

Kenyan Teachers Living with HIV/AIDS Tell Their Stories

Teachers living with HIV/AIDS need strong social support and access to treatment so they can continue their work. Finally their story is being told.

HIV/AIDS has taken a huge toll on Kenya's teachers who are critical to the future of Kenyan communities. Teachers living with HIV/AIDS need strong social support and access to treatment so they can continue their work. But fear of stigma and discrimination often prevents them from accessing the help that they need. Although no recent statistics are available, Kenya's Education Department estimates that up to 15,000 teachers die each year of AIDS-related causes because they don't know where to access the information that could keep them alive.

Finally their story is being told. Four feature stories and talk shows recently aired on Kenyan radio focusing on discrimination against HIV-positive teachers as well as cases where schools have accepted and supported the teachers. Each talk show played a pre-recorded feature story, followed by a live call-in segment featuring a guest speaker who answered questions from the listening audience. The radio programs have had a direct impact on the lives of teachers living with HIV who are now willing to be open about their HIV status and are accessing help and support for the first time. At least 16 programs will air over the next few weeks.

The flurry of media attention resulted from a workshop held by Internews in July in collaboration with the Kenya Association of Positive Teachers (KENEPOTE),



A classroom in session at Hekima Primary on the outskirts of Nairobi. The school's principal had implemented a comprehensive HIV/AIDS strategy. She openly enrolls HIV-positive children and does not discriminate against HIV-positive teachers. Although the teacher pictured here is not HIV-positive, she and her colleagues as well as all children in the school receive AIDS information and counseling that allow them to understand why people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHAs) pose no harm to them and can be a productive part of society.

the Kenyan Education Department and the Center for British Teachers. The two-day workshop brought together radio journalists and KENEPOTE member teachers to learn from each other, building a relationship of understanding and trust.

For Julius Mungai from Coro FM, a Kikuyu radio station, it was an eye opener: "I didn't realize how much stigma and discrimination HIV-positive teachers face

in their classrooms, staff rooms and in the community," he commented. "Through the workshop I got to meet five HIV-positive teachers who shared their stories. I believe I have a duty as a journalist to educate society on this because teachers influence all of us who go to school."

Ten radio journalists, who had previously received training from Internews, attended the workshop in Nairobi. Each of



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KENEPOTE member Bethwell Nyagweso (left), is interviewed by journalist Carol Gachacha, Metro FM.

them will produce at least two programs on HIV/AIDS and education, to be broadcast on their respective stations. Several will travel to schools in other parts of the country to report on the effects of AIDS on education in these areas.

After she broadcast her first program, Kenyan Broadcasting Corporation producer Ann Mikia, said, "I was really glad to have done a radio program with HIV positive teachers, because through reaching them I felt the show reached a greater part of society, as all of us pass through the hands of teachers. It even gave me greater satisfaction when I heard the feedback of KENEPOTE later on."

Several teachers phoned in to Mikia's hour-long HIV/AIDS show, "A Stitch in Time," for assistance. KENEPOTE executive director Elsa Ouko was a live studio guest, along with other teachers living with HIV/AIDS. Ms. Ouko was able to provide the teachers who called in with on-air counseling, and also provided her contact details to listeners.

More teachers are now joining KENEPOTE as a result of the radio programs, receiving counseling on their rights, as well as guidance and support.

Two journalists – Anthony Wafula from Waumini FM and KBC freelance presenter/producer Sammy Muraya – are to receive Internews travel grants to attend KENEPOTE's first national conference in Kisumu in August. This will enable

them to collect quality broadcast material for their respective stations, including the stories of teachers who are based outside of Nairobi.

"Hearing these teachers speak on radio will contribute towards stigma reduction which is one of the objectives of the education sector's HIV/AIDS policy" said USAID Senior HIV/AIDS Advisor Cheryl Sonnichsen. "Their stories need to be told."

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Elsa Ouko, Executive Director of KENEPOTE and a former teacher (left), is interviewed by journalist Eudias Kigai from Radio Waumini.

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