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Cover photo: Kenya Girl Guides proudly wear their AIDS merit badges in a Nakuru classroom.

Photos by Steve Taravella.

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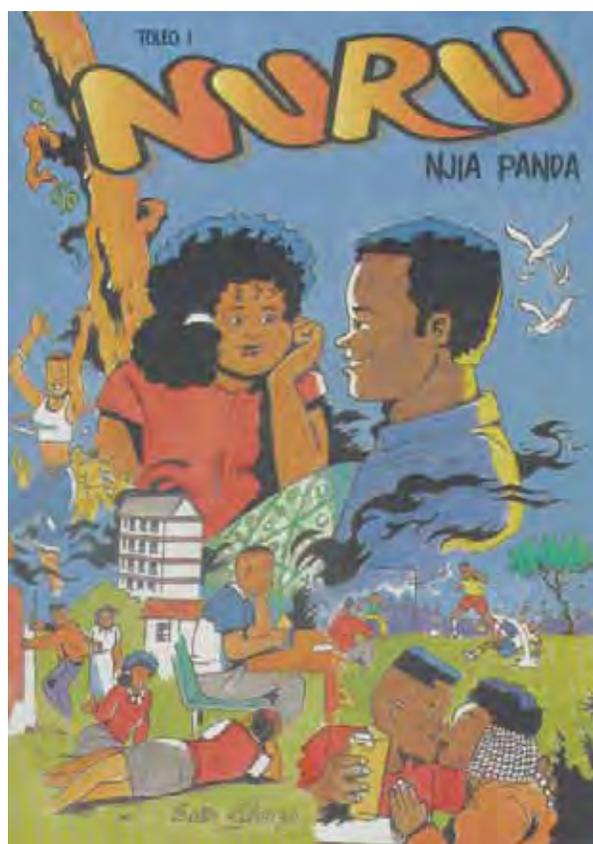
Nuru is an upbeat 17-year-old Kenyan who is well-liked and has many friends. The daughter of a trucker, she lives in a boarding-school, where she has come to know other young people from different parts of the country, different classes and different tribes. Known for her good judgment, Nuru has abstained from sexual activity and is something of a role model for her younger friend, Janet.

But Nuru's boyfriend Leon, a soccer player at the school, recently left Nuru for the more free-spirited Angel. Angel, who once had sex with a teacher to improve her grades, is kept by a sugar-daddy—who happens to be Janet's father. In a recent six-month period, Leon had sex with six different people and has since become HIV-positive. In the teenagers' skittish community, this prompted some to question aloud whether Leon should continue playing team sports or whether another player could even safely wear Leon's jersey. Meanwhile, Nuru's friend Oscar is facing his own HIV dilemma as he adjusts to living with his HIV-positive uncle.

In many ways, Nuru and her circle of friends define the challenges of adolescence for young Kenyans. The challenges are very real, but Nuru and her friends are not: Nuru (meaning *light* in Swahili), Janet, Leon, Oscar and Angel are all characters in a popular comic book series. The Nuru comic books have proven remarkably effective at reaching young people with health messages they may not hear in other ways.

The books are targeted at Kenyans age 15 to 24, although the stories often appeal to people even younger. The series is produced by the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) as part of the Implementing AIDS Prevention

and Care Project (IMPACT). IMPACT, which is managed by Family Health International (FHI), is funded by the U.S. Office of Global AIDS Coordinator through U.S. Agency for International Development. The Ford Foundation also helps support Nuru production.



Nuru and friends: Helping Kenya's in-school youth make wise decisions about HIV and AIDS.

IMPACT carefully developed stories for each Nuru book to maximize the series' effectiveness. Stories address major life occurrences, including falling in love, receiving a scholarship, marriage and death, as well as complex issues such as orphaning, rape and economic hardship in the family. The stories are field-tested in select primary and secondary schools, where students provide feedback on whether a character would genuinely behave a certain way or whether some

action seems plausible. The goal is to guide young people toward wise choices, such as abstinence and delayed sexual debut, by modeling behavior instead of by lecturing them, says Michelle Folsom, PATH's Africa regional representative in South Africa. Nuru's adventures have no single over-arching message; instead, many messages about delayed sexual debut, HIV counseling and testing, and sexually transmitted infections are woven into the stories. "We use dilemmas but don't always answer every crisis. Sometimes we use cliff-hangers," she says. "We want to provoke dialogue and discussion at the community level. We want them to like some characters and dislike others."

