

Start the press: **the journalist's perspective**

African migrants account for the greatest number of new HIV diagnoses in Britain in recent years. A new report, ***Start the press: How African communities in the UK can work with the media to confront HIV stigma*** challenges African communities to engage constructively with the media to ensure that all dimensions of the story behind this statement are explored.

For journalists it has all the elements of a 'good' story because it's

controversial – it involves race, poverty, relations between the sexes and sexuality

high on human interest – it deals with health, sex, ethnicity, discrimination and people's hopes and fears

important – because it's part of the bigger picture of a global HIV pandemic.

The story offers opportunities to journalists because

it has many angles such as the links between HIV and TB, how stigma reduces people's access to health services, and success stories of HIV-positive people who have worked with the media to challenge stigma and discrimination

brings in new people and voices that are not usually heard *Start the press* says that 'People living with HIV are not often quoted as sources... The views and voices of African migrants living with HIV were largely absent.'

touches on other controversial issues such as racism, xenophobia and negative stereotyping.

Besides the professional satisfaction of finding and running a good story, most journalists recognise that the media also have responsibilities. In the context of HIV and African communities, *Start the press* argues that media responsibilities include:

- challenging the stigma around HIV and Aids by reporting how stigma prevents people from testing for HIV and from obtaining access to health services and other support
- highlighting a range of perspectives, to ensure that no voices are excluded from important debates
- helping fight racism and discrimination
- providing accurate information on issues of public importance
- breaking the silence around issues that can be difficult to talk about, such as sex and sexuality
- helping to generate informed public debate that may go on to influence policy. For example, *Start the press* shows that in 2006 the UK press predominantly framed HIV as a disease in Africa, but it could have framed the debate in many other ways.

These responsibilities are an extension of journalistic good practice: to report accurately, sensitively, in a balanced way, avoiding sensationalism and stereotyping.

Yet *Start the press* analyses the media coverage of the case of a Zimbabwean man who allegedly transmitted HIV to six women at a holiday camp in Essex, and shows that the stigmatising reporting reinforced racist stereotypes by linking African migrants, and men particularly, with sexually predatory behaviour.

Equally, in the same coverage, several UK national papers referred to the man as a 'sex fiend' and 'sex monster', sensationalist language that almost certainly heightened racist feeling and affected the way the reader interpreted the story.

Start the press, at the same time as urging African communities to work more actively with the media, also encourages journalists to:

- Think about the choice of words and pictures to support an article and the way linking separate events and issues may affect the way a reader understands a story.
- Cover the news, if that's their job, but then dig deeper (for example, to examine why particular groups of people are more vulnerable than others)
- Try to cover issues (such as how underlying inequalities may be linked to the concentration of HIV among African migrants) as well as events, because news reporting alone will not promote informed debate or understanding.
- Adhere to media guidelines drawn up by journalists' associations, such as the *Guidelines for reporting HIV* from the National Union of Journalists and the National Aids Trust, or from specialist groups, such as the National African HIV Prevention Programme *Language guide for covering HIV and migration*.

The challenge

African migrants have reasons to be cautious about testing and about HIV and Aids in general: they do not want to add to the discrimination they may already face in their lives, and are fearful of the stigma that HIV and Aids carry in some African communities.

'Stigma to me means to be regarded [as] an alien...in the community I live in... I am HIV positive and I am from Africa... I appreciate the sympathy but I'll never tolerate the stigma surrounding my status.'

African person living with HIV in the UK

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Many of the stories analysed in the *Start the press* report were in fact accurate and avoided stigmatising people and groups, but the research behind the report revealed contrary perceptions in the African community. This negative perception was often quoted as contributing to the pressure to remain silent and therefore cannot go unchallenged. Silence fuels stigma, inhibits discussion about the way issues such as race, poverty, gender relations and sexuality increase people's vulnerability to HIV. Most important, it stops people who are at risk making use of health and support services.

By talking directly to people living positively with HIV in the African community – encouraging them to tell their stories in their own words – journalists can help break the silence on taboo issues, generate debate, confront stigma, increase understanding and influence policy responses that reflect the priorities and needs of people and communities most affected.



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Start the press: How African communities in the UK can work with the media to confront HIV stigma reports the findings of a joint piece of research by Panos London and the African HIV Policy Network (AHPN). Copies are available from Panos London or AHPN.