

# Engaging the Media

## Why engage the media?

The media are the most powerful and cost-effective communication channels available for reaching policy audiences, civil society, and the general public.

## Goal of this brief

This brief aims to show family planning advocates how to increase the quantity and quality of media coverage of family planning and to actively engage journalists in reporting on family planning consistently, factually, and responsibly.

## Identifying the media

Throughout this brief, “media” refers to television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and wire services. Different types of media reach different audiences. TV and radio especially reach more people than do the print media. While the Internet is becoming widely accessible, it is not commonplace in many newsrooms or readily available to all reporters.

## Why should the media care about family planning?

Family planning is newsworthy! In the broadest sense, family planning contributes to community and family well-being and its widespread adoption can affect the pace of national development. More directly, family planning contributes to improvement in women’s status and the health of women and children. Family planning also helps women to avoid unintended pregnancies, reducing pregnancy-related risks and the number of abortions.

Family planning issues often affect large numbers of people, entail personal as well as government expenditures, involve public officials and other influential people, and sometimes spark controversy. These are elements that journalists look for when deciding on the stories to write or broadcast.

Additional newsworthy messages include the following:

- **Family Planning Saves Lives.** While pregnancy and childbirth are natural, many pregnancies pose serious health risks for mothers and their children, specifically those characterised as:
  - *Too early*—girls under 18 face a higher than normal risk of death or disability from pregnancy, and their babies have more health risks.
  - *Too many*—women who have many births are more likely to have problems with their later pregnancies, and face increased risk of death or disability, as do their newborns.
  - *Too late*—mothers over the age of 35 have a higher than normal risk of death or disability associated with pregnancy, and their babies have more problems than is normal.
  - *Too soon*—children spaced too closely have a higher risk of illness and death. Women should wait at least two years after giving birth before trying to become pregnant again. This birth interval increases infant and child survival and protects the health of the mother.

By supporting birth spacing, journalists will be contributing to the survival and improved health of women and children.

■ **Family planning helps prevent HIV/AIDS.**

Integrating family planning into HIV/AIDS services helps avoid unintended pregnancies, resulting in fewer HIV-positive babies and fewer orphans. In addition, condoms provide dual protection—against unintended pregnancies and against transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

■ **Family planning reduces abortions.** Family planning reduces the number of unintended pregnancies that may lead to abortion. Unsafe abortion accounts for 13% of maternal deaths globally, and African women have the highest risk of abortion-related deaths in the world. By promoting family planning, the media will help to save women's lives.<sup>1</sup>

■ **Women in Africa want to regulate their fertility.** In 21 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, one-fifth or more of married women have an unmet need for family planning—that is, they would want to avoid or defer a pregnancy but are not using contraception (see the brief “Update on family planning in sub-Saharan Africa” for data on specific countries).

■ **Family planning empowers women.** Cultural and social norms limit women's decision-making ability in relationships and in the home, contributing to their lower status compared to men. As a result, many women have limited control over their sexual lives, a factor in the high numbers of unintended pregnancies and births. Early childbirth often causes girls to drop out of school, seriously limiting their future options. Family planning enables individuals and couples to have the number of children they desire with the spacing and timing they want.

■ **Family planning improves children's nutrition, health and education.** Closely spaced, frequent births are linked to poverty and overburdened families. This, in turn, contributes to poor school performance as a consequence of poor

nutrition,<sup>2</sup> contagious childhood diseases, and lack of parental attention to the individual needs of each child. Large, poor families often cannot afford schooling for all the children. Increasing birth spacing and having smaller families will help policy-makers achieve the nation's health, economic and educational goals.

■ **Family planning is safe.** Contraception is one of the most researched medical interventions in history, and while certain methods are not safe for all users, they are safe for the vast majority. The World Health Organisation issues guidelines on the safe use of contraceptives.<sup>3</sup>

■ **Family planning reduces adolescent pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.** Adolescent pregnancy is a serious problem and increases the risk of death for both young mothers and their newborns. Children born to unmarried adolescent mothers generally fare less well than children born into households with adult parents. Adolescent pregnancies also cut short young women's education, closing off future opportunities. In addition, when teenagers have sex without a condom, they increase their risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. By supporting comprehensive sexuality education—including messages supporting abstinence and condom use—and family planning services and supplies for adolescents who need them, leaders can promote the health and well-being of young people.

