

My Fellowship year

Written by Anna Miti 2015

AVAC Fellow – Zimbabwe

Introduction

Young women are more vulnerable to new HIV infections than their male counterparts. According to UNAIDS, females aged between 15 to 19 are up to five times as likely as their male counterparts to getting HIV infection as their male counterparts. Those 18 to 24 are twice as likely as their male counterparts to get HIV. This is due to socio-economic factors that affect their ability to negotiate for safer sex. In addition, sexual and gender based violence also affects this group, making them even more vulnerable to HIV. Of concern however is that in spite of these issues, it has been shown that younger women are less likely to adhere to HIV prevention tools such as microbicides. For example, during VOICE study, FACTS and CAPRISA, younger women had issues with adherence. It is also commonly known that the uptake of the female condom is negligible, and yet it is one of the tools currently available for young women to use in HIV prevention. I however feel this is due to lack of awareness of HIV prevention research information as well as negative media publicity of HIV prevention research. The media plays an important role which is critical to the success of research trials. For instance, negative media coverage has led to the stoppage of research trials. Poor media coverage also has an effect on the negative perception of research trials participants and ultimately the uptake of prevention tools once they are available. I also feel there is a gap between researchers, young women as potential end users of research products and the media. My fellowship set out to work around these issues.

Objectives

I set out to raise awareness of HIV prevention research to young women with a view to affecting acceptability of HIV prevention tools, and encourage adherence to study product for those in research trials, or in future trials. I intended to increase media coverage of microbicides, Prep and vaccine. I felt that the more people were aware of the existence of these tools, the more they would be willing to use them. This could lead to demand creation. I also set out to bridge the gap between researchers, media and young women.

Methods

I started a blog called (www.annamitisblog.org) to raise the issues of HIV prevention and young women. I used the blog to simplify and breakdown information such as microbicides trials. I used the blog to act as a bridge between young women and researchers, where I encouraged young women to contribute to the blog and write articles to share their thoughts and views regarding SRHR issues and HIV prevention. In addition, I held meetings with CSO and activists in Zimbabwe to raise awareness of PrEP, microbicides and vaccines, so they could cascade the information to their constituents. This was aimed at creating demand for HIV prevention and hopefully build up to building acceptability of the product once it becomes available. I then created a network of CSOs and individual activists focussed on PrEP. As a network we came up with recommendations to include PrEP in the DREAMS initiative in Zimbabwe, which we forwarded to the larger core group of CSOs involved in engagement with PEPFAR in Zimbabwe. We were recommending the inclusion of PrEP in the initiative. In my quest to bridge the gap between researchers and young women I organised information dissemination meetings attended by both young women and researchers, where the young women could speak directly to researchers about their concerns as young people. To increase media coverage, I worked extensively with the Health Journalists Association of

Zimbabwe. I invited their members to meeting about biomedical HIV prevention, and I also helped to link them to researchers, both for coverage of stories, and as resource persons for health journalist's workshops and meetings

Achievements

During my fellowship year I learnt a lot about advocacy and shaping response to HIV prevention needs for young women. However three of the top things I feel I achieved during the year are as follows-;

1. Created a network of CSO and individuals focussed on Prep, microbicides and vaccine

This network comprises of twenty Civil service organisations including communications consultations, the National AIDS Council, The Zimbabwe HIV/AIDS Activists Union community Trust, the Women and Aids Support network, Female Students Network, The Zimbabwe National Students Union, Health Journalists Association of Zimbabwe and other individuals. I am glad to say in addition; the I have been mentoring ten young women who were part of my meetings with young women. These will be part of the network I created as they will continue advocating for HIV prevention in young women.

2. Increase in media coverage

I successfully lobbied and facilitated for media coverage around issues of HIV prevention research, especially the Dapivirine Ring on Radio and television as well as various newspapers and online publications. I have also been interviewed on radio and taken part in various radio panels. In addition, I facilitated for the coverage of and radio programs in vernacular for microbicides. I also used my blog for the same purpose, of increasing coverage of HIV prevention research. As a result of my efforts ZBC carried a live broadcast of a session on microbicides and young women during ICASA2015, something which had ever been done before. When the results of ASPIRE and Ring study were announced, the story made front page and also made as one of the op stories on Zimbabwe`s only television station. (the top story is usually reserved for political stories). I also moved from quoting other people as news sources, but I also became a news source.

