

How to Report GENDER, HIV/AIDS AND RIGHTS Training Workshop for Caribbean Journalists Kingston, Jamaica, November 2002

In November 2002 IPS 'tested' a draft training manual on Gender, Rights and HIV/AIDS with a group of Caribbean journalists. An Experts Group whose report can be found at www.ipsnews.net/aids_2002/index.shtml developed the concept of the training manual. An earlier training towards the same purpose was conducted with African journalists in Johannesburg, South Africa in September 2002.

Patricia A. Made prepared the draft manual.

This short, informal report is intended to highlight some of the insights of the training, and document the development of the final version of the manual. Please contact Susan Alexander of IPS, susan@ips.org if you have any comments or questions about this report or the wider project.

The Trainers and Participants

Suzanne Francis Brown, a communicator at the University of West Indies, was the trainer at the three-day workshop at the Alhambra Inn, Kingston, Jamaica. Very skillfully, Suzanne took a group of eight Caribbean journalists through the second round of pre-testing of a training manual on how to report on Gender, HIV/AIDS and Rights that is being produced by IPS.

Seven of the participants were from the region – from Barbados, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad – and one from Minneapolis, United States. Ann Ninan, who is the series editor for the project, and based in Delhi, India, was the rapporteur, and Corinne Barnes, the former IPS Caribbean editor, was the coordinator.

Day One

Suzanne set the ball rolling with a brief introduction and background information on the reason and purpose of the workshop. She explained that the training programme was modular, each section fitting into the next. Participants were invited to pick lots to decide who would go first in introducing themselves to the group.

It was quickly apparent that the group was collectively very experienced, and individually, each person had very independent views. Two of the eight present were working with radio, while the rest were either feature editors at newspapers or regular contributors for international news agencies. The majority had experience, albeit limited, of writing stories on gender, equality and women's issues.

One person said her newsroom, which was run by men, did not encourage stories on HIV/AIDS. Another felt that this could be because of a perception that the reading public was more interested in politics and crime stories. The group agreed that even they chose to go after the big stories, the news that was made by policymakers and politicians, and in this scheme of things HIV/AIDS was no longer big news since the initial flood of stories when it emerged as a life-threatening problem. Since everyone had views on the subject, there was a lot of discussion around what makes news, and if it is journalists who shape news.

Each person wrote down one expectation they had come to the workshop with. These ranged from “writing good stories that would make people want to read about HIV/AIDS again” to “fully understanding what is gender and what is better reporting” and gaining “knowledge (for themselves) on people’s rights”. By the end of Day Three, Suzanne had covered all the various expectations listed as she promised to on Day One.

Suzanne laid a basis for a gender analysis framework with a quote from Margaret Gallagher on the under-representation of women in the media. Immediately the question that popped up was if the situation in the Caribbean wasn’t somewhat different. Everyone felt that there was an increased presence of women. But whether or not this includes the voices of women as prominent persons was then a subject of discussion.

To make it clearer to everyone Suzanne put the group to work with an exercise: write down your definition of sex and of gender. While there was no confusion over the first with everyone stating in one way or the other that sex was essentially the biological make-up, most people were not seeing or thinking along gender lines.

A handout ‘Sex and gender’, which defines both, was distributed to participants. Using it as a reference point, Suzanne spent some time discussing gender particularly, which helped to strengthen everyone’s understanding of gender. The discussion touched upon many “very Caribbean” biases like homophobia and the journalists’ own misconceptions that prevail in her/his writing, and the influence of the church in the region, in for instance keeping a lid of silence on big problems like domestic violence. The group felt that a caveat needs to be introduced in the definition of “gender relations” in the handout ‘Sex and Gender’, their concern regarding transgendered or other gender groups.

If anybody had any thoughts of dozing off now, they were forced awake by having to stand up in case of a ‘yes’ and sit in case of a ‘no’ answer to a list of questions to test their understanding of sex and gender. There were no mistakes. Suzanne had got the message through.

She then moved forward to discussing gender stereotypes. One person suggested that an example could be a common misconception that a secretary is necessarily female. What is the media’s role in reinforcing stereotypes? This was done through an exercise identifying the main images of men and women coming through the media; what its impact was on society; and what are some ways of changing the situation. There was no doubt at all that the media generally portrays women as the “weaker” sex, which it was in

the power of journalists to change by focusing on stories that increase people's awareness of the skewed gender relations, anti-female marketing, etc.

