



U.S. Agency for
International
Development

Bureau for
Global Health

SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

Film Romance Persuades Nigerians to Practice Safe Sex

THE USAID-FUNDED FILM *AWAKENING*, released in 2000, is reaching millions of Nigerians in Kano State with important anti-AIDS messages. Filmmakers have taken careful measure to marry script and scripture in this movie romance that entertains while it persuades against risky sexual behavior. In this highly conservative Muslim region of the country where AIDS is a growing problem, this popular film is proving an effective medium to communicate sensitive sexual information to large numbers of people in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Awakening was filmed in the bustling, dusty city of Kano in one of the 12 northern Nigerian states adhering to the strict Islamic law, Shariah, where sex between the unmarried can lead to public flogging and an adulterer can be executed. Juxtaposed upon this reality is yet another—a 'zone of freedom' in the city where high-risk behavior drives the rising incidence of HIV/AIDS and along with it an urgent need to confront taboo subjects regarding sex.

Official government estimates of HIV prevalence at 5.8 percent among adults aged 15–49 nationwide are considered very low, especially given the reluctance of persons to be tested for HIV out of fear of rejection by their families and the searing social stigma that surrounds the disease.

Sensitive to the complex religious and cultural environment in Kano and at the same time aware of Nigerians' taste for soap-operatic movies, two organizations that have been working on HIV/AIDS prevention, care, and support in focused areas of the country decided to take a bold step. With backing from the U.S. Agency for International Development, Family Health International and Program for Appropriate Technology in Health approached Kano's highly successful film industry, "Kannywood," with an idea: Produce a feature film that appeals to a youthful audience and dares to talk openly about risky sexual behaviors and the potential consequences of HIV/AIDS.

Experienced in working with community-based organizations and aware of the importance of their approval and buy-in if the film was to be a success, the team went into action organizing a "behavior change committee" that included stakeholder representatives from key government, religious, and nongovernmental organizations in Kano. The committee's work was twofold: Critique the script to ensure there were no offending or contradictory messages, and promote the film among their memberships. The preparations also included the identification and training of peer educators who were available after showings to answer questions and guide the inevitable discussions that the film generated immediately and over time.

In just a few months, at nominal cost, *Awakening* has reached an audience estimated to number in the millions. Through theaters, member committee showings, television broadcasts, and black market videos, the message about AIDS and the need to practice safe sex is getting out. Importantly, the film has people talking about previously unspeakable topics. With talk will also come new knowledge and information to help change behavior. The film's overwhelming success has led to a sequel, *Awakening 2*, now in production, and the plot of *Awakening 3* is just being hatched.

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Photo courtesy of Family Health International



Awakening, a U.S.-funded feature film, aims to persuade Muslims in northern Nigeria to avoid risky sexual behavior.

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