Nuru's stories are widely read by Kenyan youth. One PATH survey found 91% of Nuru readers had talked to someone about the comic; many cited positive aspects of the characters' relationships, such as a decision by Nuru and Bruce to postpone having sex. The first four editions each had a print run of 48,000, half in English and half in KiSwahili, while the final book had a print run of 68,000. The books are distributed by IMPACT, the Kenya Girl Guides Association (KGGA) and various youth-serving organizations. Nuru also has been inserted into some copies of the *Daily Nation* newspaper. More recently, one- and two-page Nuru strips have been published in youth magazines like the *Insyder* and *Supa Strikas*.

But Nuru is just one way IMPACT is helping Kenyan students confront AIDS. Collaborating with numerous partner agencies, IMPACT supports a range of interventions to help young people protect themselves against HIV and learn not to fear those who have it. IMPACT funds activities of the KGGA and the



In Nairobi, adolescents volunteer to mail out the latest issue of *Straight Talk*, bringing frank discussions of HIV to young people.

Kenya Association of Professional Counsellors (KAPC), which mostly target in-school youth who are not yet sexually active.

"Working through groups like KAPC and KGGA, we have had great success helping young people protect themselves and their families against the epidemic," says John McWilliam, who directs FHI's activities in Kenya. "Reaching youth in school is important because, once they leave the school system, they are harder to reach with messages of any kind."

Straight Talk from *Straight Talk*

For KAPC, the message is everything. KAPC has sponsored *Straight Talk*, a newspaper produced by and for young people, since 1995. A network of "Straight Talk Clubs" at schools across the country soon followed. Together, the newspaper and the clubs form a two-prong effort to provide adolescents with accurate in-

formation in a safe, non-threatening context. A 30-minute Saturday morning radio program, a website (www.straighttalk.or.ke) and educational videos further reinforce KAPC's messages of healthy living for youth, including abstaining from sex until marriage.

Straight Talk Clubs help improve adolescent health and well-being by fostering peer-to-peer discussion of HIV, by helping youth share opinions and experiences confronting high-risk situations, and by helping them develop behavior-negotiation skills through role-playing activities. Straight Talk programs have increased dialogue between adolescents and teachers, and between adolescents and their parents, says Project Manager Simon Kokoyo. And the programs do not shy from difficult topics: Some clubs have addressed the dilemma of Muslim teenage girls engaging in unprotected anal sex to avoid jeopardizing the virginity needed for marriage. Others have addressed "widow cleansing," a deeply rooted cultural practice that re-

quires a new widow to have sex with other men during her grieving period to free her of her husband's ghost, enabling her to find happiness with another husband. At an event in Nyanza Province, two boys who had "cleansed" many widows told KAPC Field Officer Joy Masheti that they stopped after reading about the dangers of the practice in *Straight Talk*.

Each month, KAPC produces 360,000 copies of *Straight Talk*. About 300,000 are inserted in issues of *The Nation*, Kenya's largest daily newspaper. KAPC distributes the remaining 60,000 copies through schools, youth-serving organizations and partners.

The paper aims to reach people ages 15 to 19 on their own terms. Written mainly in *Sheng*, a popular patois of KiSwahili and English, it addresses topics generally not found in the pages of general-audience daily newspapers. One edition challenged some schools' practice of putting small amounts of petroleum in student lunches, believing it will hinder their sexual urges. Another challenged some school matrons' practice of insisting at the start of each semester that girls raise their blouses so the matrons can "tweak" their nipples in the mistaken belief that this will reveal whether a girl has become pregnant over the summer. Sexual abuse, pregnancy, homosexuality, masturbation and gender inequality are frequent topics examined through articles, columns, question-and-answer interviews and cartoons.

