



Integrating Fertility Awareness into a Serial Radio Drama

How do you overcome deeply held misconceptions and offer accurate, actionable information about sex, fertility, and family planning?

Addressing barriers to family planning (FP) use can be complex. Even in countries where large gains have been made in contraceptive prevalence rates, progress has stalled in recent years. The prevailing challenges are less about access to services and more about social and attitudinal resistance. Demographic and Health Survey data suggest that misunderstanding of pregnancy risk (post-partum/breastfeeding and infrequent sex) cultural, religious or social opposition, and fear of side effects are key barriers to FP use.¹

Education entertainment is one way to reach a wide audience with contextually relevant and accurate reproductive health information which could help address these concerns. Mass media approaches using entertainment education have been proven to increase reproductive health knowledge, attitudes, and social support across a large audience.² In Rwanda, the Institute for Reproductive Health (IRH) and Population Media Center (PMC) collaborated under the USAID-funded [FACT Project](#) to create an entertaining serial radio drama that dispelled myths about fertility and FP.

PMC's approach emphasizes storylines that resonate with audiences in an emotionally relevant way, encouraging audience members build a strong connection with the characters.

Using a proven theory-based approach to behavior change communication developed by Miguel Sabido, the drama *Impano n'Impamba* (A Gift for Today That Will Last a Long Time) took on racy and controversial issues and confronted taboos like menstrual health, domestic violence, and the struggle to understand true pregnancy risk and avoid unwanted pregnancies.

Fertility Awareness is actionable information about fertility throughout the life course and the ability to apply this knowledge to one's own circumstances and needs.

It includes basic information about the menstrual cycle, when and how pregnancy occurs, the likelihood of pregnancy from unprotected intercourse at different times during the cycle and at different life stages, and the role of male fertility.

Where does fertility awareness fit in?

Fertility awareness is much more than an understanding of how pregnancy occurs. Fertility awareness can:

- Empower people to identify what is healthy and normal for their bodies, and know when to seek reproductive health care.
- Help youth understand their changing bodies and recognize their reproductive responsibilities.
- Foster communication between parents, children, partners, health care providers, patients, teachers and students to advocate for one's own health.

- Reinforce the need for reproductive rights, gender equality, and social norms that help people develop the behaviors that have a positive effect on reproductive health for all.

How did we integrate fertility awareness into a serial radio drama?

***Impano n'Impamba* attracted audiences throughout Rwanda with intriguing storylines while addressing fertility awareness and other health and social issues.**

Listeners tuned in for the 104-episode drama which aired twice a week from October 2014 to November 2015. Four storylines addressed a range of issues including FP, adolescent health, gender equity, and maternal and child health. Two of the four storylines featured information about fertility and FP —Ketia's story and Bacyenga's story. Fertility awareness was woven into these diverse storylines in relevant and practical ways while still maintaining the drama of a traditional soap opera.

In order for fertility awareness to be actionable, listeners must resonate with the storylines. This is especially true if the information seems to contradict commonly held beliefs in the community such as the myth that one cannot become pregnant the first time she or he has sex, or that having sex minimizes menstrual cramps.

Therefore, the creative team drew from daily Rwandan life with a sound understanding of the local context as they plotted the story, integrating information about the menstrual cycle, how pregnancy occurs, and when men and women are fertile. Characters revealed how fertility awareness can affect everyday life, even experiencing the consequences of a lack of fertility awareness, such as unintended pregnancies. PMC also used epilogues to highlight essential fertility information and motivate listeners to utilize health services.

"We want to break taboos and talk about the menstrual cycle. In one of the scenes, we talk about when a woman has cervical secretions and has unprotected sex that day, she has a greater chance of becoming pregnant."

- Head Writer & Producer, Alfred Twahirwa

To provide real-time feedback on how listeners were responding to the serial radio drama, listener groups were established in several districts. Existing community groups targeting women, men, and unmarried adolescents were invited to listen regularly to the drama and facilitate monthly discussions among group members.