Everyone was constantly pitching in with examples drawn from their own experience, which was country specific. The Caribbean may be a small region but no two countries are the same. There was animated discussion around the role of the media in their respective countries: on whether it was independent, and going further, if the media in the region could at all be called independent.

Suzanne set the group to work on an exercise that analysed the media to see how it communicates gender. Who is and isn't portrayed negatively or positively in the media, and if the media is male-dominated. Also who are the chief sources of information for journalists, categorised according to sex, class, and geographic location.

The answers made it very clear that the media in the Caribbean too, like in most parts of the world, was gender insensitive, depended on policy-makers and politicians for information, served the interests of the upper class and wrote for urban audiences. Who originated news? Men. Who were stories about? Mainly men. Women were the sources for "soft news" stories, and their voices were mainly heard in a context of negative portrayal along with working class men. A handout on the definitions of gender equality, feminism, gender-specific story and adding a gender perspective was passed around to each participant to take home with them.

The last couple of hours on Day One were spent with award winning journalist Patricia Watson of the Jamaica-Gleaner newspaper. Patricia is this year's PAHO Awardee for her continuing series on HIV/AIDS. She spoke of her experience in reporting HIV/AIDS. How until last year she had done articles on HIV without having ever met anyone with the virus.

It was after she attended the Durban conference on racism and discrimination last year that she pushed for a series on HIV/AIDS and got two pages in the Outlook pages of her newspaper. The editor, she feels, may also have had his reasons to agree. Now she no longer focuses on its health aspects, but seeks out its impact on people.

In her opinion a journalist reporting on HIV/AIDS has to necessarily be open to discussing/recognising the reality of homosexuality (except for Barbados, the rest of the region refuses to consider anything other than heterosexual relations) and commercial sex workers no matter what their personal feelings might be.

She believes that it is time for journalists to take a stand on HIV/AIDS as people are dying, and young girls are getting infected through sex with older men, which is sometimes forced and often arranged by the parents for a financial consideration. All across the region, women have no rights to negotiate sex. The first day's session extended well past six.

Day Two

Following a recap of the previous day's work, Suzanne plunged straight into the role of journalists as communicators. To get everyone's mind thinking, Suzanne passed around a hand-out, Gender Analysis Framework for the Media – A Checklist of Key Questions, and everyone was asked to say if they thought it a useful tool for evaluating gender representation in the media.

One person's immediate reaction was that analysis would be more useful than the checklist in a region like the Caribbean where there is more than average representation of women in the media and in universities, for instance. Eventually it was agreed that both analysis and a checklist like this serve an equal purpose. The checklist, which includes a simple headcount of male and female voices in a story, reveals the various stereotypes at a glance. To put the checklist to practical use, an evaluation of two newspaper articles from that day's Observer newspaper was done by participants divided into two groups.

The results were very interesting. What one group said was a "positive portrayal" of women, was rejected by the other group as reinforcing gender stereotypes about women. The story in question was a report on a high-flying business woman who has stepped down. This sparked a lively discussion around male and female roles in the media: how, for instance, sports journalism is still guarded as a male preserve and women kept out because sportsmen would feel uncomfortable having them around in the locker room!

What was revealing is that the exercise was an eye opener for most participants about the media's own role in reinforcing stereotypes at the workplace. What they chose to cover or to ignore was very evident in media products. What was needed was balanced, fair reporting, also on HIV/AIDS for which the media would need multi-faceted requirements since its impact went beyond health.

Suzanne took the group through an exercise on understanding risks and harms reporting of HIV/AIDS. The former gives people a choice while the latter is disempowering. How stories should go beyond the retelling of tragedy? How the media must shake people out of their complacency?

The group had a clear understanding that the virus could infect any body: they had either a best friend or relative or knew a prominent person in government or musician who was HIV-positive. But in the Caribbean many people including journalists did not personally know people living with AIDS. The group agreed with the opinion that the spread of the virus can be halted by the media through education, information sharing, and socially responsible writing which could also prevent risky behaviour.

Again the stigmatization of homosexuals in the Caribbean surfaced with some participants saying they were not "comfortable" with interviewing homosexuals and discussing sexual practices. Interestingly, this discomfort was not gendered, and the

group discussed the issue freely. At the end, the dominant feeling was that media ethics demanded of each journalist to go beyond individual prejudices to talk to everyone in the pursuit of “good journalism”.