Because of the paper and the clubs, young people "are able to ask questions they can't ask anywhere else. Some of us didn't have that chance," says KAPC Executive Director Cecilia Rachieri. This is especially true for young girls, whom



Straight Talk dispels misconceptions about HIV and sexual behavior in ways that resonate with young Kenyans.

KAPC encourages to assertive themselves more in this male-dominated culture.

Clearly, this formula has tapped into something special among young people. The paper receives some 500 letters each month from across Kenya, many to “Dr. Straight,” a physician who advises KAPC, serves on the *Straight Talk* editorial board, and answers questions in print. The paper also features a “Please Advise” column in which adolescents respond to questions from their peers. “We want to empower the students themselves to raise as many questions as possible,” says Masheti. Questions typically address menstruation, erections, HIV transmission and myths about sex. If questions to *Straight Talk* are any indication, Kenya’s young people, whether they are in school or not, continue to hold some perplexing misconceptions about HIV and sexuality:

- HIV-positive boys can cleanse themselves of the virus by having sex with virgin girls.
- A girl cannot contract HIV from sex she engages in during her menstrual period.
- Boys are protected from HIV if they have been circumcised.
- The closer one lives to Mount Elgon in Kenya’s Western Province, the less likely one is to contract HIV.

A 2003 knowledge, habit and attitudes survey commission by KAPC found that, of 800 youth in seven provinces, 74 percent claimed to have been strongly influenced by *Straight Talk* on matters of reproductive health and HIV/AIDS. The major actions these respondents took to re-

duce their risk of HIV infection were talking about the disease to friends and family, and abstaining from sexual activity until older.



KGGA Project Officer Jane Mbugua and Chief Commissioner Margaret Mwaniki discuss the importance of the organization’s Life Skills curriculum.

Through IMPACT, USAID has supported additional staff at KAPC, larger print runs of the newspaper, and training to help teachers guide the clubs, counsel students and nurture student confidence. The teacher training ensures instructors are able to handle adolescent concerns sensitively. The training format is a two-week class on group management and facilitation that includes peer education and HIV information. Through the year, other teachers turn to KAPC for advice on handling issues such as children coping with HIV-positive parents, sexual relations between a teacher and a student, and a boy and girl found kissing at school.

The clubs are central to KAPC’s outreach. Since January 2004, when IMPACT funding enabled the hiring of Ms. Masheti, the number of clubs has jumped to more than 1,500 from 36, each with an average of 35 students. Club

members discuss issues raised in the newspaper, hear guest speakers, visit health centers and the disabled and engage in community service projects. At least once per term, a student club hosts pupils from three or four other clubs for a symposium on a particular topic. The basics of HIV prevention are always discussed, but, to keep students engaged, other topics are also featured, such as teacher-student relationships.

Kenya Girls Guides: Keeping Students Engaged

Keeping students engaged is part of what the 83-year-old Kenya Girls Guides Association is all about. KGGA, a veritable national institution with 10,000 members country-wide (ages 6 to 25), has been instrumental in IMPACT's efforts to reach young girls. Addressing difficult issues such as sexuality, sugar daddies and a parent with AIDS has helped KGGA remain relevant in girls' lives. IMPACT supports KGGA's peer education program for HIV prevention, which aims to change behavior and attitudes of girls and young women. These activities help the Girl Guides stay HIV-negative, build self-confidence, and interact in healthy ways with HIV-positive persons.

One way KGGA reinforces behavior change is by rewarding girls with a merit badge for specific AIDS activities, one of 20 merit badges the girls can earn. A different AIDS badge is offered for different age groups: Brownies (7 to 10), Girl Guides (10 to 14), Ranger Guides (14 to 18) and Cadets (18 to 25). Activities that build toward a badge include: spending

45 minutes a week helping an AIDS orphan with household chores; preparing a nutritious meal for a neighbor with AIDS; delivering a 15-minute talk to classmates on values that have helped you stay HIV-free; inviting someone with AIDS to speak to a girls' unit about living with HIV; writing an essay on the difference between HIV and AIDS; writing a letter to a Kenyan newspaper about AIDS; and demonstrating ways a girl can say "no" to sexual intercourse when pressured by a young man.

