

Stories of Circumcision

The significance of engaging with the media around
Voluntary Medical Male Circumcision (VMMC) in Kenya

2008 - 2012



Preface

In December 2006, the results of two landmark studies confirmed that Medical Male Circumcision (MMC) reduces the risk of sexual transmission of HIV from women to men by approximately 60 per cent. The need was identified to communicate these life-changing messages to those around the world who would benefit most from the medical procedure. In 2007, the WHO and UNAIDS recommended Voluntary Medical Male Circumcision (VMMC) as an additional HIV prevention strategy. In 2008, Internews in Kenya introduced VMMC as one of the themes in its health journalism training.

A media content analysis and assessment recently conducted by AVAC, an HIV prevention advocacy group, and USAID in seven East and Southern African countries shows high quality health journalism can catalyze positive change. The assessment was done in countries where Voluntary Medical Male Circumcision (VMMC) services are being scaled up for HIV prevention. Among the seven countries, Kenya – often lauded as the success story in scaling up VMMC – stood out for its high marks on media coverage of VMMC.

This report documents Internews in Kenya's work to help journalists tell compelling stories about VMMC. It also captures efforts in support of organizations working to promote and offer the medical procedure. Besides working with these organisations on how to engage the media, Internews also offers training on using emerging digital technologies to tell captivating stories about this new mode of HIV prevention. With its unique ability to empower local media to provide people with the news and information they need to improve their health, Internews set out to connect Kenyans with experts on VMMC via media stories. In 2008, Internews initiated projects that brought together a diverse set of stakeholders to engage communities on VMMC. The premise of the project was that effective storytelling is central to ensuring that people understand the significance of VMMC in HIV prevention.

Forms of engagement

- **Roundtable meetings** are half-day activities that bring together journalists, experts and case studies from the field to discuss a topical issue, with the view of identifying story themes. Moderated by an Internews trainer, the topic is designed to explore newsworthy elements of HIV themes, such as VMMC. The key to the success of the roundtable is choosing a newsworthy topic, getting together knowledgeable experts and case studies (people who have real-life experience of the issue being discussed) and galvanising committed journalists to attend and find stories from the roundtable. In the context of VMMC, Internews put together numerous roundtables on issues ranging from

women leadership in male circumcision to the drive for circumcising older men (35 years old and above).

- **Mentored-Travel Grants:** These are trips to the field, paid for by Internews, during which Internews trainers lead journalists on newsgathering travels. Regarding VMMC, Internews trainers travelled with journalists to different parts of Kenya, such as Suba District and Turkana County.
- **Travel Grants:** These are self-guided trips by senior journalists who can produce stories on their own.
- **Training of Journalists:** This activity is the centrepiece of Internews engagement with journalists. These are usually 3-10 day practical-oriented workshops, in which journalists learn about the science theme of a chosen subject, as well as refine their storytelling skills. Following each workshop, journalists are required to produce at least two stories on the health theme chosen. For the VMMC theme, journalists have produced stories on topics like the introduction of male circumcision in Turkana, mobile moonlight circumcision drives in Nairobi and the challenges of abstinence after circumcision.
- **Strategic Communication Training for Health Partners:** These are 4-5 day trainings for health implementers' communication officers, government communicators, not-for-profit organisations and research institutes. The trainees explore ways of engaging the media with HIV messaging, while exploring digital media technologies to do their own of storytelling.

Importantly, Internews provides ongoing technical support and mentoring to journalists in the production of their stories and to partners and government agencies working on VMMC communication.

Internews is a member of Kenya's National task force on VMMC, with the Program Director in Health and Digital Media attending and contributing expertise to the monthly meetings.

Besides providing technical guidance on communication matters to VMMC, Internews has seized the opportunity to align its work plan and priorities along the priorities of the Taskforce, e.g. in late 2011, a roundtable was designed after Internews learned about the challenges of attracting older men to be circumcised - currently the biggest challenge facing VMMC programming in Kenya. Bringing together men older than 60, who had undergone circumcision, the roundtable sought to challenge the notion that circumcision

is for the young. The elderly men who appeared in the roundtable urged all men to embrace the procedure.

Key to Internews success in keeping journalists interested and focused in telling the VMMC story was to continue finding new news angles to keep audiences interested and informed. This at times meant charting new areas of focus in VMMC, e.g. Internews proactively helped steer VMMC towards the next geographical area of focus, by guiding study tours to Turkana in Northern Kenya, another non-circumcising community. This helped turn around the perception that only one community had been targeted for this HIV prevention intervention. Internews returned to Turkana again in 2011, when the government finally launched the VMMC project in that community.

