hope that Africa's natural assets can be harnessed through its own human resources. On the other hand, the size of the youth population and its inherent momentum mean that a disproportionate size of the region's resources must be devoted to cater to the needs a population that as yet does not contribute as much as it consumes. The key development question then is: How can Africans tap the creativity and energy inherent in a large youthful population while averting the social, economic and cultural upheavals which social scientists warn may befall Africa if this potentially valuable resource is not well managed?**

**The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in September 1994 fully acknowledged the significance of adolescents and youth in assuring a well-rounded development of human societies. The ICPD Programme of Action offers specific guidelines and proposes actions that countries can take to address issues affecting adolescents and youth. It encourages nations to confront the issue of adolescent reproductive health. It urges nations to offer opportunities for education and training to youth, focussing special attention on girls, and to prepare both boys and girls to develop in an environment of mutual support and respect. The ICPD Programme of Action calls on all institutions that seek to advance human progress and development to address the problems that affect young people. It duly recognises the role of the media as a key partner in implementing the Programme of Action<sup>3</sup>.**

**In this paper we address some of the key issues affecting the development of adolescents and youth in Africa at the dawn of the information revolution and assess the role that journalists and other media professionals in Africa can play in addressing them. We focus particular attention on issues raised by the ICPD, such as adolescent reproductive health, gender equity, and sexuality and family life education.**

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<sup>3</sup>See ICPD Programme of Action, Chapter XI. B, Paragraphs 11.11 to 11.26

## **II YOUTH, MEDIA AND DEVELOPMENT**

### **II.1 Youth in Africa - A Potential for Development**

**It is fashionable to begin and end all discussion about youth with a recitation of problems - those afflicting youth as well as those that they supposedly inflict on society. While this approach may have some merit – for indeed the problems facing African youth are many – it fails to recognise the potential for development inherent in a youthful population. Whilst a young population no doubt imposes a burden on the fragile economies and socio-political systems of African countries, the very size and inherent vitality of youth represents an asset. Africa's natural resources and latent wealth require technology and manpower to exploit them. Many of Africa's current industries and key economic activities – agriculture, fishing, mining and infrastructural development – are labour intensive and require youthful manpower. Until modern technology is developed sufficiently to reduce the labour intensiveness of these occupations, Africa's youthful population may indeed be considered an asset.**

**A youthful population also represents innate creativity, enthusiasm and optimism. Throughout human history, young people have led the way as adventurers, risk-takers and pioneers who have energised change and progress. With increasing access to information and knowledge brought about by modern education and the globalisation of communication, Africa's youth are now members of a global sub-culture that is poised to change the directions of development on a global scale. African youth have the same dreams as their counterparts around the world. With the proper direction, motivation, support and an enabling environment, they can bring about significant progress and change in Africa.**

**But this inherent potential of African youth remains just that - *potential*. In order for it to be fully realised conditions must be created for youth to overcome the many real problems and obstacles they face *right now*.**

## **II.2 Obstacles to the Development of Youth**

Like their counterparts around the world African adolescents and youth face psycho-social problems associated with the transition from childhood to adulthood. In addition to these normal growing pains, young people in Africa are confronted with specific problems and obstacles that merit special attention. These problems require that all African institutions must form a partnership to help our youth to direct their energies to improve their present conditions and achieve personal satisfaction in order to avert possible catastrophe. The mass media, as a major institution for education and information, have a key role to play in this regard. In this section we discuss three specific problems and obstacles to youth development and propose ways in which African media professionals can assist in addressing them. These are:

- Adolescent reproductive and sexual health
- Sexuality and family life education
- Gender inequity

### **II.2.1 Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health**

Some of the most serious health problems faced by adolescents in Africa are those associated with reproduction. The onset of puberty brings sexual awareness and maturation. This is a critical period in the life of adolescents. The choices that they make with regard to sexual behaviour at this time may have a long-lasting impact on their health and future family life. Whereas the root causes of adolescents' attitudes and behaviour towards sexual activity are the same, appropriate educational and service interventions can lead many to avert some of its potentially disastrous consequences by delaying the onset of sexual activity or, for those who cannot wait, by protecting themselves against pregnancy and disease.

