



# Imagining the epidemic: an analysis of young Nigerians' representations of HIV/AIDS and their implications for communication activities

K. Winskell<sup>1</sup>, A. Patterson<sup>1</sup>, C. Putnam Rankin<sup>2</sup>, R. Haughton<sup>1</sup>, S. Huffman<sup>1</sup>,  
B. Mbakwem<sup>3</sup>, D. Enger<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University, Atlanta, United States, <sup>2</sup>Emory University, Department of Sociology, Atlanta, United States, <sup>3</sup>Community and Youth Development Initiatives, Owerri, Nigeria, <sup>4</sup>Scenarios from Africa, Global Dialogues, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

**CONCISE ABSTRACT: Background:** Young people's representations of HIV/AIDS in their creative writing provide valuable insights into youth sexual culture and related blame and stigma, while also highlighting strengths and weaknesses of communication efforts. A sample from the 1,800 stories submitted to the 2005 Scenarios from Africa scriptwriting contest in Nigeria was analyzed. **Methods:** A stratified sample (n=120) was constructed, comprising ten stories randomly selected for each of twelve strata defined by gender, age group and urban/rural location. Analysis was undertaken using MAXQDA and EpiInfo software. **Results:** While many of the stories perpetuate familiar negative representations of the epidemic, some suggest positive trends. Most narratives describe a character becoming infected and end with diagnosis or death, without envisaging a fulfilling life between. However, ARVs and examples of support and positive living are present in the stories. The majority of infections involve transmission from males to females. A number of stories acknowledge risk factors for women which mitigate blame. Condoms are largely absent from the stories, while testing, which occurs in most stories, is generally motivated by symptoms. **Conclusions:** Despite some persistent negative themes, there is evidence of growing optimism and awareness of the moral complexity of the epidemic.

## Background

Young people's representations of HIV/AIDS in their creative writing provide valuable insights into youth sexual culture and related blame and stigma, while also highlighting strengths and weaknesses of HIV-related communication. Since 1997, contests organized by the Scenarios from Africa communication process have invited young Africans to contribute scripts for short fiction films to educate their communities about HIV/AIDS. The process has generated an archive of tens of thousands of stories.

As the first step in a longitudinal study exploring young people's representations of HIV in countries of varying prevalence, we examined a sample from the 1,800 stories submitted to the 2005 Scenarios from Africa contest in Nigeria (2005 adult HIV prevalence: 3.9%). The contest was coordinated by Community and Youth Development Initiatives in Imo State, Southeastern Nigeria, and most of the stories come from this Igbo-speaking region.

## Methods

A stratified sample (n=120) was constructed, comprising ten stories randomly selected for each of twelve strata defined by gender, age group and urban/rural location. Analysis was undertaken using MAXQDA and EpiInfo software on three levels: plotline, thematic elements, and quantifiable variables.

## Results

### General outlook

While many of the stories perpetuate familiar negative representations of the epidemic, some suggest positive trends. Around two thirds of the narratives feature a character becoming infected and end with diagnosis or death, without envisaging a fulfilling life between.

*what a havoc! devastation! devastation!!, you see how Poverty led to HIV/aids to the last bus-stop death. So Everybody should be careful and avoid sex until you Get married.*

**Male, aged 10-14, Rural (1053)**

However, around a third of the scenarios imagine more positive outcomes, in terms of prevention, treatment, support and positive living.

### ARVs

Although the notion that there is no treatment for AIDS persists in most stories, ARVs are mentioned in almost 20%. In three stories, characters die despite ARV treatment, while in one story a character allows his own fear of stigma to get in the way of access to treatment. ARVs are sometimes associated with wealth and there are examples of characters unable to access the drugs due to lack of resources. However, there are also cases of poor and rural characters accessing treatment and transforming their lives. For most characters who access ARVs, they are a lifeline that will allow them to live "like a normal human being", fulfill their dreams and avoid stigma.

*[Doctor:] Always attend HIV counselling clinic where you will be taught how to use Anti Retroviral drugs. These drugs can help you on for a long time. This however will afford you the opportunity of continuing your education and still be what you want to be in future.*

**Female, aged 20-24, Urban (0824)**

### Gender, morality and blame

Two thirds of protagonists in the stories are female, and the majority of infections involve transmission from males to females. In around half of cases in which women are infected via sex, they are held responsible for their infection by the narrator. The 8% of scenarios in which rape takes place are illustrative. In two-fifths of these cases (all gang rapes) the woman is blamed for wearing provocative clothing. Moral failings on the part of women portrayed as leading to infection include: disobedience towards parents, partying, excessive sexual appetite and, above all, pursuit of money.

*Rita: Spare me all this your Holy talk, I think I have had enough of it. Look, you need to grow up and be wise. If you want to live and die in penury, then go ahead and do that, but leave me out of it. AIDS may be real, but let me tell you something, I'm immune to it...*

**Female, aged 20-24, Urban (1631)**

However a comparable number of stories acknowledge risk factors for women, such as poverty and social vulnerability, or a partner's infidelity or deception, which mitigate or absolve blame. Several stories end on a questioning note, asking how to make sense of indiscriminate infection.

*HIV/AIDS is not a spiritual problem neither does it have a conscience.*

**Male, aged 15-19, Urban (1331)**

### Testing

Testing, which occurs in most stories, is generally motivated by manifestation of symptoms, but examples of premarital, post-exposure and routine testing are present.

### Condoms absent

*For me, I believe in the use of conduct and not condom. May God help us.*

**Male, aged 20-24, Rural (1848)**

Condoms are conspicuous for their absence in the overwhelming majority of stories. They are mentioned in barely a quarter of the scenarios, most often in morally-inflected commentary at the end of a story. They are almost invariably described as being less than 100% effective and inferior to abstinence. Condoms actually feature in fewer than 5% of the plotlines and never prevent infection. In the two acts of sex in which they are used in the stories, the male character nonetheless becomes infected.

### National communication campaigns

One story in eight features the pidgin slogan "AIDS no dey show for face" (AIDS can't be seen) popularized by a Society for Family Health (SFH: PSI affiliate) communication campaign featuring megastar Femi Kuti. Around 7% of stories incorporate the expression "Zip up", from a SFH/PSI campaign to promote abstinence.

### Discussion and conclusion

Despite some persistent negative themes, there is evidence of growing optimism, fuelled in large part by increased access to ARVs. There is also awareness of the moral complexity of the epidemic. This bodes well for prospects of reducing stigma and increasing risk perception.

The virtual absence of condoms from these young Nigerians' stories about HIV/AIDS reflects the powerful influence of conservative religious sentiment. It is vital that sexually active young people are able to envisage condoms as a viable prevention option and to integrate them into their representations of HIV/AIDS. This should be a priority for communication efforts. The resonance of two SFH/PSI campaigns speaks to the impact and potential of communication programming using catchy slogans drawing on local idiom.

The research described here was supported by Grant Number 1 R03 HD054323 01 A1 from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. This research was also supported in part by the Emory Center for AIDS Research (P30 AI050409) and by Emory Global Health Institute.

For further information about Scenarios from Africa, please visit [www.globaldialogues.org](http://www.globaldialogues.org)