Ketia	Bacyenga
<p>The drama portrays Ketia as a materialistic and impulsive teenager who attends a prestigious secondary school. Convinced by her boyfriend, Rukuba, she begins having sex and experimenting with alcohol. They do not use protection, despite the advice of her best friend Sandra, president of the Fertility Awareness Club, and her stepmother Afisa, a health researcher.</p> <p>Neglecting her studies, Ketia fails her national examination and must repeat her third year. When she and Rukuba are discovered having a drunken tryst in a public bathroom, they flee and are injured. In the hospital, Ketia learns she has a sexually transmitted infection and that Rukuba has had multiple partners.</p> <p>She ends the relationship, commits herself to her studies, and joins the Fertility Awareness Club where shares her story as a lesson for other girls. Rukuba, meanwhile, continues to have promiscuous, unprotected sex, and is diagnosed with HIV.</p>	<p>The drama portrays Bacyenga as a young man in his mid-20s eager to marry his girlfriend Rosine and start a family. He believes having many children means prosperity and a strong public standing.</p> <p>Rosine is surprised to find herself pregnant after the wedding, and she proceeds to become pregnant again soon after the birth of the first child. Frustrated with Bacyenga's preoccupation with his siblings, she asks, "If you can't take care of me and just one child, how are we going to survive with two?" A health worker advises Bacyenga to visit a health clinic to learn about fertility and FP, but he sees no reason to limit the number of children.</p> <p>Rosine returns to live with her parents. The child falls ill and requires a costly hospitalization, and Bacyenga's business begins to fail. Only then does he begin to understand the value of respecting his family's needs and the importance of planning for pregnancy together.</p>
Selected fertility awareness concepts woven into the storylines	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signs of onset of fertility for boys and girls • Menstrual hygiene management • Explanation of the menstrual cycle • When during the cycle a woman is fertile 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explanation of the menstrual cycle • When during the cycle a woman is fertile

How effective was Impano n'Impamba at improving fertility awareness and FP?

Given widespread misunderstanding of pregnancy risk, the *Impano n'Impamba* radio drama incorporated information on fertility awareness with an overarching goal of reducing unmet need for FP. After the drama concluded, a community-level household survey was conducted with a nationally representative sample of 1,477 women and men of reproductive age to assess differences in FP knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors between *Impano n'Impamba* listeners and non-listeners.

Results indicated that listeners had higher fertility awareness than non-listeners. No differences were found in FP use or intent to use a method in the future. However, listeners were more likely to experience secondary outcomes related to FP use.

Improvements in fertility awareness:

Significant differences were seen in fertility awareness scores between male listeners and non-listeners as well as female listeners and non-listeners ($p < 0.001$). Listeners were also more likely than non-listeners to know key concepts, including the menstrual cycle and onset of fertility for girls and boys. Qualitative interviews suggest discussion groups provided an invaluable opportunity to ask questions of a knowledgeable facilitator and clarify the fertility awareness information.

Improvements in secondary outcomes:

Relative to non-listeners, listeners were significantly more likely to report knowledge of at least one FP method, perceive more supportive norms around FP, and know where to access a FP method. Male and female listeners were significantly more likely than non-listeners to have discussed FP with family, friends, or neighbors in the past three months. As well, female listeners were more likely to have discussed FP with their partner. Qualitative interviews suggest increased discussion about FP occurred because the drama emboldened people to talk about uncomfortable and taboo topics.

MALE & FEMALE LISTENERS WERE MORE LIKELY TO KNOW:



There are **certain days** during the menstrual cycle when a woman is **more likely to become pregnant**

1.5 ↑
odds (1.0 – 2.1)**

First menstruation is sign a girl is now fertile

1.9 ↑
odds (1.3 – 2.8)**

Ejaculation is sign a boy is now fertile

1.6 ↑
odds (1.2 – 2.1)**

EFFECT OF LISTENERSHIP ON FACTORS RELATED TO FAMILY PLANNING USE when controlling for demographic variables

	Odds Ratio (95% CI)
Knowledge of at least one method	3.8 (1.7 - 8.6)***
I think married couples use FP	1.4 (1.0 – 2.0)*
I think unmarried men use FP	1.3 (1.0 – 1.8)*
I think unmarried women use FP	1.4 (1.0 – 1.8)*
I know where to go to access FP	2.2 (1.1 – 4.4)*
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$	



EFFECT OF LISTENERSHIP ON COMMUNICATION

Male & female listeners were more likely to **discuss family planning with friends/family**.