Innovative programming characterised by new thinking in storytelling, as well as intensive training and mentoring for storytellers has characterised Internews work and contribution in the VMMC rollout in Kenya. The result has been a vibrant **circumcision story**: compelling, scientifically sound and articulating the issues of real people.

Introduction

In Kenya, most communities practice male circumcision as part of a cultural rite of passage. The methods of circumcision vary from community to community. But the Luo, Turkana and Teso of Kenya do not circumcise – they have other rites of passage. When the evidence from three clinical trials in Kenya, Uganda and South Africa confirmed that VMMC reduces a man's risk of HIV infection by about 60 per cent, Kenya rapidly rolled out the medical procedure, starting in Luo Nyanza, the community with the highest HIV prevalence in the country.

Circumcision has been a sensitive topic in the Luo community. In Kenya's highly ethnicized politics, the Luo have sometimes been mocked for not practising male circumcision. The year 2008 was a politically sensitive period too, which witnessed Kenya's highly disputed elections that resulted in violence. The notion of the Luo being the only group targeted for an intervention might have resulted in a sense that the community had been targeted and this would have affected the Luo peoples' enthusiasm to embrace VMMC.

While different stakeholders from the VMMC task force met with the cultural and political leaders to create buy-in, Internews worked with the media to ensure that the journalists covering the story (most already trained by Internews on other HIV thematic issues) understood the science of VMMC. Internews also worked with journalists to present different faces of the story to remove any political connotations with circumcision. Internews did this by reaching the story out to different communities which are traditionally non-

circumcising, even before the government roll out of the procedure reached people.

Additionally, Internews trained several members of the task force in engaging the media and digital storytelling.

Workshops

The Internews training model worldwide features 3–10 day intensive workshops, followed by story production and ongoing mentoring from Media Resource Centers where expert trainers are on standby to guide storytelling.

Since the program began in 2008, Internews in Kenya has conducted seven VMMC-themed workshops with different groups. The workshops have been followed up with mentoring to ensure that Internews-trained journalists provide ongoing story coverage which is accurate. In the journalists' workshops, participants interacted with experts on VMMC while acquiring the skills for compelling storytelling.

One of the first workshops on VMMC was held in November 2008 in Lodwar, the largest town in north-western Kenya, where the Turkana people live. Internews took six TV journalists to Lodwar for TV production training on VMMC-themed stories. The six represented commercial broadcasters, the national broadcaster and a religious TV station.

The stories from Turkana at the time provided a different perspective to the discussion, indicating the VMMC procedure was not targeted at the Luo community.



**Susan Ekoyan,
a Turkana
journalist at the
workshop in
Lodwar**

Photography Training – May 2009, Nyanza

By May of 2009, medical male circumcision had gained momentum in the Luo community. Internews opted for photo journalism to capture this encouraging story from the shores of Lake Victoria. The journalists visited different parts of Nyanza and produced powerful photo essays on pertinent subjects such as involving women in VMMC, support from family members, the pre-sexual debut circumcision of young boys and lifestyle issues. With training and mentorship from Internews trainers, the six journalists produced outstanding work that was later made into a book and a month long public photo exhibition.



Launch of 'The Kindest cut' book and exhibition at the Alliance Francaise, Nairobi

Media workshop with FHI360 & VMMC national task force, Kisumu

In September 2010, Internews partnered with FHI360 and mentored 30 journalists who had been trained on the science of male circumcision. The national task force on VMMC provided VMMC experts while Internews provided expertise on compelling story production. Journalists produced stories pertinent for the Kisumu community.

Training of Trainers (TOT) for community-based organisations, Nairobi

Internews delivered this workshop in collaboration with Simon Odiwuor, a fellow of AVAC, a global advocacy group for HIV prevention. Odiwuor's chosen medium for advocacy communication was the photo novella. The [photo novellas](#) which he produced with Internews technical assistance are now being used to inform and educate the rural Nyanza community on

VMMC. Exhibitions of the photos from the training have been held in Kisumu, Addis Ababa and Kampala.

