

Today I want to narrow the focus of our conversation a bit to talk about how and if media can effect behavior change. This is a complex topic because it relates to a conventional wisdom (“Yes – of course media promotes all sorts of behaviors, good and bad), but I wonder if that conventional thinking takes into account all the actors and forces involved in setting commercial media priorities.

Let’s start with what we know works:

We know that soap operas and tele-novelas that include strong family planning messages have had an impact on reducing unintended pregnancies through de-stigmatizing the use of contraception and confronting conservative values around abortion and sexual debut. We know that some radio programs have been successful in encouraging delayed sexual debut (Uganda) and others have helped to increase access and use of VCT services (Zambia). We also know that traditional folk-arts can be powerful in reducing the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV (http://www.icrw.org/docs/2005_report_stigma_synthesis.pdf/) More of that work is vital and should be encouraged by funders and programmers alike.

But behavior change is not only needed among the vulnerable and uninformed. A few of the comments from yesterday’s postings suggested that training is needed for “media professionals and upper management.” I couldn’t agree more.

Yes – the sexual behavior of young men around the world needs to be changed to engender a greater respect for women and girls. Yes – girls and women everywhere should be able to affirm that their human rights include sexual and reproductive rights. Yes – more men need to take responsibility for their sexual activities. I think most, if not all of us, will agree that these ‘behaviors’ need to be ‘changed.’

But what about the western/northern media executives who approve programming that promotes misogyny, that reinforces negative gender stereotypes, that encourages unsustainable lifestyles? Their behavior needs to be changed too, but that’s not any easier than changing sexual behaviors of young people that have been fostered over generations in some traditional societies.

Media executives do not act alone. They, too, operate within intense traditional pressures – the difference is that theirs are market-driven, steeped in the expectations and anticipations of global capitalism. They must supply the demand of their audiences, and often those demands are articulated by advertisers, marketing professionals, and financiers. In countries where the media is governed by the government, those market-driven pressures are accentuated by political pressures. And too often, politics are overly influenced by conservative religious thinking in those governments.

Over the last decade or so, we have heard a lot about public-private partnerships (PPP). Business models are being used to stimulate advances in research and development, NGOs are partnering with businesses to expand their programs, and businesses are

increasingly looking to community-based organizations to help shape their corporate social responsibility agendas.

It's time for the PPP model needs to evolve. Those of us who work on issues that challenge the status quo and that are aimed at improving the human condition need to challenge businesses big and small. We need to create demand among business leaders to learn about the work we do and why it is GOOD for business. A new ethos in businesses at all levels needs to be developed that is based on ensuring gender equity, stopping the spread of infectious diseases, protecting the rights of the vulnerable and the marginalized, and of course, saving the planet from environmental degradation.

There are myriad affinity groups for businesses that are run by business people and too often they pay only lip service to the work on the front lines of all the development issues that those of us on this forum support. I wonder how we can begin to shape the agendas of these affinity groups, and involve them in our efforts to effect behavior change amongst business leaders.

A couple of resources:

The major business affinity group that organizes business responses to the three major infectious diseases is The Global Business Coalition to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria: www.businessfightsaids.org (or businessfightsmalaria.org or businessfightstuberculosis.org). Do they have any programs to sensitize or train their members?

An exciting conference to be held in London October 2007 is called Women Deliver (www.womendeliver.org) that frames women's empowerment as a smart investment instead of as a charity.

We live in a capitalist world – even those of us who don't live in free-market economies must accept that capitalism is the predominant economic definer.

* So, how can we influence the forces of capitalism? How can we change the behavior of profiteers so that they are motivated, from a profit-making perspective, to be proponents of the SRH goals that guide our work?