In Africa, helping young people to understand sexuality and educating them to manage sexual activity and its consequences are critical in improving adolescent reproductive health. Studies show that in various African countries from a third to two thirds of all adolescents are sexually active. In many instances sexual activity begins quite early. In traditional societies, and currently among some religious cultures, such early sexual activity occurs within the context of culturally-sanctioned early marriages. However, in many African societies pre-marital sexual activity is widespread. Figure 1 below shows that in five out of 10 African countries surveyed by the DHS, unmarried girls are as likely (or more likely) to be sexually active as married girls.

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

Despite popular allegations to the contrary, pre-marital sexual activity is not a recent occurrence in Africa nor is it confined to African societies. An analysis of Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) data from several African countries concludes that in "several of the countries analysed here, premarital sexual intercourse among teenagers is not a new phenomenon as is often believed, but rather a continuation of a behavioral pattern that already existed in the past."<sup>4</sup> As table 1 and Figure 2 clearly indicate premarital sexual activity has increased only marginally across the three different age cohorts studies. In the countries in which pre-marital sexual activity was already the norm - Botswana, Ghana, Kenya and Liberia - younger age there have been increases in such activity. However in Burundi and, to a less extent, Zimbabwe, where premarital sex was less widespread, there appears to be a decline premarital sex among the younger generations.

[INSERT TABLE I AND FIG 2]

Premarital sexual activity is also not confined to Africa. Figures 3 and 4 show extent of sexual experience and sexual activity among 15 to 19 year-old girls in 12 South

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<sup>4</sup> Cited from Gage-Brandon Anastasia and Dominique Meekers, *Sexual Activity Before Marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Paper presented at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Denver, Colorado, April 30-May 2 1992.

and Central American countries and ten major cities in that region. It is clear that pre-marital sexual activity occurs in all countries in the region, although the incidence appears to be somewhat lower than in the African countries studied.

[INSERT FIGURES 3 AND 4]

Irrespective of the marital context, sexual activity among African adolescents is generally unprotected. Again the DHS provides a picture. Although contraceptive knowledge is relatively high, use is abysmally low. Figure 2 shows the rate of contraceptive use among 15 to 19-year old girls in 11 African countries. As the chart shows, contraceptive use among adolescent girls ranges from one percent in Burundi and Senegal to 25 percent in Botswana.

[INSERT FIGURE 5]

Unprotected sexual activity often leads to two sets of negative outcomes: (i) pregnancy and its consequences, and (ii) sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Both outcomes can have devastating consequences, particularly for adolescent girls. Pregnancies lead to premature parenthood or abortions. Indeed teenage pregnancy is one of the silent tragedies in Africa.

Pregnancy among adolescent girls poses serious social and health problems. Young girls who become pregnant, especially out of wedlock, face stigmatisation in many societies. Schoolgirls face expulsion, possible hostility from their parental home and rejection by their peers and partners. In Kenya 20,000 schoolgirls were estimated to have been expelled from school Between 1986 and 1987 due to pregnancy<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup>Kenya Ministry of Health, Department of Family Health: *Schoolgirl Pregnancy in Kenya. Report of a Study of Discontinuation Rates and Associated Factors*. 1988. To their credit, the Kenyan authorities have since 1994 changed the policy that led to automatic dismissal of pregnant schoolgirls.



Obviously, such girls face a bleak future. To avoid such a fate many girls resort to abortion. Because abortion is illegal in most African countries and adolescent girls usually do not have the financial means to pay for high-priced private care, they undergo the procedure in dangerous and often life-threatening environments. Many an adolescent girl has been maimed for life or been rendered infertile as a result of illicit abortions performed by quacks. Some have given their lives. A study<sup>6</sup> in Kenya reported that between January 1986 and August 1987 abortion complications contributed 42 percent of maternal mortality in Kenyatta Hospital in Nairobi. On the average five women died each month during the study period. Of the mortalities, 13 percent were teenagers. Medical statistics and various studies from a number of African countries are consistent with these findings. In all countries abortions occur mostly among 15 to 24-year-old women. The majority are unmarried.