<https://t.co/ouGDKGZWDA>

3. Closed gap between researchers and young women as the potential end users of the research tool. This was done through meetings, my blog and meetings which I attended and managed to carry the voice of the young women, in meeting where ordinarily their voice would not be represented. For example I attended a meeting at the NIH in the US where I and other advocates successfully lobbied for the inclusion of women younger than 21 in the open label extension trial for the Dapivirine ring. This was after the reluctance of researchers to include young women under 21 in research trials as the results of two studies- Ring and ASPIRE had failed to prove efficacy off the Dapivirine ring to prevent HIV infection in women under 21. This was attributed mainly due to lack of adherence. I however argued that excluding them will leave us with a gap where there was little choice for young women intending to prevent HIV Through my work researchers working on microbicides trials in Zimbabwe are engaging young women in discussion about HIV prevention research for young women

Future of this work

My network of CSO is still in existence and I intend to keep it going. Due to funding constraints, this network will mostly be virtual, where we will be updating each other on developments in HIV prevention research. I will also keep my blog going. The young women I was mentoring are a part of the SHAZ/HUB youth drop in centre run by my host organisation Pangaea Zimbabwe. There are plans to invite them to talk at various forums where they can speak on behalf of young people.

Where does it go

From here I intend to seek more opportunities to advocate for young women. I have been negotiating to have a slot on radio to discuss HIV prevention issues for young women, bringing together young women, researchers and other stakeholders in talk shows. It is highly likely that I will be doing at least one program per week on radio to achieve this.

Challenges

I found it hard to get started at first as I struggled to fit into my host organisation. I also had challenges in getting people to turn up for my meetings. People knew me as a journalist and they were unsure of how to receive me at first, due to negative stories that sometimes are published by my media colleagues. One of my first meetings had members of GALZ (an organisation representing LGBTI community in Zimbabwe). They had to ask the facilitator why I was there as a journalist from the state media. Other groupings were also wary that I had come to cover the event and therefore were afraid of being “quoted” or “misquoted” in my story. It was later explained to them that I was attending the meeting as AVAC Fellow and they accepted it. I also struggled to get copies of my programs, both television and radio because ZBC is still using analogue operating system as opposed to digital, therefore it is a long process to get copies of program. Besides that, retrieving programs usually attracts a fee that I had not planned for in my budget and therefore could not be supported.

Lessons learnt

I learnt that you cannot move into young women's lives with solutions to problems without first of all involving them in the discussion. I thought I was going in to tell young women about HIV prevention and what they should do about it, but I learnt that in order to do this, I have to be willing to learn more about their lived realities. I learnt that contrary to our belief that young women are completely useless and out of control, they face real challenges which need solutions, besides biomedical HIV prevention. I also learnt that advocacy is not easy, and that it involves a lot of negotiation, hard work and resilience. I also learnt that unlike in media, where one sees the fruits of one's labour (that is a story published or aired), in advocacy this is not always easy to see. It also means doing the work and letting someone else take the credit in order to advance one's cause.

Recommendations

For those willing to take up advocacy I recommend that they learn as much as possible, and that they work closely with Host organisation, supervisors and alumni. In the end this can make or break their work. For those intending to apply for fellowship I advise to choose your host organisation carefully, be sure of how you will be integrated into the organisation and also how the organisation's work will impact yours.

Key resources

Although I took part in many programs, I could not get copies of my work due to aforementioned challenges.

www.annamitisblog.org



<https://t.co/ouGDKGZWDA>

Figure 1 with UNAIDS Zim Michael Bartos and Mary Sandasi Women and AIDS support network on a radio programme about PrEP for young women



Figure 2 with Minister of Health and Child Care Dr David Parirenyatwa after Editor's breakfast meeting on ICASA 2015



Figure 3:

Information dissemination meeting with young women in Chitungwiza



Figure 3: Disseminating results of ASPIRE and ring study with female students of tertiary institutions



Figure 4: Researcher Dr P Hunidzarira explaining how the ring works using a pelvic model to CSO



Figure 5: Attending a meeting at the NIH in Washington, USA



Figure 6: With my young mentees just after they had taken part in a meeting with researchers