Radio and print training, VMMC – Turkana

Before the official roll out of VMMC in Turkana, the National task force thought it essential for journalists working in Turkana to receive training on VMMC to help stem any misinformation that may inhibit the adoption of circumcision. Internews brought together 13 print and broadcast journalists for a workshop in Lodwar – leading to intensive coverage on the region.

A tale of two cities – Kisumu

A six-week intensive training and mentoring initiative in Kisumu brought together 20 journalists based in Nyanza to focus on telling VMMC stories in the region.

Roundtables



**Journalists at
a VMMC
roundtable**

With well-selected story angles, Internews roundtables seek to stimulate storytelling possibilities for journalists on a chosen topic – they help journalists find new perspectives in an “old story.” The roundtables are also an efficient vehicle for debate and to correct errors in the public domain (caused by inaccurate media articles or community perceptions).

Of the four roundtables held on VMMC so far, the following two were most outstanding.

'Women urge men to circumcise'

This roundtable was a culmination of a communications training workshop for members of the national task force. Their brief was to interest journalist in the subject of "women involvement in VMMC": an exceptionally high number – 60 journalists – attended the roundtable discussion, and they produced stories with high visibility and impact in the Kenyan media. The roundtable featured women who work as mobilisers, MC experts and also women married to men from non-circumcising communities. They called on uncircumcised men in the country to circumcise.

'Benefits of VMMC to men over 35'



Charles Meso addressing journalists at a roundtable on the benefits of VMMC to men over 35

Journalists from different media houses were very interested to hear the stories of men, some older than 60, saying one is never too old to be circumcised. More than 20 stories were produced and published/broadcast over a three-week period.

Travel grants

Internews awards travel grants to support journalists to tell stories outside of their traditional story gathering areas. This connects their audiences to grassroots and untold stories. Internews travel grants cover travel expenses where media houses have limited resources.

In the period 2008 – 2012, 14 travel grants were awarded to journalists from different media to tell stories on VMMC. The travel grants have been to Nyanza, Turkana and Teso and also to parts of Kenya that do traditionally circumcise.

A story by William Inganga and Catherine Achieng'a (a team from the state broadcaster) "followed the knife" in Western Kenya during the traditional circumcision period. The aim was to caution circumcising communities to "do it right", i.e. the stories emphasized the **medical** in voluntary medical male circumcision. Unsafe circumcision practices can expose the boys to HIV infection.

The kindest cut book and exhibition launch

[The Kindest Cut](#) is the result of a photography workshop on VMMC, held in May 2009. The book captures stories of the Luo community, who embraced male circumcision, even though the practice had not been part of their culture.



**The Kindest Cut
created a
conversation on
male circumcision**

The book features photo essays about the experience of circumcisions and the significance of this cultural change.

Training members of the VMMC national taskforce

Internews role in the Kenyan media landscape is to bridge the gap between journalists and those who are story sources (medical practitioners, implementers, etc.). This is achieved through the creation of a trust relationship over time.

Members of the VMMC national task force were the beneficiaries of media-relations workshops held at the request of the task force. In the workshops trainees learn to engage effectively with the media – it always culminates in a real media event, which puts their skills to the test. Internews continues to provide "after care" for trainees, who go on to write media releases or host media events on behalf of their organizations.

Over time, through these networks, Internews has facilitated a trusted working relationship between people working in the VMMC field and journalists – leading to the more efficient dissemination of stories.

Storyfest awards – VMMC category

Storyfest is an award ceremony started by Internews in 2011 to celebrate outstanding health storytelling. The first Storyfest awards had general media categories that cut through all themes of HIV, maternal and child health and family planning. In 2012, Internews was requested by the national task force to include a category on VMMC.

Three TV journalists were the finalists. Continued support for this award will encourage more journalists to tell more and better VMMC stories.

Conclusion

Continuous, accurate and compelling coverage on VMMC requires ongoing engagement with a cadre of journalists who already know the basic science of HIV. This is possible through the Internews model of continuous in-country presence and the practice of nurturing select groups of journalists as specialist health writers. If all elements of the communications ecology are connected and each plays their distinct part, results are multiplied. Internews provides a platform for different role players to maximize their contribution, while working together, as can be seen when Internews helps communicators' refine their messaging to journalists – who then go on to tell independent stories, which are about the real life experiences and challenges often present in any area of public health.

A selection of VMMC stories from Kenya:

http://www.internewskenya.org/home/page.php?home=summaries&cat=health&sub_cat=Male%20circumcision&page=4