Pregnant teenagers, especially if unmarried, who do not procure an abortion face problems of their own. For teen motherhood comes with many problems. Due to a variety of medical and social factors, mortality of children born to teenage mothers is much higher than for children born to adult mothers. Maternal mortality and morbidity rates are also higher among adolescents. Even if they survive with their child, adolescent mothers face a bleaker future than their counterparts who did not become pregnant. Premature motherhood usually means interrupted schooling and limited employment opportunities. In short girls who drop out of school to have a baby have a greater chance of sliding into poverty than their peers who continue on to higher levels of education.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV/AIDS, constitute another danger for the adolescent who engages in unprotected sex. Studies conducted across the continent show a very high incidence of STDs among adolescents. The prevalence of STDs and HIV/AIDS is associated with the levels of sexual activity and the low level of contraceptive/condom use among adolescents. (See Figures 1 and 5 above.)

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<sup>6</sup>Rogo K.O.: *Mortality in Acute Gynecology: A Developing Country Perspective*. International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics, 1989 Dec. 30 (4) 343-7.

There is disturbing evidence that the HIV/AIDS epidemic that is sweeping some areas of the continent is making inroads into the youth population. Figures 6 to 9 show the age and sex distribution of HIV and AIDS cases in three relatively high infection countries -- Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe<sup>7</sup>. The data indicate a significant rate of infection among the 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 age groups. Among these age groups, a disproportionate number of girls as opposed to boys is infected. In both Kenya and Uganda about twice as many girls as boys in these age groups are infected. In all three countries, the infection rates for men peak much later than women, from ages 30 to 39 for both Uganda and Zimbabwe and from age 25 to 34 in Kenya. Some commentators have suggested that adolescent girls in some high-infection countries may be at increased risk as older men seek out younger girls as sex partners in the belief that they may not be infected as yet. Although the actual numbers of infected 15 to 19 year-olds is relatively small in all three countries, the incidence among 20 to 30-year-old women is high. In view of the long latency period before HIV converts to full-blown AIDS, it is likely that many women in their early 20s diagnosed with AIDS may have been infected with the virus during their adolescence.

Clearly, African adolescents and youth, especially the girls among them, need to be protected from the consequences of unwanted and unplanned pregnancy and STDs, including HIV/AIDS. This is the way to guarantee them a healthy life today and ensure that they can fulfil their innate creative and productive potential that will enable them to contribute to the development and progress of the continent.

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These charts are extracted from the following documents: Kenya National AIDS Control Programme (NACP), Ministry of Health (MOH) and National Council on Population and Development (NCPD) *AIDS in Kenya: Background, Projections, Impact, Interventions*, Nairobi, 1994; Prof. John Rwomushana, *The Role of The Organised Sector in the National Multi-Sectoral Strategy for AIDS Control: The Uganda Example*, in *The Role of the Organised Sector in Reproductive Health and AIDS Prevention*, ILO, Geneva, 1995; and Margaret Mwalo, *AIDS in the Workplace in Zimbabwe: The Case of the Employers' Confederation of Zimbabwe* in *The Role of the Organised Sector in Reproductive Health and AIDS Prevention*, ILO, Geneva, 1995. They are based on data obtained from: (i) the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP) of Kenya, (ii) The Uganda AIDS Commission, and (iii) The National Public Health Laboratory of Zimbabwe.

## **II.2.2. Sexuality and Family Life Education**

**Traditional African societies have always recognised the importance of sexuality and family life education for adolescents. African societies had elaborate systems to educate adolescents about sexuality and prepare boys and girls for responsible parenthood and family life. These practices were woven into community life and were community-sanctioned. Because sexuality and family life education was compatible with community norms and values, there was no opposition to them. Indeed usually the entire community was involved in the process.**

**But Africa's socio-cultural transition has changed all that. In most African societies the school has assumed greater responsibility for educating children and youth than the family and the larger community. As the role of modern formal education increases it progressively undermines and erodes the influence of traditional educational systems. The problem is compounded by the fact that many youth (up to two thirds in some countries) remain outside the formal education system. Thus in the field of sexuality and family life education, while community-based traditional sexuality education systems and structures are disintegrating the modern educational system has not been able to replace them with alternative systems acceptable to all the communities and sub-cultures that constitute the modern nation state. This has led to a veritable crisis in many countries. A loud and acrimonious debate opposes proponents of three schools of thought in this regard.**

**The first school, comprising what one may call "modernists", would leave the task of educating African children and adolescents about sexuality and family life to those institutions mandated to teach them mathematics, biology, geography and foreign languages. The adherents of this school fail to recognise that matters of sex and procreation touch on deeply held beliefs and values of all societies. They are tied in with notions of kinship and clan, religion and mores. Parents and communities will not easily relinquish to any "third party" institution matters that are so deeply ingrained in their communal vision of existence and continuity.**

