

Reality radio: Ethiopia □

By Sally Pollak
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If a character on a popular TV show can induce girls to cut their hair in a "Rachel," and if an earlier sitcom had the clout to help boost production of a crop of children among unmarried women (just ask Dan Quayle), then a radio show in Ethiopia can increase condom use.

That's the premise of a program of the Population Media Center, a nonprofit organization based in Shelburne. The PMC uses entertainment media in its effort to educate people around the world about family planning, sexually transmitted diseases and related issues -- including the status of women.

One year ago, PMC launched two radio programs in Ethiopia, weekly audio soap operas whose story lines reflect the culture and whose characters develop and change over time. In the course of the dramas, the characters deal with family relations and circumstances in which they come face-to-face with the issues PMC attempts to address.

"We're creating artificial role models for a new cultural reality in Ethiopia," said William Ryerson, founder and president of the Population Media Center.

Thomas Streeter, a University of Vermont professor of sociology with a specialty in media, said soap operas have been used for decades to address everyday life, family and personal issues.

"Soap operas are about moral boundaries, and the family and gender roles," Streeter said. "The general idea of a melodrama that involves inter-personal life is really well suited to communicating issues about the modern world."

PMC's ambitious goal -- to create "a new cultural reality" -- is centered around priorities that have been identified by program researchers and focus groups. The priorities coincide with those of the Ethiopian government, said Negussie Teffera, director of PMC's Ethiopia program and former minister of population for Ethiopia. Those issues are family planning and HIV infection.

"This program is unique in Ethiopia," Negussie said last weekend on a visit to Vermont. "It directly contributes to solving the real problems in the country. The government itself has come to PMC and contributed money (about \$120,000). This is recognition of the effectiveness of our program."

Negussie said PMC has received more than 10,000 letters about the radio soap

operas, almost all of which are expressions of appreciation.

"I'm seeing my life in this story," Negussie said of a typical correspondence. "My behavior really changed because of information, which is helpful for my life."

Ryerson, a biologist by training, has done considerable work in family planning and population control. He is a former associate director of Planned Parenthood of Northern New England, where he says he learned the need for and importance of comprehensive reproductive health services. "We're a lot better off addressing the whole person, and not just part," he said.

"We can not ignore pre- and post-natal care, sexually transmitted diseases and expect to have successful family planning programs."

He brings this broad-based understanding of reproductive health to the development of the radio shows, which are written and produced by Ethiopians. He also brings concern about world population and a belief that if cultural mores and traditions can be influenced in a certain way, people's lives will improve.

Ethiopia has a population of about 70 million people, with an average of seven children born to each woman. About 10 percent of the adult population is infected with the AIDS virus, according to UNAIDS (a United Nations AIDS organization). The country is in the midst of a severe famine (and drought) that contributes to the death of tens of thousands of children a year.

PMC works in Ethiopia to research the relevant issues, to train the writers and guide them in a method developed 25 years ago by Miguel Sabido. Sabido is a Mexican television executive who created the first soap operas to address family planning.

In one scene, a female character warns two girls that "flirting with men nowadays is tantamount to risking one's life. At this Hawani feels very sad. She reassures her mother that she is careful enough to protect herself from bad habits and from the deadly AIDS. Hawani also reassures her mother that she will never give her virginity to any man, and that she even advises others concerning this matter."

Measuring a soap opera's effectiveness in changing behavior is difficult, Street said.

"For every case of somebody doing a show that seems to have dramatic impact, there's many more cases with no measurable impact or unintended impact," he said.

Though people don't always do as they're told, they "turn to a lot of places for ideas about possibilities for their personal and social lives. One is media of various sorts."

Information

-- WHAT: Population Media Center is a nonprofit organization based in Shelburne. PMC creates and operates a range of programs in other nations that address issues surrounding reproductive health, including family planning and HIV prevention. The organization focuses on issues that are of particular relevance to the region in which it is working. -- ADDRESS: P.O. Box 547, Shelburne, Vt. 05482-0547 -- TELEPHONE: 985-8156; e-mail: pmc@populationmedia.org; Web site: www.populationmedia.org

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