

Foreword

By Lucy Oriang*



It is barely a year since we buried my friend. She was only 34. Hers was the classic scenario: Young woman meets man. He is significantly older but that is how it should be, according to conventional wisdom. He sweeps her off her feet and soon enough marriage is on the cards. And the disillusionment sets in. She heard through the grapevine that his longstanding mistress was constantly ailing, and neighbours started mentioning HIV/AIDS. She confronted him and got the beating of her life.

Being a good wife, she did as she was told. There is something seriously remiss with the kind of social conditioning that tells our daughters that it is heroic to stick with a bad relationship. There is something seriously wrong with social pressure that tells our daughters that they must submit to the sexual demands of husbands they know to be totally unfaithful. There must be something wrong with cultures and traditions that subject women and girls to rituals and power relations that expose them to HIV infection. It may have been a matter of family pride once, but these days it's tantamount to sending our daughters to the slaughter.

Without doubt, journalists have the power to shape and influence the way people think and make decisions. This agenda-setting role has never been more urgent, given the impact of HIV/AIDS on ordinary lives in eastern and southern Africa.

None of us in Africa today can claim not to have encountered the human face of this pandemic. It is the challenge of our times that, despite all the advances in communication, we should be faced with such limited success in the behaviour change necessary to stem the vicious tide. As a journalist whose life has been touched at a personal level by the devastation of HIV/AIDS, I firmly believe that efforts such as this manual will go a long way in helping change not just what we know, but how we behave.

The manual before you tackles the whole spectrum of gender issues that surround HIV/AIDS, from prevention to treatment and care, within the broader context of custom, culture, religion, as well as the political and economic environments in which HIV/AIDS is thriving. It addresses not just the concerns of women, but also of men. It sees HIV/AIDS not just as a catastrophe, but as an opportunity. For if, in fighting this pandemic, we also emerge with an understanding of the gender dynamics that underpin it, we would truly be on the road to victory.

As a board member of the African Woman and Child Feature Service, a partner with Gender Links in the African Gender and Media (GEM) initiative, I have been closely associated with the many practical media tools that these organisations have developed to promote gender equality in and through the media.

This manual lives up to GEM's proud tradition of professionalism and excellence. It belongs in every African newsroom, training institution and library. The time for journalists to be passive vehicles of information is long over. We are called upon not just to record, but also to prompt debate and to set agendas. Ending HIV/AIDS, as well as promoting gender equality, are two related agendas that we ignore at our peril.

**Lucy Oriang is the deputy managing editor of the Daily Nation, the flagship publication of the Nairobi-based Nation Media Group. She has worked in the print media for 20 years and specialises in gender and the media. Ms Oriang has pioneered several women-in-the-media projects at the Nation, East Africa's largest media company. She is also the editor of Africa Woman, a virtual newspaper produced by women journalists in nine African countries. It is available at www.africawoman.net.*