The second school of thought holds a diametrically opposed view. This group, whom we may call "traditionalists", believe that sexuality and family life education offered in schools or any other institutions not rooted in the tradition and culture of African societies is an intrusion and a threat. Proponents of this argument are also motivated by fears that exposing adolescents to foreign-inspired notions of sex and procreation will lead to promiscuity and an erosion of moral values. Some argue for a preservation of traditional cultural practices and rites of passage that imparted sexuality and family life education to past generations. This school of thought is epitomised by the *Sankofa*<sup>8</sup> movement in Ghana.

The weakness of the "traditionalists'" argument is that it fails to recognise that traditional systems and structures of sexuality education have been radically eroded in most African societies. A return to the past is unrealistic and unattainable because culture is dynamic, not stagnant or static. Meanwhile, preventing schools and other modern institutions from teaching adolescents about sexuality and family life while traditional delivery mechanisms are disappearing condemns adolescents to ignorance. An international, cross-cultural study of 19 in-school sex education programmes conducted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) concluded: "in no study was there evidence of sex education leading to either earlier or increased sexual activity in the young people who were exposed to it". Rather, in six of the 19 studies, "sex education led to either a delay in onset of sexual activity or to a decrease in overall sexual activity", and in 10 studies, "sex education increased adoption of safer practices by sexually active youth".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>In Ghana, *Sankofa* (literally "Go back and get it" in the Akan language) is a powerful symbol of the strength and durability of culture and the lessons modern society can learn from the past. It is symbolised by the mythical *Sankofa* bird whose head is turned backwards, that is, towards history and tradition.

<sup>9</sup> Mariella Baldo, Peter Aggleton, Peter Slulkin: *Does Sex Education Lead to Earlier or Increased Sexual Activity in Youth?* World Health Organisation, Global Programme on AIDS, Geneva. Poster presentation at the IXth International Conference on AIDS, Berlin, 1993.

Between these two, somewhat ideological, positions, a third wave is emerging. Proponents of this school of thought approach the issue in a more pragmatic way. They recognise the beauty and effectiveness of aspects of the traditional sexuality and family life education. But they also acknowledge that many aspects of it may be irretrievably lost. They also understand the inherent dangers of leaving family life education to foreign or foreign-inspired institutions. Nevertheless, they recognise the role that formal education plays in preparing African children and youth to cope with the world in which they live. As such, the school provides an appropriate forum and environment for imparting knowledge and skills about sexuality and family life. To avert the dysfunctional debates and arguments that threaten to leave African adolescents in the lurch in many countries, the "pragmatists" argue for identifying and retrieving positive aspects of traditional sexuality and family life education and introducing them into modern family life education (FLE) programmes. One key aspect of the traditional system that can enhance the quality and acceptability of modern FLE programmes is community participation and involvement, especially in deciding the content and messages of these programmes.

The problems of sexuality and family life education in Africa go beyond this "great debate" which essentially concerns schoolgoing adolescents. Many FLE programs do not even begin to address the needs of adolescents who are out of school, the majority in many countries. This the second important challenge of FLE programmes in Africa -- to reach out-of-school youth with education and skills training that will help them avoid reproductive health-related problems and prepare them to assume full and responsible parenthood in future. African societies need to begin now to establish mechanisms and approaches to reach and educate these youth.

### **II.2.3 Gender Inequities**

Girls and women make up just over half of the population of Africa. Yet throughout the continent overt or implied discrimination prevents this significant segment of the population from realising its full productive and creative potential. This

hobbles Africa's development. The roots of discrimination against girls and women are rooted deep in the history and culture of African peoples. It manifests itself through: unequal educational opportunities for girl children, poverty resulting from lack of access to financial and other economic resources, poor participation in political power, poor reproductive health, tiresome and endless household chores, violence against women, sexual exploitation, and in a myriad other forms. Women and girls suffer from poor self-image and self-esteem due to their upbringing and the roles assigned to them by society.

The battle to eradicate discrimination against women and enhance their status in society needs to be fought on several fronts and with a variety of weapons. One of them is education of women as well as men about gender issues. Many of the images that men and women have of themselves and of each other are formed during childhood and adolescence. That is why it is important to start such education early in life. Girls and boys should be taught to recognise, respect and value their differences and similarities. Concepts of equality and equity between the two genders and the complementarity of gender roles should be inculcated into tomorrow's men and women today.

