

# Pack 111, Item

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**BH2 – How to deal with sensitive issues on air**

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*The following Broadcaster how-to guide was produced in the context of a Burkina Faso-based project called AdoSanté. The ultimate goal of AdoSanté is to contribute to improving the sexual and reproductive health, nutritional status, and well-being of adolescents aged 10 to 19 in Burkina Faso.*

*Through the project, FRI is supporting local radio stations to produce and broadcast quality interactive rural radio programs that aim to: 1) increase the demand for sexual and reproductive health products and services for adolescents, and 2) improve the social environment to make it easier for adolescents to access and use these services.*

*There are many types of sensitive issues that broadcasters could deal with on the radio: social issues, agricultural issues, gender issues, and many others. This document talks mostly about those issues that were the focus of the AdoSanté project. As broadcasters, we are often expected to deal with sensitive issues on air. This includes a wide range of topics, for example, HIV and AIDS, termination of pregnancies, male and female circumcision, sexual orientation, and domestic violence or sexual abuse, amongst others.*

**Introduction**

It is important to remember that what may seem like a normal, everyday issue for some may be a highly sensitive issue for others. Often, this sensitivity relates to culture, religious background, gender, or age. As broadcasters, we need to take into account the sensitivities of our listeners and develop programs that address their needs in a way that makes them feel comfortable and allows them to participate freely in programs.

***How can effectively dealing with sensitive issues help me serve my listeners better?***

* It ensures that listeners feel comfortable engaging in discussion on the air.
* It helps listeners build the confidence needed to ask questions about topics where they need more information.
* It can help listeners expand knowledge, adapt attitudes and behaviours where appropriate, and understand behaviour that may be unfamiliar to them.
* It can encourage listeners to seek advice from community health professionals and other experts.
* It helps to build a relationship of mutual respect between listeners and broadcasters.

***How can effectively dealing with sensitive issues help me produce better programs?***

* It helps to build credibility with a network of professionals working in the health and social development sectors, people who I can rely on to contribute to my programs.
* It helps establish a loyal base of listeners who are willing to contribute to the improvement of the radio station.
* It encourages participatory programming where listeners are actively involved.
* It encourages partnerships with schools, government departments, and local NGO partners, and hence promotes varied and balanced programming that uses a variety of sources to address topics from more than one perspective.

***How do I get started?*** (Learn more about these and other points in the *Details* section below.)

* Know your audience: understand their needs and wants and be clear about what you want to say to them.
* Know your subject: research the topic well to ensure that program content is relevant to your audience.
* Ensure that content is factually accurate and up-to-date.
* Be comfortable with the subject matter.
* Collaborate with other experts and explore various points of view.
* Be respectful and mindful of the language and terminology you use.
* Be aware of issues where people may have conflicting opinions and differing perspectives.
* Create a safe and positive environment for learning.
* Ensure that the program format is educational as well as stimulating.

***Details***

* 1. **Know your audience: understand their needs and wants and be clear about what you want to say to them.**
* It is important to understand that different people learn and absorb new information in different ways. For some, new information may simply reinforce existing knowledge or opinions and the learning process will be fairly simple and easy. For others, the topic will be completely unfamiliar to them, and they will need to make sense of it first within their own spheres of reference before responding to it. It’s a good idea to repeat information in different ways throughout the program to hold listeners’ attention while at the same time providing an opportunity for different people to engage with the information at their own pace.
* Generally, the more sensitive a subject is, the more time you will need to explore various issues and allow listeners the time to make sense of information before they can articulate their thoughts and questions. Listeners can become extremely frustrated when key issues are skimmed over and there is not enough time for meaningful discussion. The more contentious an issue is, the more time is required to air all the voices, particularly the most marginalized—for example, women and girls.
* Know when your target audience is most likely to be listening and schedule your program accordingly. Who is the target audience? When is the best time to broadcast in order to have the most impact? What is the most convenient time for them to tune in? Audience research will inform this process and ensure quality programs that meet listeners’ needs and achieve the desired outcomes.
* Where possible, it may be appropriate to run focus group discussions with groups of listeners to gauge their sensitivities around various topics and explore how best to approach producing programs on those topics. It is critical to take into account opinions and perspectives from as wide a group of stakeholders as possible and not to take for granted that people share the same opinions on all subjects. What may seem like a minor issue to some may well be a very important issue for others. This is particularly relevant when discussing issues relating to adolescent sexuality, including contraception and abortion. It is also important to remember that your listening audience is not limited to your target audience. For example, while your key messages may target teenagers, other key role-players may also be tuned into the program, including parents, schoolteachers, religious leaders, and others. Your comments could positively or negatively impact on any future programs that you may be involved in. It is therefore important to take into account listeners’ recommendations and suggestions and use them to guide your on-air discussion.
* When considering the points above, take the time to explore whether audience needs and wants are different for women/men, youth/elders, etc., and ensure that all voices are acknowledged and heard.
	1. **Know your subject: research the topic well and ensure that program content is relevant to your audience.**

