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Tanzanian Media Join HIV Response

Major media houses launch workplace policies to raise HIV awareness and meet staff health needs.



PHOTO CREDIT: LEAH SAM KE.

"... [S]ince media are on the forefront of communication, once we sensitize them we can also educate the nation."

—Richard Kasesela,
Chief Executive Officer,
AIDS Business Coalition of
Tanzania

The media have a strong recognized role to play in the fight against HIV. This role involves informing the public about HIV issues, challenging stigmatizing portrayals of people living with HIV, and ensuring that HIV is high on the political agenda. However, like other groups in the private sector, media houses are also businesses that can complement national HIV responses by reaching their own employees with HIV workplace programs. This is a role the media often overlook.

With technical assistance from the USAID | Health Policy Initiative, Task Order I, media houses in Tanzania are answering the call to become part of the private sector response to HIV. To date, 16 major media houses, including newspaper publishers and television and radio stations, have adopted HIV workplace policies and another five are in the process of doing so. Partners such as the Media Owners Association of Tanzania (MOAT), AIDS Business Coalition of Tanzania (ABCT), and Association of Journalists Against AIDS in Tanzania (AJAAT) have also been instrumental in these efforts to sensitize, mobilize, and assist media houses in the design of HIV workplace policies and programs.

"The policies cover awareness creation, fighting stigma, how to treat those who are affected, encouraging voluntary counseling and testing, how to maintain confidentiality, and other aspects," explains Henry Muhanika, Executive Secretary of MOAT. "For those affected by HIV, these policies will help make life easier. The policies can help to reduce stigma and promote social acceptance of people living with HIV. Ultimately, implementation of HIV workplace programs can check the spread of HIV by raising awareness and educating workers, by promoting prevention, and by encouraging testing."

In addition to prevention initiatives, the workplace policies and programs prohibit discrimination against HIV-positive employees and outline the care and treatment services covered by company programs. To support implementation, the Health Policy Initiative and ABCT have trained 44 human resource coordinators and 42 peer educators in the media houses. These personnel will help enforce HIV policies and organize HIV awareness raising and peer support among staff.

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Some organizations have already started to implement their HIV policies and programs. For example, Global Publishing has about 65 employees and produces six different publications each week. The publishing house designed its HIV policy with input from workers' representatives. The policy states that employees cannot be terminated due to HIV-positive status and outlines psychosocial support, care, and treatment offered by the company. Since April 2008, the company's HIV coordinator/peer educator has organized periodic information sessions on Saturdays that cover general HIV prevention information, as well as specific topics, such as HIV and youth. As a result, one employee has come forward to disclose her HIV status to her colleagues. She is now actively taking part in the company's HIV awareness-raising efforts.

The need to encourage HIV workplace programs for the media became clear following a rapid assessment on HIV, gender, and the media conducted by AJAAT in 2007, with financial support from the Health Policy Initiative. The study of employees and managers at 80 media houses in Tanzania revealed that while journalists often report on HIV issues, many lacked accurate knowledge about HIV and its transmission, prevention, and treatment. Moreover, gender issues within the media had the potential to increase HIV vulnerability, especially for female employees who worked in an environment with pervasive sexual harassment and traditionally low wages for women.

"We need to sensitize the media and since media are on the forefront of communication, once we sensitize them we can also educate the nation," says Richard Kasesela, Chief Executive Officer of ABCT, which receives financial assistance from USAID and other donors.

Thus, the benefits of HIV workplace policies and programs within media houses fulfill two fundamental objectives. First, these programs can reach a corner of the private sector that has often been ignored and can mobilize media houses to address the HIV-related needs of their own staff. Second, raising HIV awareness of journalists and editors through HIV workplace programs can help enhance the empathy of media professionals and improve the overall quality of HIV-related reporting, thereby having an impact not only on media employees but the broader public as well.

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