Equal opportunities should be provided for both boys and girls to demonstrate their ability and worth to themselves and to each other. Above all else educational opportunities should be opened up to girls. In every single African country school girl enrolment lags behind that of boys. The situation becomes worse as one mounts the educational ladder. Young girls are withdrawn from school to marry, have babies or help at home as their brothers continue on to higher levels of education. Lower formal education limits the economic and social opportunities of women and perpetuates their dependency status.

As stated earlier on, it is important to boost the status of women not only to redress past and present injustices but also to ensure their full participation in, and contribution to, Africa's development. All African societies stand to benefit from this.

### II.3

### THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

The youth today are growing up in an era of historic change driven by the nascent communication revolution. The conjunction of media, telecommunications and computer technology to create an information highway is ushering humanity into a new era in which the spread of information and knowledge respects no boundaries. Truly the global village is upon us. In this village, the role and responsibility of journalists and other media professionals looms large. They are the new interpreters. For they must identify, gather, synthesise and disseminate the information that will spread knowledge and shape the beliefs and actions of men and women in every land. Their impact on children and youth is particularly significant because they can inculcate values and norms in these formative years that will last a lifetime.

Television, radio, newspapers and other mass media are important instruments for shaping the attitudes towards sexual behaviour, reproductive health and gender issues in Africa. Vulnerable young boys and girls are today exposed to information and entertainment that suggest that it is hip to be sexually irresponsible. Most of this information comes to them through the mass media. The media in Africa have contributed, along with other social institutions, in perpetuating the negative image of women in African societies by reinforcing popular stereotypes. With regard to sexuality and family life education many African media have sensationalised the debates that rage around the subject, either exaggerating the alleged moral degeneration of youth or distorting the content and intent of in-school FLE programmes.

Just as the media can create and reinforce images, they can also revise and edit them. Since the media have contributed to maintaining popular stereotypes and misunderstandings about adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health, sexuality education and gender issues they should contribute to restoring the accurate picture. The media can help in the following specific ways:

### II.3.1 What the Media Can Do

*With regard to reproductive and sexual health:*

- First, the media should provide accurate and responsible information about reproductive and sexual health issues to young people, parents and policy makers. Inaccurate reporting, half-truths and sensationalism which do not offer practical suggestions or solutions only serve to confuse the public and obfuscate the debate about the need to inform and educate young people. Society tends to blame young people for the reproductive and sexual health problems they face and often the media provide an echo for these complaints. For instance, one frequently sees in newspapers articles condemning pre-marital pregnancies and drug abuse among youth. The sweeping nature of these condemnations and their self-righteous tone do not sit well with young people who feel victimised and misunderstood. As the research cited on page 5 shows, young people today are no more "morally degenerate" than earlier generations. Also although some young may be engaging in these activities, the majority are not. For instance, an analysis of DHS data from seven countries (Botswana, Burundi, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Togo and Zimbabwe) shows that the percentage of never married 15 to 24-year olds who are sexually experienced is lower than those who are not sexually experienced in four of the seven countries. In Burundi (3.7%), Ghana (45.2%), Kenya (44.7%) and Zimbabwe (23.1%) less than half of unmarried youth are sexually active<sup>10</sup>. Although data on substance use is scant, it can be safely said that the vast majority of youth do not abuse drugs. Adolescent and youth problems are often more complex than they appear on the surface. It is therefore incumbent on media professionals to probe deeper and be properly informed about these issues before they join in omnibus condemnation of youth.

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<sup>10</sup> Gage-Brandon, Anastasia J and Dominique Meekers, *Sexual Activity Before Marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Paper presented at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Session on Sexual Behavior Before Marriage Denver, Colorado, April 30 to May 2, 1992.



- Secondly, the media should strive to make their reporting and coverage of reproductive health issues interesting and creative. There can be little doubt that commercial media that wittingly or unwittingly promote irresponsible sexual behaviour attract the attention of young people because they package their information in ways that are interesting and attractive to them. One cannot compete with MTV for young people's attention with talking heads carrying on with statistics about global trends in the HIV/AIDS pandemic or dull lectures on how today's youth have strayed from the path of traditional morality. In recent years it has been shown that serious public health information can be presented in interesting ways that get the attention of youth. Responsible African media should adopt this "enter-educate" approach to present reproductive health issues.
  