The group was divided up and told to find possible angles for real stories from a list of five subjects: funding for HIV/AIDS from donors, national HIV/AIDS policies, new trends in HIV/AIDS epidemic, impact on schools and universities, and treatment and care. One group that included guest participants¹ – Suzanne and Corinne’s students at the Caribbean Institute of Media and Communication, University of West Indies – actually came up with a story outline, including a title and list of sources!

Time was spent in discussing the language and the terminology of HIV/AIDS, including what to avoid. Many of the terms listed in a handout, Definitions – language, were new to the group. Most of the journalists had never encountered for instance serostatus, which was part of everyone’s vocabulary in southern Africa. There was some discussion again around the description of HIV/AIDS as a disease. Syndrome might be better because it suggests an alternative. Participants also shared their views on the socialisation of men and women, which makes them particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. What constitutes acceptable behaviour? Even within the Caribbean, it was noticed, there were yawning differences in perceptions.

Suzanne went slowly over the need for HIV/AIDS to be mainstreamed in media coverage, the gender dimensions of the disease, and the need to challenge acceptable male and female behaviour. The group discussed male and female vulnerabilities, and was shown the links between HIV/AIDS and rights. A handout on definitions of reproductive health, reproductive health-care, reproductive rights and the principle of ‘universality’ was carefully studied, and media coverage in the Caribbean of these issues was revisited.

As a practical exercise linking gender, HIV/AIDS and rights, the group analysed an IPS story by Mercedes Sayagues titled ‘Orphan Children, Dilapidated Farms’, which captures the plight of rural communities across southern Africa hit hard by HIV/AIDS. While the group felt that none of the things written about was part of the media landscape in the Caribbean, there was no doubt that the story was excellent. The story made the connections and mainstreamed gender without “banging on the head”.

Suzanne moved on to laying the legal foundation of reproductive health rights at the international level (hand-out provided participants with a list of rights and the international instrument in which it is found) and the specific situation in the various Caribbean countries. From the contribution to the discussion by the participant from Barbados, it emerged that this was probably the only country that has brought the issue of reproductive rights into the public arena.

¹ A group of students from the Gender, Media and Development class at the University of the West Indies sat in on a couple of sessions on the second day of the workshop.

Day Three

The morning started with a long and open discussion on homophobia in much of the region, which could be central to the silence around HIV/AIDS reporting. The group went over the conditions that create such a situation (did the church have a role?), was prejudice a matter of socialisation, and whether or not the media has a role to promote the freedom of all people's whatever their sexual preference in this instance.

Much of what followed in the morning fitted into the above discussion and the job of the media to be responsible. The group revisited the rules of good reporting – accuracy, balance, clarity, focus, diverse voices and context. A handout, Pointers for a More Effective Interview, was passed around on how vulnerable and marginalised people and groups (relevant in the context of HIV/AIDS) should be interviewed.

The pointers included the need for the journalist to spend time, observe the environment in which the person lives, listen and ask open-ended questions. There was need to question conventional wisdom, it was concluded. This followed a discussion around stereotypes – how for instance in common wisdom nurses are female and mechanics always male.

A handout on Understanding Data put focus on the need to disaggregate data, and the use of statistics to tell a story. How in the Caribbean not all countries are breaking up data by sex, and as a result it is that much more difficult for journalists to use figures effectively. But the group felt it would be worthwhile to ask authorities and officials to disaggregate the figures as it reveals so much more. The media needs to also break down jargon, and at all times to cross-check facts because what is put out in the media is believed in and quoted as the truth by readers.

Bringing the curtain down on the workshop, Suzanne returned to the flip charts with the modules of the three-days, and the cards on which each participant had printed an expectation. It was clear the workshop had achieved all that it had set out to do in terms of covering all the sections in the training manual and in meeting the expectations of the group. Each person wrote a short note on what they had got out of the workshop, and of what use this knowledge would be for their work.

Corinne made the closing remarks, but before her, each participant thanked Suzanne for among other things an “excellent” three-day training, all through which she “stayed on her feet”!

PS – To anyone who knows Caribbeans and has been to Kingston, this report would seem very sterile and superficial if we didn't also include the memorable ackee and salt fish breakfasts, and the “lime-ing” that happened every evening!