Educating girls about caring for someone with HIV is not merely an abstract exercise to earn a merit badge; many of these girls live with HIV-positive parents who need their help.

To understand the extent to which KGGA's efforts have improved the health awareness of young girls, one need only sit with them and ask what they know.

With no prompting, in a dusty schoolroom in Nakuru, 11- and 12-year-old girls talk with a visitor knowledgeably—if shyly—about routes of HIV transmission, viral activity, protecting themselves when caring for infected persons, abstaining from sex to avoid pregnancy and disease, the need for condoms

when people do not abstain, ways to avoid "bad company," and the threat of rape. They speak with remarkable confidence about HIV, sexual behavior and sexual health. They know where to refer friends to be tested for HIV.

And they understand the importance of confronting HIV-related stigma. "They should not blame



KGGA's AIDS merit badge

themselves for having the virus,” declares Janet, 12. Ngonyo, also 12, says, “I learned not to fear someone with HIV/AIDS. You should show her love and care for her, even when maybe someone abused her. If people don’t care for her, you can care for her. Feed her well, if you can afford it.” Muna, also 12, says, “If you say you can’t help (a family member with AIDS), he will feel bad. He’ll say nobody wants him in this world.”

Compassion was not always what these girls displayed. Before her KGGGA activities, “I thought they were just different from others and kind of feared them,” says Alice, 16. “I thought it was contagious and that the next thing was death. Now I’ve learned to care for them and love them.”

Through KGGGA activities, girls have learned more than basic HIV knowledge; they have developed greater self-esteem, which allows them to discuss these matters confidently with others. But they don’t always have an easy time of it. On more than one occasion, when Alice has shared HIV information with an adult, she has been dismissed as a little girl trying to tell adults “big things” she doesn’t know about.

Helping girls work through these issues are other IMPACT-funded tools. One is “Talking Points for Peer Educators,” a series of eight glossy, two-sided cards that present key information in a concise question-and-answer format. Another is the KGGGA’s 214-page training guide, *Participatory Peer Education for HIV and AIDS Prevention: A Life Skills Manual*, developed by PATH through workshops with KGGGA leaders and peer educators. Its eight topics—including sexuality, preventing pregnancy, and gender roles—are explored over

the course of 39 weeks (one school year) to increase girls’ knowledge of STIs, HIV/AIDS, relationships and communication. Girls are introduced to these issues via discussions, short lectures, case studies, role-playing, games and brainstorming sessions. The manual is used in about 1,000 schools country-wide by teachers IMPACT has trained to be Girl Guide leaders.

Since the course was introduced in 2003, many schools report higher student retention, says KGGGA Chief Commissioner Margaret Mwaniki, who believes it has helped engage girls who are vulnerable to leaving school. Some instructors turn to Girl Guide teachers for guidance on providing government-mandated HIV instruction. One male teacher in Nakuru told Ms. Mwaniki, “This course should be taught to both girls *and* boys long before courtship starts.”

To supplement KGGGA activities in the schools, IMPACT recently joined with UNICEF to integrate UNICEF’s Sara Communication Initiative (SCI) into KGGGA’s Life Skills program. SCI is similar to the Nuru concept, where a young comic-book character (Sara) and her adolescent friends confront various serious situations, such as female genital mutilation. The series of comic books and videos are in English and Swahili and include seven episodes. The Sara character dresses in blue, the same color as the girl guides; the KGGGA sees her as a model for Girl Guides. Sara’s primary HIV messages address abstinence and non-discrimination toward people with HIV or AIDS. The UNICEF-inspired initiative is an Africa regional one, and FHI is helping UNICEF and the Girl Guides introduce the initiative in as many countries as possible. ◆