- Provide a forum for adolescents to ask important questions and receive responsible answers. Newspapers throughout the continent offer "advice" columns allowing readers to seek help from "Dear Abby", "Dear Dolly", etc. in solving all manner of personal problems. Most tend to deal with relationships, and many correspondents are young. Unfortunately, the entertainment function predominates over education or responsible information giving. Therefore, the issues discussed tend to be frivolous. Yet this is a tremendous opportunity for the media to offer a real service to adolescents. Call-in radio and television shows also fall in this category. They offer anonymity and confidentiality and can become a vehicle for providing responsible information and counseling to adolescents. A good example of how the media can assist in this way is provided by the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation which, in March 1995, initiated a radio Programme in collaboration with a consortium of local youth-serving organisations organised under the umbrella of the Kenya Association for the Promotion of Adolescent Health (KPAH)<sup>11</sup> to answer questions that adolescents phone in. Responses are provided by professional counselors and experts in

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<sup>11</sup> The KBC Programme is part of "The Kenya Youth Initiatives Project" initiated by the National Council on Population and Development (NCPD) with technical assistance from The Johns Hopkins University Center for Communication Programs (JHU/CCP).

adolescent issues, thus ensuring that the information given is accurate and appropriate.

- **Direct adolescents to source of appropriate information, counseling and services.** The collaboration described above can be taken further. Media organisations can collaborate with youth-serving organisations to direct adolescents to appropriate counseling and other services. In the Kenyan example cited above, teenagers who call in for information are referred to appropriate sources of information and counseling. Listeners can also write in for information leaflets designed for youth and parents.
- **Provide a forum for debate and advocacy designed to improve access to information and services.** In many African countries access to sexuality information and services is limited by "unfriendly" or fuzzy policies. An open and responsible debate on this issue is the first step to resolve this issue. The mass media can foster and moderate such a debate. As part of the same project cited above, KAPAH has started a programme to encourage local media, particularly newspapers which have been at the forefront of the anti-FLE crusade to open their pages to all views on the issue. At the same time the association has produced a series of fact sheets based on research conducted locally to give policy makers and opinion leaders in Kenya the facts about adolescent sexuality and related issues.

*With regard to sexuality and family life education:*

- **The media should offer an informed and educated view of sexuality and family life education.** In some countries the media have seized on the term "SEX EDUCATION" to imply that FLE programmes will teach, or at least lead, children to have sex. Sensationalist headlines announcing "SEX LESSONS IN SCHOOLS TO CONTINUE" or "CONTRACEPTIVES FOR CHILDREN"<sup>12</sup> have

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<sup>12</sup> These are actual headlines that appeared in the Kenya Standard in 1994.

been used to insinuate that FLE programmes distribute contraceptives to minors and promote or justify sexual perversions and so-called alternative lifestyles. In other instances the media have been used by "traditionalists" to move the focus of debate from the content of FLE to the purveyors of the programmes. Where external agencies are perceived to be behind the FLE programmes it becomes easy to characterise them as foreign-inspired ideas introduced to undermine the moral values of African societies. Journalists have a moral and professional duty to highlight the essential: the need to safeguard the health and future wellbeing of African youth through effective sexuality and family life education - a function that African societies have recognised and sanctioned for generations.

- **The media should provide a forum for responsible and healthy debate.** The issues involved in sexuality and family life education are complex and often emotion-laden. It is the duty of the media to ensure that all sides have a chance to air their views. To suppress or distort the views of one side or the other is a disservice to young people in Africa .
- **The media should offer a voice to youth themselves to participate in the debate.** In Africa it seems that adults are always talking to young people or about them but hardly ever with them. Yet this debate concerns youth primarily. It is their attitudes and behaviour that will make the difference between progress and disaster. The media can help to bring young people into the debate. To hear their voices and views may be educational for some of those who seek to protect them. For instance A study conducted in Namibia by a group of high school students found that the majority of students supported and family life education in schools and called for the expansion of its content to beyond physiology and anatomy to cover social and psychological aspects of gender and sexual relations.

