

DN-ABJ-482
ISN 73878

WOMEN IN RADIO: GETTING THE ORAL REHYDRATION MESSAGE TO RURAL MOTHERS

In different parts of the city, two women in their 30s wake up simultaneously and go about getting their children ready for school. A few hours later, they leave for their respective jobs at the local radio station. One is an executive producer of the government-owned facility; the other is the country's leading female broadcaster/announcer.

The city is Banjul; the country, The Gambia; the women, Ami Joof and Maimuna Bah. Both work for "Radio Gambia," and are part of a health success story being played out in this tiny West African country.

Nearly 20 million people in Third World countries are affected by diarrhea-induced dehydration every year. Repeated and prolonged attacks of diarrhea are common in developing countries because of unsanitary conditions and lack of clean water. Diarrhea interacts with lack of food and poor feeding practices to increase malnutrition and further debilitate small children already at risk of death.

The Gambia is in the process of altering this dreadful reality. In 1980, The Gambian government decided to improve the picture and sought assistance from the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID). AID has 67 diarrheal disease activities in some 30 developing countries. AID officers, working with health and communications experts, behavioral psychologists, and anthropologists from the Washington, D.C.-based Academy for Educational Development and Stanford University in California, developed the "Mass Media and Health Practices" project which uses radio, graphics, and village health workers to teach mothers how to treat and prevent diarrheal dehydration.

The treatment is known as oral rehydration therapy (ORT) and is recommended by the World Health Organization. ORT restores body fluid and replaces essential salts lost during bouts of diarrhea. Effective, inexpensive, and simple to mix and administer, ORT can be prepackaged or made from table sugar and salt, and offers an alternative to intravenous therapy which must be administered in hospitals or clinics—something financially and geographically out of reach for most rural people in developing countries. Defining the problem and its solution, however, was a lot easier than determining how it would be delivered.

In The Gambia, health personnel are over-worked and health facilities are out of the reach of many women. If ORT was to be effective, mothers would have to administer it in the home. That meant learning to mix sugar, salt, and water in just the right proportions. Most Gambian women are illiterate; they traditionally learn by word of mouth. But the mixing instruction must be precise - 8 bottlecaps of sugar, 1 bottlecap of salt, and three small bottles of water. So to teach this formula, the Ministry decided to use the nation's greatest educational resource--radio.

Bah's special broadcast talents helped make the approach a success. As a production assistant in the broadcasting section, she is the voice of women throughout The Gambia. One of her programs is "Hospital Request," in which she visits rural hospitals and conducts spot interviews with patients. Sometimes it is the only means for patients to communicate with their families, who are often many miles away. Bah also conducts a show "For Women Only," during which she provides practical advice about such subjects as child care and personal hygiene. Her credibility with rural women, and her understanding of their vocabulary and experiences, transformed the dull mixing instructions into lively, interesting programming.

Ami Joof had already won one international broadcast prize for excellence and as executive producer she was determined to make the project programs prize winners too. She worked for three weeks with an extraordinary, talented Australian radio specialist, Ms. Esta de Fossard, who was provided as a consultant through the Academy's assistance program. Fossard, Joof, and Bah pushed aside the old broadcasting formulas. They developed short, punchy programs filled with local drama, music, and stories. Ami then took charge of finalizing and translating scripts, locating talent, taping, editing, field testing, and finally broadcasting dozens of programs.

Ami and de Fossard were also key members of the team that found the solution to the program's biggest problem - how to get enough women to listen carefully and remember the mixing instructions? A team, from the Ministry of Health, Radio Gambia, and the Academy developed the idea of a national radio contest, kicked off by the distribution of 200,000 flyers with printed mixing instructions. The flyer acted as a lottery ticket - permitting women from randomly selected villages all over the country to win simple prizes if they could mix the ORT solution correctly. The real purpose of the lottery was to get the 200,000 flyers in as many homes as possible as a handy reminder of the advice on ORT. There were as many as 40 ORT broadcasts a week, most between the hours of 5 p.m. and midnight--the prime time for reaching women, the main target of the project.

In one program, two mothers--Mariam and Fatou--talk about the large numbers of "sick and dry (dehydrated) children" in their village.

Mariam: "Surely diarrhea is not dangerous."

Fatou: "Do not underestimate the dangers of diarrhea. It can lead to dehydration or malnutrition. There is a special diet for children with dryness and this has saved lives.

Mariam: "Is this not our everyday pap?"

Fatou: "No, that is not very good. To prevent dehydration/malnutrition and subsequent death, these things are very important -- sugar, salt, and water solution, continuation of breastfeeding, and solid adult foods. Even when the diarrhea stops and the child wants to eat, give him extra adult foods for two days -- this gives power."

The broadcasts are not limited to promoting proper mixing and administration of ORT. A "Diet for Dryness" campaign promotes the feeding of soft foods and breastfeeding along with ORT. A companion clean-up campaign motivates men to keep living areas free of human and animal waste. Talk shows, including interviews with experts, doctors, and local priests who emphasize the Moslem principle of cleanliness, focus on these related health issues.

The message is reaching Gambian women, two-thirds of which have access to radios. In a sample of 750 families throughout the country, the number of mothers who reported using a salt-sugar solution to treat their childrens' diarrhea rose from 3% to 48% after only eight months. The number of women who could recite the correct formula jumped from 1% to 64%. Many things contributed to these results: the Ministry of Health's commitment to promoting simple messages that rural people could understand; the collaboration of hundreds of health workers all over the country; the

v

systematic way the program was developed, relying on careful testing of concepts, materials, and programs; the integration of radio, print, and health workers around a single set of useful messages; and the talent and dedication of professional women like Joof, Bah, and de Fossard, who demonstrated clearly that the role of women in development broadcasting goes far beyond the melodious voice of a female announcer, and touches every aspect of successful broadcasting.