■ **Family planning promotes equity in the community.** Research shows that the poorest populations, people in refugee camps, internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities, and women in need of postabortion care often do not have access to or are not encouraged to take advantage of family planning services. Media channels that help improve family planning access for these groups contribute to attaining equity in health and other social and economic benefits among community members.



### Box 1

## Kenyan radio program on reproductive health

In May of 2004, a USA-based NGO in Kenya, looking for a way to disseminate reproductive health information through the mass media, approached The Nation Media Group to collaborate on a programme on this topic. This media company publishes Kenya's leading daily newspaper and owns an FM radio station with a popular mid-morning call-in show called Feedback. The NGO was looking for a way to 1) provide the Kenyan public with simple and concise reproductive health information through the mass media; 2) build the capacity of a major media organisation to report accurately on reproductive health issues; and 3) create a forum for interaction between experts and the general public. Their discussions led to a partnership and support for a radio programme every Wednesday. The NGO took responsibility for financial costs and technical content, lining up health professionals and researchers to appear on the programme and answer questions from callers. The Nation Media Group underwrote the costs of production and airtime. This innovative collaboration brought family planning and reproductive health topics to the airwaves in the Nairobi area, led to stimulating debates, and delivered accurate information to the public for 12 consecutive months until May 2005.<sup>4</sup>

## What can the media do to advance family planning?

The media play a key role in determining the most important issues of the day, by deciding what information will be published or aired. The media inform the public as well as policy-makers. They report to the public on government commitments and plans, and because they reflect community attitudes, the media influence policy-makers. This, in turn, stimulates public debate and helps to build constituencies around the programmes and policies.

Family planning advocates can help engage the media by giving them creative ideas and direction on what to cover. For example, the media could undertake the following activities:

- Cover family planning programme successes, including the introduction of new contraceptive technologies and improvements in quality and expansion of services and coverage.
- Interview women who state that they need family planning but are not using any type of contraceptive. Probe as to why this is the case. Consider additional interviews, for example with the woman's husband to seek his opinion on the practice of family planning, or invite women who practice family planning to speak of its benefits.
- Tell the story of how family planning has changed the life of an individual or a family.
- Show how family planning offers life-saving benefits and how much more it could do to save the lives of mothers and children and to combat HIV/AIDS by reducing both the sexual and mother-to-child transmission of the virus.
- Interview supportive policy-makers, family planning programme managers, health specialists, family planning advocates, youth group leaders, and adolescents concerned about sexuality issues.

- Interview a family planning technical expert. The interview could include questions on the need and demand for family planning in a district that is not being satisfied, the number of contraceptive stock-outs that occur in the district, the selection of contraceptives available, and how often married or unmarried youth frequent the clinic.
- Interview the youth about family planning and their perceptions of family planning clinic services and health provider attitudes.
- Visit a clinic and see what the quality of services is like. How many different types of contraceptives are available? Have there been shortages recently? Interview clients leaving the clinic to find out whether or not they are satisfied with the services.
- Organise televised debates, panel discussions, or town hall forums on family planning issues.
- Offer free airtime for topics on family planning.
- Form a network or coalition of journalists to focus on family planning and reproductive health, and share information and story ideas.
- Engage senior broadcast producers, print editors, and heads of media associations (the “gatekeepers”) in family planning issues to enhance the likelihood that beat-level reporters will have their stories published and aired.
- Include family planning in coverage of media events such as the World Population Day, International Women’s Day, or World Health Day. Organisations like the International Planned Parenthood Federation, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Health Organization (WHO) and other United Nations agencies often prepare materials that could be used with the media around these regular events.
- Give coverage to relevant international treaties and conventions that the country has supported,

and demonstrate how family planning is linked to them and how it could make a significant contribution to their achievement. These include the Millennium Development Goals, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),<sup>5</sup> the Beijing Declaration,<sup>6</sup> and, more recently, the African Union Maputo Plan of Action for the Operationalisation of the Continental Policy Framework for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (2007–1010).<sup>7</sup>

## What do the media need to advance family planning?

Journalists need to understand family planning before they will put family planning-related issues on their “news” agenda. Just as important, family planning advocates who work with the media need to understand what makes “news.”

While newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV news programs have widely different styles, their stories contain essential ingredients that qualify them as news. These ingredients include timeliness, potential or actual conflict, prominence of the people involved, and the number of people affected, among others. When one or more of these elements is present, journalists take note.

- **Timeliness.** Just as the word implies, “news” is new, or at least should seem new. If a new clinic is to be opened, alert the news media ahead of time. Or tie your family planning message to something current, such as a new report being released or survey results being announced, or link it to an annual observance such as the World Population Day, International Women’s Day, or World Health Day.
- **Prominence.** One of the best ways to ensure that an event will be covered is to get a well-known public official to participate. When the prime minister, health minister, or member of parliament kicks off an event, the news media are there to cover it.

## Malawi newspaper finds news in family planning

Family planning often made the news pages in *The Chronicle*, an independent newspaper published in Malawi for more than a decade. In fact, the newspaper included an entire page of articles related to reproductive health every week. The *Chronicle* created this page, under the banner *Reproductive Health Matters*, after its editor joined a regional network that helped journalists find and write stories about reproductive health issues. Through educational seminars, the editor learned about the issues and their importance to the people in her community. Before long, the newspaper—aided by the popular page of reproductive health stories—built a loyal readership that helped to increase publication from once to twice a week.<sup>9</sup>

**Reproductive Health Matters**  
**Oral Contraceptives for Family Planning**

**BY OUR REPORTER**

**O**RAL contraceptives or "The Pill" as it is more commonly known is one family planning method that has been around for a very long time. For over 40 years women have been using this method of family planning. Unfortunately in the past it was only available to those who could afford it. This being the case, many women in the developing world were unable to access contraceptive even if they were aware of its existence.

Information on the benefits of family planning provided in worldwide programmes and provision of affordable access to family planning methods by Reproductive Health (RH) Providers have helped to raise the use of contraceptives. The rise in contraceptive use and smaller families has meant many lives saved with women and children who are healthier and stronger.

The Pill is one family planning method which is being offered by the Banjala Mtsogolo (BLM) RH providers. Offered at an affordable price in all their clinics, the pill is being used by many women to plan their families.

The Pill is an oral contraceptive which requires that the woman take a pill daily to stop ovulation, thicken cervical mucous membrane lining the opening of the uterus making it difficult for sperm to pass through. The pill has proven to be very effective when used correctly with 1 woman becoming pregnant in every 1,000 users.

A woman will benefit from using the pill by several things. Regular, lighter and fewer days of menstrual periods are experienced. User can stop taking the pill at any time with fertility returning soon after stopping.

The pill will help women prevent ectopic pregnancies and ovarian cancer. It has said that the pill helps in the prevention of ovarian cysts, pelvic inflammatory disease and benign breast disease. It can be used as an emergency contraceptive after unprotected sex.

Like all medication the pill has its own limitations. It is effective only if it is taken every day which some women find difficult to remember and one must remember to have a packed ready for use every 28 days. Breastfeeding mothers are advised not to use the pill as it affects the quality of milk.

Women who are over the age of 35 and have high blood pressure risk the possibility of developing heart problems when using the pill. The problem is worse for women who are heavy smokers.

the pill are nausea for the first 3 month, spotting or bleeding when a woman forgets to take the pill, breast tenderness and some weight gain.

According to a BLM year 2003 annual report, the

**Maternal Health Statistics**

- **Impact.** The more people are affected by an event, an issue, or a problem, the more interested the news media will be. Journalists are also interested in trends—an increase or decrease in teenage pregnancies, for example—and their consequences.
- **Controversy.** Government agencies and family planning NGOs tend to shy away from controversy where the news media are concerned. However, when conflict emerges, you can use it as an opportunity to explain your side of the story.
- **Proximity.** Local news media tend to be more interested in news that occurs close to home rather than in another country or on another continent. But news from afar usually has a “local angle.” For example, when a United Nations report on a global issue is released, help journalists localise the story by putting them in touch with a local programme or person directly affected by the issue.