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<sup>13</sup> UNFPA, Technical and Evaluation Division (TED): Summary of Study Report, *Namibian High School Students Research Knowledge and Attitudes about Teenage Health*,

***With regard to gender inequities:***

- **Highlight the inferior status of women and its negative impact on the economic and social development of African societies.** This is an important educational and advocacy function. The gender status quo is so ingrained in the African social psyche that many policy makers as well as ordinary men and women assume it to be the norm, not seeing the discrimination inherent in it. Even less do they perceive its negative impact on society's progress and development. Without being sensationalist or controversial, the media can raise the issues gender equity and discrimination and sustain a responsible debate around them.
- **Promote a positive image of girls and women in the media.** Media stereotypes influence perceptions of children and adolescents. African media institutions can help to improve the image of girls and women by portraying women in positive roles. A significant first step would be to admit more women into journalism and other media professions. Women journalists should not be relegated to "Women's", "Fashion" and "Homemaking/Cookery" pages. Since journalism is itself a high profile profession having women in responsible and "power" positions will raise the image of women and erase some stereotypes.
- **Boost individuals and institutions that advance the cause and status of girls and women.** The media can shape the attitudes and behaviour of men in subtle ways by boosting organisations and institutions that promote the social and economic enhancement of women and girls. Sometimes the media seem to swing between extremes of male chauvinism or a blanket condemnation of men, alternately angering and alienating women and men. Rather they can promote a new positive male stereotype by portraying in a good light men who demonstrate caring and respect towards women.

- **Foster dialogue between men and women.** One outcome that Africa needs to avoid in the effort to boost the status of women is the dysfunctional "battle of the sexes" that has divided men and women and created animosity and distrust among them in some Western societies. Africa cannot afford the luxury of a gender war. African media can help to head this off. They can offer a forum for men and women to air their points of view and to share their frustrations and appreciations, instead of screaming uncomplimentary epithets at each other.

### **III CONCLUSION: FORWARD IN PARTNERSHIP**

The above proposals for media intervention presuppose an organised and strategic approach on the part of the media. It also implies a partnership with other institutions devoted to the wellbeing of adolescents and youth. To make the media's contribution meaningful the following key elements are required:

- **Collaboration among peers:** As a first step, journalists should form associations in their own countries devoted to promote adolescent and youth issues. A good example of journalists united and organised to support a development cause is the China Journalists' Association of Population established in 1993 as an NGO to publicise population policy and principles. As adolescent health and development issues are fairly similar in all African countries it should be possible to envisage a regional association to foster the sharing of ideas. An African example of such an international network of journalists is provided by the Bamako-based Centre de Recherche en Population et Développement (CERPOD) which in 1992 established the CERPOD Media Network with the support of the Johns Hopkins University Center for Population Programmes. The purpose of the Network was to promote the dissemination of quality population and family planning information in the eight Sahelian countries covered by CERPOD. The network members prepared several articles for publication in special editions of the CERPOD newsletter, POPSAHEL. They also published articles in several newspapers in their own countries.

- **Collaboration with Youth Serving Organisations:** To be most effective, journalists should team up with youth-serving organisations that are involved with youth programmes. Such a partnership will ensure that the information the media give is accurate and has the backing and sanction of professionals. In Kenya, such a partnership has been forged between the KAPAH and journalists from several key newspapers and KBC.
- **Facing Up to the Gatekeepers:** Inevitably, any association of media professionals formed to promote adolescent reproductive health will elicit criticism and suspicion from various gatekeepers and moral guardians of society. Journalists should anticipate this and act to avert any obstacles by informing and involving potential opponents, such as parents associations, religious leaders and various "traditionalists" in their activities. Such a pre-emptive strategy will minimise potential attacks.
- **Asking for Help:** The ICPD provides a great opportunity for all those who wish to act to promote the health and wellbeing of adolescents and youth. Nearly all governments and the entire international development community have pledged to promote its goals. Some countries, such as Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya and Zimbabwe have initiated the process of developing comprehensive adolescent or youth reproductive health programmes.
- **The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and other UN agencies as well as bilateral aid agencies are also devising or revising their funding and operational policies and strategies to emphasise support for adolescent reproductive health. These organisations all count on the media as partners in advocacy and education. African journalists who organise themselves to promote the health and development of youth can surely count on the support of some of these agencies. The challenge is for media professionals to make the appropriate moves now.**

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