

# Journalists Become Maternal and Neonatal Health Advocates

Improving public health outcomes requires that people change certain behaviors and that governments ensure that progressive policies and adequate resources are available and in place to support such behavior change. USAID's Action for West Africa Region-Reproductive Health (AWARE-RH) project has been engaging key stakeholders in developing advocacy strategies to sustain behavior and policy change that will improve maternal and neonatal health across West Africa.

One strategy has been to actively involve journalists in delivering evidence-based messages that support both behavior and policy changes. This strategy targets in particular the "new" generation of health journalists as maternal and neonatal health stakeholders and advocates for change. And this new crop of journalists is rising to the challenge.

## The AWARE Approach

In July 2007, AWARE-RH, in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) Africa Regional Office, brought 20 journalists and eight WHO experts together from eight different countries in the West Africa region to increase the number of stories on maternal and neonatal health, improve the content, and inspire journalists to become powerful advocates for these issues. At the beginning of the workshop, the participants received background information on why women and children in the subregion are dying and how such death and disability can be prevented. Expert facilitators also gave tips on how to effectively report on maternal and neonatal health issues. Journalists then visited health clinics throughout Niamey, where they interviewed fathers, mothers, and



Photo: Staff/EngenderHealth

**"I realized that if more women knew about how and when to seek care, fewer women would die or suffer complications."**

— *Panakou Atakou, Journalist*  
*Radio Lomé, Togo*

health care workers and developed stories on different aspects of maternal and child health.

"What made this workshop unique was the combination of the technical information on why women and newborns are dying and the practical on-the-ground training," said El Bachir Sow, an editorial board member of Senegal's *Le Soleil*. "The training targeted journalists who had expressed an interest in writing on health issues but who had never had formal training in maternal and neonatal health concepts."

## Results

Engaging the journalists has had a real and significant impact. Take Panakou Atakou, a radio journalist from Togo, who was producing a weekly radio show on general health issues. After participating in the workshop, she understood more clearly the links between reproductive health and women's status in society and realized the need to raise awareness. "I was particularly struck by how

many women die needlessly due to complications during childbirth,” said Atakou. “I also had no idea how many women are disabled due to fistula and infections from abortions performed secretly.”

Convinced that these issues urgently needed more attention, Atakou developed a proposal to refocus her weekly radio program solely on reproductive health. Mr. Willie Bround Telou, Director of Radio Lomé, was extremely pleased by her initiative and recognized the need to dedicate air time to this important topic.

Radio Lomé convened an advisory group comprised of health experts from the WHO and the Department of Reproductive Health to collaborate with Atakou in developing the program’s format and content.

Every month, Atakou oversees the production of four stories covering each of the following broad themes: mothers and children; reproductive health; women and health; and healthy living. Radio Lomé has already produced 11 programs and has plans for approximately 15 more. Some of the most popular shows have covered such topics as fistula, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and cesarean sections.

The call-in format starts with Atakou interviewing one or two health experts on a topic, followed by callers seeking additional information. Since the show has started, she estimates, close to 100 listeners have called in about their specific health problems and have been referred to an expert or health center for care. One woman drove from Benin for more information on STIs. With the referral, this listener was treated within a few days and returned to Radio Lomé full of appreciation.

In addition to sensitizing the population on reproductive health issues, Atakou uses the forum to advocate for policy change. For example, after her show on cesarean sections, she received numerous calls asking why the procedure is not performed free of charge or at a subsidized rate (as it is in Burkina Faso and Niger). Atakou met with Ministry of Health officials to ask why such a policy had yet to be adopted in Togo. The officials explained that such a policy would be difficult to adopt, due to budgetary constraints. Despite this response, a multistakeholder group made up of donors, parliamentarians, NGOs, and other experts recommended that the government subsidize cesarean sections.

Adama Diouf Ly, journalist for Agence de Presse Sénégalaise, attributes the workshop with increasing her knowledge of maternal and neonatal health issues. “I would like to thank AWARE-RH for inviting us to this training that triggered our desire to report on reproductive health in an accurate way in order to sensitize our populations, but above all to influence changes in health policy through our work.” While she admits that it is difficult to link her work to policy changes, she notes that since the workshop, she and her colleagues are collectively participating in advocacy efforts, and policies are changing. For example, cesarean sections are now performed free of charge in Senegal. Additionally, Senegal is implementing new policies to vaccinate infants at home and increase the number of health centers in the most remote areas.

“Our investments are paying off,” remarks Carmen Coles of AWARE-RH. “These journalists are forming partnerships and they are becoming actors motivated to use their talents to improve the lives of women and children in their countries.”

## Next Steps

The WHO Africa Regional Office and AWARE-RH linked the journalists with WHO experts from each country to provide support following the training. In mid-2007, AWARE-RH will organize an independent panel to determine which of the journalists’ stories best capture the current challenges that countries face in preventing maternal and newborn deaths and disabilities. The chosen articles and productions will be showcased on the AWARE-RH web site and disseminated throughout the subregion. The challenge now is to keep these talented journalists engaged as advocates by mobilizing others to participate in the fight to save the lives of mothers and children.

## For More Information

*AWARE-RH monitors and supports policy reform in 21 West African countries in partnership with international, regional, and local organizations.*

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