## The internet

The phenomenal expansion of news and information dissemination via the Internet bears special mention. Many news outlets have robust web sites that are updated throughout the day. This places added pressure on journalists to deliver news quickly. To keep abreast of issues, journalists often turn to the Internet and to organisations whose web sites have family planning and reproductive health information in the press relations or media sections. These websites can become quick sources of information for journalists if they are kept up to date. Also, many journalists rely on e-mail, and family planning organisations should find out if their journalist contacts prefer to receive news releases, reports, and other materials electronically (see website sources for journalists listed at the end of this brief).

As Internet access continues to expand across Africa, family planning advocates are increasingly turning to this

resource as an important means of accessing information as well as a relatively inexpensive communication channel to reach broader audiences. The reach of the Internet and the “viral” nature of e-mail, have spurred an increase in advocacy organisations around the globe. Examples of simple, low-cost Internet advocacy activities include compiling a list of e-mail addresses of the intended audiences and using it to send periodic e-broadcasts of news, research findings, or events; establishing a monthly family planning e-newsletter; and conducting online discussions. Creating a “list serve” of activists or family planning champions that allows group members to post information, share news, or request

assistance can help maintain alliances and coalitions, and help build local social networks.

## In summary

Engaging the media is a highly effective approach for reaching wide audiences and influential people. It is an essential component of an overall advocacy campaign and serves to reinforce messages disseminated through other channels. Time and resources spent by family planning advocates to increase media coverage are excellent investments.

## Additional ideas for working with the media:

### *What do the media need?*

Factual, unbiased information from trusted, credible sources

Information presented in a clear, concise way that highlights its news value

### *What can family planning advocates do to help them?*

- Identify important media outlets and journalists interested in family planning.
- Meet with journalists regularly to offer information and available resources.
- Engage senior reproductive health programme managers to serve as credible spokespersons.
- Accompany reports, surveys, and other research material with news releases and fact sheets.
- Eliminate technical jargon and explain complex terms in nontechnical language.
- For media events, prepare press kits with news releases in advance and have knowledgeable people on hand to answer questions.
- Limit the promotion of the programme or organisation and focus on the facts and impact.

### *What do the media need?*

Basic information about family planning, how programmes work, and what their impact is

### *What can family planning advocates do to help them?*

- Offer to meet with journalists either individually or for group training to introduce them to the basics of family planning.
- Plan site visits for journalists.
- Introduce journalists to people affected by the programmes who are willing to share their stories.
- Introduce journalists to senior, respected clinicians and managers.

Ways to cover family planning and sexuality topics that can be sensitive and controversial

- Provide compelling stories of the positive effect of family planning on a person, family, or community.
- Identify and work with journalists who are interested in these topics.

Immediate information in times of controversy or adverse events

- Maintain a trusted reputation as a credible source of objective information.
- Designate a spokesperson and train that person to interact with the media in times of controversy.
- Develop position statements and community allies before there is a need to address anticipated controversial topics such as equating family planning to abortion, adverse medical events of contraceptives, and religious opposition.

Recognition of responsible reporting to help sustain interest in family planning coverage

- Organise a contest for journalists and present a prize for the best family planning news coverage.
- Establish an annual “Award for Excellence in Family Planning and Reproductive Health Reporting,” and present the award at a high-level event.

## Additional resources for working with journalists

### Advocates for Youth

A respected source on adolescent reproductive health for journalists; see web site with useful Web information for professionals and the media: <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/news/index.htm>

### PLANetWIRE

[www.planetwire.org](http://www.planetwire.org)  
(an online newsroom for journalists)

### Population Reference Bureau

<http://www.prb.org/template.cfm?Section=Journalists>

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## References

A wire service is an agency that collects news reports for newspapers and distributes it electronically.

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3. World Health Organization. *Medical eligibility criteria for contraceptive use*, 2004 (<http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/publications/mec/index.htm>).
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6. *The Beijing Declaration of the Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995, Resolutions 17 and 30* (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/beijingdeclaration.html>).
7. *The Maputo Plan of Action for the Operationalisation of the Continental Policy Framework for Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights, September 2006* ([http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/Conferences/Past/2006/September/SA/Maputo/doc/en/Working\\_en/SRHR\\_Plan\\_of\\_Action\\_2007\\_Final.pdf](http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/Conferences/Past/2006/September/SA/Maputo/doc/en/Working_en/SRHR_Plan_of_Action_2007_Final.pdf)).
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