Always be prepared by researching your topic well. There are several ways to do this:

* Desktop research (reading articles, reports, and research studies) can provide a broad understanding of and perspective on the subject and help educate and clarify issues that the presenter is unaware of.
* Face-to-face interviews with experts can provide direction, get a sense of how the issues play out on the ground in the local area, and help the production team decide which “angle” the program will take.
* Site visits to community-based projects provide insights into people’s lives and allow the production team to empathize with the real issues on the ground.

For example, if you are developing a program on teenage pregnancy, you will need to use all of the research methods above to help you develop a well-rounded series of programs. These programs will cover the background statistics on the issue as well as dealing with the human angle by highlighting and addressing the experiences and needs of young women and girls. Expert opinion will help provide solutions for pregnant teenagers and young mothers and provide support and guidance to grandparents and other family members, particularly young fathers. In a program on teenage pregnancy, it would also be necessary to underline the importance of access to contraception in the future, as well as risky sexual behaviour, including how it increases vulnerability to HIV and AIDS. It would be equally important to highlight ways to enable and empower young mothers to further their education in order to secure their future. It is unlikely that all of this information can be covered meaningfully in an hour-long program. It may therefore be more valuable to produce a series of short programs that respect the complexity of the issues facing young women.

When producing the program, it is essential to take into account the views and perspectives of the broad range of people who make up an audience. Based on their lived experiences, people from different backgrounds may not necessarily share the same understanding of a topic. For example, ethnic origin, education level, age, and gender identity all influence how people respond to a topic. The production team should carefully bear in mind these differences in the potential audience when developing program content.

* 1. **Ensure that content is factually accurate and up-to-date.**

There is nothing worse than providing inaccurate or outdated information. Firstly, it is insulting and disrespectful to your audience. Secondly, it undermines the credibility of the presenter as well as the radio station. Most importantly, if listeners were to follow incorrect information, it could cause inconvenience at best or have a detrimental impact at worst.

It is important to “triangulate” your information to ensure accuracy. This means that you need to check your information and corroborate it with at least three sources to ensure that it is sound and reliable. If a listener asks a question and you are unsure of the answer, it is much better to admit that you are unsure and commit to finding the correct information and continuing the discussion in a future episode.

The importance of trust, credibility, and building sound relationships cannot be overemphasized. If the community believes that they are not getting information from a reliable source, they will not act on it. If you are a new presenter or are new to a station and have not yet developed a relationship of trust with your audience, it may take some time to develop a rapport with your listeners. Building trust is not an overnight process. It takes time to establish sound relationships that enable listeners to feel comfortable enough with you to share their experiences and be willing to engage in discussion on air.

* 1. **Be comfortable with the subject matter.**

As the presenter, if you are uncomfortable with the subject matter because of your own beliefs, it is much better to bring in another expert on the subject, someone who is able to provide a balanced and fair perspective. Alternatively, you could pre-record someone’s lived experience. The personal testimony of someone living with HIV or a sex worker’s dilemma of negotiating around safer sex practices can make for very powerful storytelling.

If you are, for example, uncomfortable dealing with issues of sexuality, your listeners will sense your discomfort, and this will inhibit the dialogue and limit any chance of an open and honest discussion. Remember that your role as presenter is to facilitate discussion as a way for your audience to acquire new knowledge and information or reinforce existing knowledge.

