The media can play a vital role in setting a country’s policy agenda. Compelling and accurate news reports have the potential to spur policymakers to advance national development by addressing reproductive health, family planning, gender disparities, and population dynamics. Media attention is also critical to holding policymakers accountable for their commitments and for spending public resources wisely and equitably to improve citizens’ lives.

Over the past five years, information sources have expanded significantly as governments and other agencies have made vast amounts of digital information publicly accessible. For data-literate journalists, this wealth of information, combined with new digital tools, have enabled them to better explain and illustrate complex issues like population dynamics in innovative ways.

Activities
Through workshops, study tours, and mentoring, PRB helps journalists in developing countries understand how family planning, reproductive health, and population growth can impact national development. Stimulating interactive workshops introduce reporters and editors to experts and public officials who manage programs and implement policies that address these issues. Week-long study tours and shorter field visits enable journalists to see first-hand how population and reproductive health problems manifest and to talk to the people who are affected. The vast majority of these journalists participate in two or more training sessions, and PRB keeps them engaged and motivated through online mentoring and monthly e-bulletins.

PRB’s lauded Women’s Edition network, a cadre of influential female reporters and editors, provides high-profile coverage of issues critical to improve women’s health and gender equity. Launched more than two decades ago, Women’s Edition selects about a dozen senior-level female journalists from developing countries for two years of active participation, during which time they attend four, week-long seminars and cover international conferences. Not only does the project improve news coverage of family planning and reproductive health issues, it empowers participants by enabling them to share experiences, learn, and gain confidence from each other. Their bonds cross borders, cultures, and political differences.

Results
Under the IDEA project, more than 700 journalists from 25 countries participated in PRB training activities, resulting in more than 2,800 news stories and broadcast programs that reached millions of readers and listeners. PRB-trained journalists often become newsroom experts on reproductive health and population issues, and many win promotions to influential positions within their media institutions. Some of their work also earned national and international awards, including the Population Institute’s prestigious Global Media Award. More important, their articles and programs prompt action that improves the lives of women and girls.

Improving public accountability for government health services. In India, examples of impact from work by Women’s Edition participants included a TV reporter’s story in Mumbai that prompted civic authorities to monitor maternal deaths in public hospitals throughout the city; another story led to health camps to care for pregnant women in the slums; and a third led to renewal of a family planning program that promoted birth spacing. During a national discussion on preventing and responding to rape, another Indian journalist’s reporting prompted the government to announce a long-promised pilot project establishing one-stop rape crisis centers in 600 public hospitals.

About the IDEA Project
With funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development, IDEA—Informing Decisionmakers to Act—increases support among policy audiences for effective health and population programs around the world. By increasing the flow of accurate, understandable information about population, family planning, and reproductive health to policy audiences, IDEA enhances efforts carried out by civil society, the public sector, the development community, and donors. IDEA develops materials on priority issues in cutting-edge formats; trains and supports media to influence policy change; builds the communications capacity of institutions, researchers, and advocates; and nurtures communities of policy champions.
Drawing attention to early marriage. Journalist training, study tours, and reporting by Senegalese reporters generated a front-page story in the state-owned newspaper as well as coverage by radio stations about child marriage in the southern part of the country. The region’s governor thanked the media for spurring public discussion and leading local women to initiate action against early marriage.

Justice for rape victims. Stories by journalists in Kenya and Pakistan brought justice for women who had been gang-raped. The Kenyan journalist’s investigation sparked global outrage and led to successful criminal prosecutions after she uncovered the story of a 16-year-old girl who was gang-raped, thrown in a pit latrine, and left with life-altering injuries. In Pakistan, the country’s chief justice saw the story of a rural woman gang-raped in front of her husband and children; within 24 hours, eight suspects were arrested and later sentenced to prison.

Lessons Learned and Looking Forward

More than two decades of experience underpin PRB’s work building the skills of journalists to report accurately and contextually on reproductive health and population. PRB training, continually enhanced with lessons learned, enables journalists to monitor and strengthen coverage of these issues to inform the decisionmaking within their countries. Data literacy is becoming more important as more open sources of data become available to reporters.

Data-driven journalism requires reporters and editors to understand statistics and know how and when to use them both to find and bolster stories and to inform readers, listeners, and viewers. Online tools can help journalists see trends and patterns in the numbers, and data visualization tools provide journalists with new ways to tell a story.

Traditional reporting skills are essential, even as reporting methods may be changing. Journalists must understand the facts and evidence if they are to report information accurately and hold governments accountable. PRB focuses on a core group of journalists, communicates with them regularly, and helps them to see problems and solutions from a policy perspective. Training also includes taking journalists into the field where they can witness problems and solutions and talk to the people affected.

Holding governments accountable requires journalists to keep a watchful eye on promises made by leaders. Knowledgeable journalists can provide strong coverage of population and health issues in ways that compel policymakers to act.

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