

Spotlight on Bernice Heloo & the Society for Women and AIDS in Africa

Bernice Heloo and SWAA International are featured in the September issue of *Global Campaign News*. Bernice is the President of SWAA and a member of the IAWC Steering Committee.

Bernice Heloo is the President of the Society for Women and AIDS in Africa (SWAA International), a Pan African NGO working in 41 African countries. SWAA's aims are to mitigate the impact of HIV and AIDS on women and children in Africa and empower women to enjoy their economic, social and political rights.

Bernice holds an M.Phil. degree in Adult Education from the University of Ghana and M.Ed in Adult Education Literacy for Rural Development from the University of Manchester, UK. Bernice has been working in working in HIV/AIDS and women's health for close to two decades. She is the Executive Director of Pro-link, a non profit development organisation she founded in 1993 and a member of the Steering Committee of the African Microbicides Advocacy Group (AMAG).

Bernice is married and the mother of three. She believes that human beings, irrespective of their literacy levels and where they live, have the capacities and potentials to transform their lives and are the authors of their own development.

As an ardent promoter of female controlled devices, she sees microbicides as empowering tools for women and other minorities. Her first encounter with the female condom, another female controlled prevention option, was in 1996 when as the project manager of CARE International's Sexually Transmitted Diseases and AIDS Prevention Mining Areas (SAPIMA) project, she carried out an acceptability study of female condoms among wives of formal and non-formal miners and sex workers. This study strengthened her commitment for prevention tools for women as she says "I could see the strong desire coupled with fear among the women who see the female condoms as the savior. Their husbands and sexual partners were cheating and they knew it".

In recognition of her work, UNAIDS appointed her to serve on the National Female Condom Promotion Committee which was instrumental in the launching of the Ghana female condom promotion project in 2000. She got introduced to microbicides in 2001 in a sensitization meeting for SWAA and other partners organized by Global Campaign for Microbicides.

She was instrumental in the establishment of the Multi-disciplinary Microbicides Advocacy Group in Ghana. The group works all levels of leadership to ensure literacy and support for microbicides development. She says that putting the team together and gaining their support required establishing rapport with scientists, advocates, policy makers and other stakeholders. This was built on earlier efforts and collaborations. In establishing this group, the team held discussion with a variety of leaders including the Ghana AIDS Control Programme, AIDS Commission, trials sites, community leaders, women groups and the media and traditional authorities whose involvement is a critical part of HIV prevention research.

As the current president of SWAA International, Bernice is working with all 41 branches to sensitize and educate policy makers to support microbicides development and female condom campaigns in order to ensure that women have access to tools that they want and deserve. One of the priorities of SWAA is advocating for access to technologies that women can initiate to save their lives in male dominated societies. Bernice acknowledges the need to involve men in the process of developing tools that women can use, especially in Africa where they still remain the decision makers at home. She sites this as a lesson learnt from work in promoting the female condom where some of the men who were reached through the campaign sometimes purchased the female condoms for their spouses. Most men were interested in its dual protection capabilities.

Bernice's dream is that, in her current position, she will contribute to making every SWAA member microbicides literate so that they can confidently pass the information to their constituents - that is, grassroots women and men who are sometimes forgotten by macro-level programs. To achieve this, she is working with the different country chapters to ensure that the SWAA workshops, seminars and international conference have skills building sessions on microbicides and female condoms. SWAA will be holding its 11th international conference slated for 3rd to 7th February 2008 in Burkina Faso where microbicides and female condoms will be features prominently on the agenda. (Please visit the website at www.swaaburkina.org).

Bernice argues that building synergy between different technologies and diverse stakeholders will help launch, promote and sustain work with new technologies. Undue competition among the various players would also be avoided. A major challenge is that, "... a lot of lip service is been paid to promotion of the female condom. Some people talk about it without believing in it for several reasons." There is need, therefore, as advocates of female controlled prevention technologies to genuinely push for access to the existing tools as the focus also remains on new prevention technologies.