* 1. **Collaborate with other experts and explore various point of views**

Quality programming requires a team effort, and team efforts ensure good planning and research. Try to build strong relationships with key stakeholder partners. It is important to build a network of reliable partners and ensure the team represents a diversity of gender and age, and includes minority groups. You cannot be expected to be an expert on every subject. But if you have done your research well, you will know which questions to ask. And you will know which areas require direction from people who work in the specific sector you are addressing. As a team, develop strategies to facilitate balanced and reasoned discussions that take into account the views and perspectives of a diverse group of people, including for example, different genders, age groups, ethnic or cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic classes.

* 1. **Be respectful and mindful of the language and terminology you use.**
* Ask: In which language do listeners prefer to receive information?
* Be mindful of the sensitive nature of your subject matter and use language that is respectful and appropriate. Do not use terms that might be considered vulgar or offensive. Do not use language that perpetuates myths and stereotypes. For example, the word “victim,” implies someone who is a sufferer, target, or object. People living with HIV do not perceive themselves as AIDS victims, and somebody who has been raped prefers to be called a rape survivor than a victim. “Victim” implies a sense of helplessness. This does not help the healing process of those who are trying to take back control of their lives.
* Derogatory words for sex workers or people with different sexual orientations categorize and typecast people and promote anti-social behaviour and human rights violations.
* Verbal communication is one of the most powerful ways that gender discrimination and sexism is promoted. Some words have a particular gender bias. Try to avoid phrases such as “boys will be boys,” “don’t be a sissy,” or “it’s a woman’s job to look after the children.” Not only are they in poor taste, but they also perpetuate the notion that women are the weaker and/or less equal gender.
* Try not to use pre-packaged material spoken with a different dialect or accent. Particularly with sensitive issues, listeners want to be able to identify with people who have gone through similar experiences and (preferably) speak the same language as them.
	1. **Be aware of issues where people may have conflicting opinions and differing perspectives.**

Don’t be judgmental. Your opinion is not necessarily correct—or the only one. Also, do not allow listeners to make disparaging comments or be disrespectful of other listeners’ opinions.

The role of the presenter is to facilitate open discussion and to provide a platform for learning and exchanging ideas. Even if you strongly disagree with a participant, it’s important not to allow your emotions to drive your interactions with them or interfere with your ability to facilitate an open and honest discussion. There are, however, times when a presenter needs to intervene and not simply accept a caller’s opinions. For example, when a participant expresses an opinion that promotes violence or could qualify as hate speech\*, the presenter needs to take decisive control of the discussion. In a situation like this, the presenter could start by summarizing the input of the participant and suggesting alternative approaches. To promote a culture of learning, the presenter should also explain why the comment is considered offensive and unacceptable. By doing so, the presenter sends a clear message that language and opinions of this nature will not be tolerated.

Preparing for a program on a sensitive issue requires broadcasters to do thorough research and prepare questions that will help differentiate facts from value-laden perceptions.

Facts can be described as information that can be observed or calculated—for example, statistics, historical dates, location, etc. They are statements that are known to be true or can be proved to be true, and they do not change regardless of who presents them. Value-laden perceptions, on the other hand, are informed by deeply held personal beliefs and/or widely shared viewpoints.

Female circumcision or female genital mutilation is an example of an issue where facts and personal or widely held social perceptions can diverge—even the different ways of naming the practice demonstrate that it is a conflict issue. In this case, the clash is between cultural traditions (values), and evidence of the physical consequences of the practice (facts). Presenting practitioners with the facts of its physical impact has convinced many that the practice needs to be changed and/or eradicated.

Subjects such as abortion, rape, and sexual abuse can be extremely sensitive. Particularly for women, topics such as these could trigger memories of their own personal experiences and therefore need to be handled with empathy and understanding.

Your primary role as presenter is to facilitate discussion amongst various parties and to create a platform for learning and sharing of ideas. You can do this by asking probing questions and directing the discussion in particular ways. When a presenter does provide comments, they should always be fair, accurate, and provide an educational role. No matter what your personal beliefs are, you are not on air to represent your family, religious, or ethnic group. Try to remain calm, state the facts clearly, and ask clarifying questions. It is perfectly acceptable for you as a presenter to voice disagreement and to substantiate your opinion so that listeners are clear what stance you are taking. But be sure not to humiliate or belittle an opinion. Remember also to be clear on your station’s editorial policy so that you don’t contradict management policy.