1.6 ↑
odds (1.2 – 2.1)**

Female listeners were almost 3 times as likely to **discuss family planning with their partner**.

2.7 ↑
odds (1.1 – 6.3)*

How do you integrate fertility awareness into a serial radio drama?

The implications of fertility awareness on reproductive health outcomes are just beginning to be understood and require further exploration. Initial results suggest that integrating fertility awareness into existing social and behavior change communication (SBCC) strategies may influence an enabling environment for FP by improving attitudes, social norms, self-efficacy and communication. Entertainment education approaches, such as the serial radio drama, have the added benefit of reaching a wide audience with a range of information in an engaging way. The following implementation lessons from the FACT Project can help guide SBCC programs seeking to integrate fertility awareness into entertainment education activities.

IMPLEMENTATION TIP	HOW IT WAS APPLIED FOR IMPANO N'IMPAMBA
<p>Establish sound understanding of fertility awareness among the creative team. Understanding fertility can be complex and difficult to communicate. This is why IRH has distilled the scientific information into a selection of simple fertility awareness facts which are applicable to preventing (or planning) pregnancy. It is important for the creative team to understand these facts and how they are related to behavior change so that the information can be communicated accurately with appropriate emphasis.</p>	<p>During the design phase, IRH conducted an orientation for script writers about fertility awareness which included reproductive physiology and practical application exercises. It was necessary to clarify with script writers the importance of emphasizing actionable information that can be used for pregnancy prevention. For example, when describing the menstrual cycle, explain when during the cycle a woman can become pregnant rather than simply how a woman manages her periods. When describing postpartum fertility, describe the Lactational Amenorrhea Method's 3 criteria rather than good breastfeeding practices alone.</p>
<p>Conduct formative research about the local context to understand the audience's norms around fertility, pregnancy, and FP. Fertility awareness is best conveyed when grounded in local realities. It does not replace existing health messages but, rather, enhances them.</p>	<p>With <i>Impano n'Impamba's</i> strong focus on adolescent health, the drama prioritized messages about onset of fertility for girls and boys as well as the menstrual cycle. For adults, fertility awareness was always conveyed alongside messages about couple communication and availability of specific FP methods. Epilogues reinforced key information after the episode.</p>
<p>If possible, identify and strengthen service delivery linkages based on a FP service delivery assessment. Mass media interventions have been proven to increase demand for health services like FP. Program managers should anticipate these effects on the current health system and work with service delivery partners to meet the demand.</p>	<p>The availability of FP services was one criteria considered by the team when selecting the country of implementation. In Rwanda, the health system is quite strong, and geographic access to FP services is facilitated by a nation-wide strategy of community-based provision. No explicit service strengthening component was conducted in this intervention. However, messages about service availability were broadcast after each episode during the epilogue.</p>
<p>Use transmedia elements to reinforce essential messages from the serial radio drama and spark critical reflection and discussion among listeners. This can include established listener group, radio talk shows where hosts discuss the drama with callers, social media discussion, and other community events. Therefore, any opportunity to continue the reflection and discussion is beneficial.</p>	<p>Monthly listener groups were established, and group facilitators were equipped with discussion guides prepared by IRH. Qualitative analysis revealed that these group discussions deepened the improvements in FP knowledge, attitudes, and social support by encouraging critical reflection and dialogue with peers.</p>

¹ Sedgh, G. Unmet Need for Contraception in Developing Countries: Examining Women's Reasons for Not Using a Method. Guttmacher Institute, 2016

² High Impact Practices in Family Planning (HIPs). Mass Media: Reaching audiences far and wide with messages to support healthy reproductive behaviors. USAID, 2017



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