* 1. **Create a safe and positive environment for learning.**

When discussing sensitive topics, it is imperative that listeners feel safe enough to share their experiences and opinions, and to ask questions without ever feeling embarrassed, humiliated, or threatened. Particularly with phone-in programs, it takes a lot of courage to voice an opinion or share a story. Always make participants feel comfortable and thank them for their contributions.

Another important thing to remember is to speak in a manner which is easily understandable and not to use terminology or medical jargon that some or most listeners won’t understand, or that makes the listener feel uncomfortable. Not all listeners have the same educational background or are able to clearly articulate what they are trying to ask or say. The presenter should always assist and encourage the caller by asking clarifying questions and allowing the person sufficient time to express themselves.

Where a caller prefers to remain anonymous, do not insist on trying to identify the person. Doing so may put them in danger / at risk.

1. **Ensure that the program format is educational and engaging.**

Part of the planning process is identifying the best format for the issue you will present and discuss. At their best, talk shows attract the audience to listen and also stimulate listeners to discuss what they are hearing.

Good talk shows require diversity, spontaneity, and flexibility. Thus, there are no absolute rules about how to discuss sensitive issues on radio. As radio presenters, we cannot ignore sensitive issues and hope that they will just go away. It is undoubtedly a challenge to talk about sensitive issues in a way that is interesting and informative, holds an audience, and offers positive suggestions. The biggest challenge is that few radio presenters are trained to deal with difficult issues, and we therefore need to develop the skills to help us address sensitive issues on air. If we don’t handle these topics well, it could result in conflicts and in driving wedges between groups with opposing viewpoints.

It is worthwhile to consider using different radio formats to reach as wide a group of listeners as possible and to introduce different and exciting ways of sharing and exchanging information. Some of the more popular radio formats include:

* Jingles (with or without music)
* Reports
* Dramas
* Documentaries
* Features
* Interviews
* Panel discussions
* Debates
* Phone-ins

Each of these formats has its own merits and may appeal to different segments of the community. For example, story telling and dramas are far more appealing to younger audiences than interviews or panel discussions. But when a young person is interviewed and shares her experiences, this can motivate other young people to adopt similar practices and behaviours. Programs that blend formats often work well. For example, combining a round table discussion or face-to-face interviews (pre-recorded or live) with a phone-in can encourage listeners to become actively involved in the program rather than remain passive listeners. It may also be useful to develop a jingle if you want listeners to remember an emergency help line that has been promoted during a series of programs.

At the end of each program, you and your team of collaborators should conduct an evaluation to help identify the strengths and weaknesses of the episode and to assess how future programs can be improved.

It may also be worthwhile to develop a checklist so that you can remind yourself of the key things you should be doing when planning and implementing your program. Especially if broadcasting on sensitive issues is new or unfamiliar to you, this could help you develop confidence and establish a routine to plot procedures and timelines.

**Where else can I learn about how to deal with sensitive topics on air?**

* Mandla S. Nkuna:*Radio Production Toolkit, published by the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism. (Hard copy only)*
* Howard, Ross, and Rolt, Francis, 2005. *Radio Talkshows for Peacebuilding: A guide.* Second edition.<https://www.sfcg.org/programmes/rfpa/pdf/Talkshows_EN_color.pdf>(451 KB)
* Children’s Radio Foundation. *Health*. <http://www.childrensradiofoundation.org/learnings/radio-guides/health/>
* Radio Regen. *Community Radio Toolkit*. <http://www.communityradiotoolkit.net/on-air/programming/>
* Commonwealth of Learning, 2001. *Using Community Radio for Non Formal Education*. Downloadable at: <http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/124> (295 KB)

***Definitions***

*Hate speech:*Hate speech is speech that attacks, threatens, or insults a person or group on the basis of national origin, ethnicity, colour, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability.

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Contributed by: Gail White, Independent Community Health Specialist, Cape Town, South Africa

Reviewed by: Vijay Cuddeford, Managing editor, Farm Radio International, Sylvie Harrison, Radio Craft Team Lead, Farm Radio International, and Caroline Montpetit, Regional Program Manager, West Africa & Gender Specialist.

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