

# Yebeteseb Mela

 **Pathfinder** | ETHIOPIA  
INTERNATIONAL

Vol. 1, No. 3,  
December 2005

EMPOWERING individuals, communities, and organizations to identify barriers, design and implement solutions, and expand their capacity to improve health outcomes is a major aspect of Pathfinder International/Ethiopia's programs. This edition of Yebeteseb Mela showcases examples of Pathfinder's partners empowering adolescents, fledgling community-based organizations, and communities struggling to address health and education.

## "BEAUTY FOR LIFE"

Adolescent girls in Addis Ababa enthusiastically participated in an opportunity to publicly display their wide range of creativity and discuss the life issues facing them today. The **Beauty For Life** Pageant, organized by the Arada Sub-City Youth Association with the support of Pathfinder International/Ethiopia (PIE) in September 2005, gave 19 young women the chance to openly display their gifts, their potential, and their challenges as young women in Ethiopia.

Held at the hall of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, this event drew more than 50 youth volunteers and over 100 cheering fans. Young women promenaded in formal and traditional gowns and answered questions on life skills, gender roles, and the future. With Black Angels, a promotion agency also run by youth, the girls developed films on their various talents, from poetry to welding.

In preparation for the pageant, the girls underwent a series of discussions and training with peer educators on life skills, gender, and reproductive health, overseen by PIE partner Health Communications Partnership.

Mizan Berbihun, the 19-year old painter who won first place, says that the girls discussed major issues affecting today's youth, including HIV/AIDS, peer pressure, and decision-making. "Through the friendly atmosphere that we created and the friends that we made, we learned a lot about ourselves as well as about each other. We discovered that despite our differences in background, we have a lot more in common and share the same kind of problems as adolescents." Runner-up Abenet Getachew adds: "We all talked freely about things we aren't normally encouraged to."



"The first thing I did after our first group discussion was go to a VCT centre and get tested for HIV. That was when I realised for the first time that I had the potential to influence others like me for the better."

*Mizan Berbihun, 1st place contestant.*

Mizan believes that the biggest challenge for youths is lack of self-awareness and recognition of the youth's potential to transform their situation. Painting, she says, has helped her in that respect. "As I grew up I realised that women interested me more as subjects. That's because we have many social facets that can be depicted in many ways. But our culture doesn't teach or encourage that kind of introspection. Still, I believe that women need to progress more if we want to start solving our problems as a nation."

Both Mizan and Abenet agreed that today, messages aimed at improving adolescents' reproductive and sexual health have taken on a more badgering and accusatory tone rather than a helpful one. Youth have stopped paying attention because of the repetitive messaging.

**"It's of no use to constantly blame us and expect us to come up with solutions by ourselves," Mizan says, "ultimately the youth are an inseparable part of society, and we require everyone's active and positive participation."**

*In Tigray, with donor support from USAID and SIDA, PIE works with the Tigray Youth Association, the Relief Society of Tigray, Voices of the Revolution of Tigray, and the Tigray Development Association to increase the capacity of communities, to empower adolescents, and to improve their sexual and reproductive health. Below are the stories of two local organizations PIE and partners support in these efforts.*

## WUKRO YOUTH ASSOCIATION

Located some 45 km north of Mekelle, Tigray, the small town of Wukro boasts a very busy and expanding youth association. The Wukro Youth Association (WYA), chaired by the energetic Assefa Mesfin, has recruited 1,425 young members through 3 out-of-school reproductive health (RH) and HIV/AIDS awareness



*The Ping-Pong Hall at Wukro Youth Center*

clubs.

Assefa founded the WYA due to what he perceived as the elevated risk for the youth lounging along the dusty streets of this sleepy town. Tigray has some of the poorest health indicators in Ethiopia. High rates of early marriage, malnutrition, and sparse health coverage contribute to the challenges facing youth's wellbeing. In Wukro's case, the presence of a military base in the town attracts the migration of commercial sex workers (CSWs) and consequently Wukro hosts one of the highest HIV prevalence rates in Tigray, particularly

**“Even when youth want to improve their lives by themselves, they still need help from outside.” --Assefa**

among young men.

With this in mind, WYA solicited support from the Relief Society of Tigray and PIE to scale up its activities that reduce youth vulnerability to HIV and other STIs, while empowering them to make responsible decisions in life.

WYA and PIE trained senior members of WYA to provide counseling and peer to peer education, and strengthened referral networks to both professional counseling and voluntary counseling and testing for HIV (VCT) at nearby health facilities. The past year, 130 youth were voluntarily tested for HIV through WYA.

To create a sense of ownership in the association, members vote yearly on their leaders following their own developed criteria. The lush garden on WYA's compound is maintained by the youth, who are working on creating a football pitch, and watered by a pump installed through PIE funds. Twice a week the youth gather to present poems, songs, and debates on adolescent life and reproductive health, while a library, movies, and sports provided through PIE support supplement these activities.

Assefa notes that WYA is working hard to expand its capacity, range of activities and impact, and benefits from the technical, material, and training assistance of PIE and partner REST. WYA reaches out to the greater community by organizing festivals and information sessions for military personnel stationed nearby. Hadinet club, one of the three anti-AIDS clubs sponsored by WYA, received an award from the regional government in recognition of its contribution to the now declining HIV prevalence rate.

By investing in youth activities, WYA enables youth to articulate their daily struggles, while encouraging their active participation in finding long-term solutions to their problems.

## VoRT RADIO

PIE's most recent partner in expanding community-level adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) activities is VoRT Radio (Voices of the Revolution of Tigray), the only major regional radio station in Tigray. VoRT broadcasts a 15-minute program weekly that addresses youth-specific life skills, reproductive health, and HIV/AIDS. The young journalist and theatre graduate in charge of the program, Ephraim Tadesse (*photo below*), takes an innovative approach to program design by involving Tigrayan youth. He goes to rural villages to solicit young audiences' feedback and participation in identifying major issues and their solutions through participatory “development theatre.” VoRT's ASRH radio program is the only one of its kind



**“These are their burning issues and they [the youth] want to participate. The solution is out there.” --Ephraim**

in Tigray.





*Skills training for vulnerable women in embroidery, creative design and sewing at the MFM compound.*

Wro. Tibereh remembers when she first started Mums for Mums in May 2001, with only her own time and money to work with. It was witnessing the direst, and least recognized need in their community that inspired the retired, indomitable woman to action. Women as young as 14 years old,

who had given birth out of wedlock or whose husbands had died or abandoned them, were cast out of school and family homes, and left to their own devices, small children in tow. They were often illiterate or barely educated, and could find no work in Mekelle, its suburbs, or surrounding rural areas. They would come to the city to beg or prostitute themselves. Young women begging openly is not culturally accepted, so the women would sit, with their malnourished children, in the early hours of the morning and at dusk, hidden in doorways and on certain street corners, where knowing souls like Tibereh would find them. Commercial sex work was their only, and last, resort.

Tibereh calls the challenges of this vulnerable population “the hidden poverty.” Mums for Mums (MFM) was formed with the mission to provide destitute mothers and commercial sex workers (CSWs) with loans, skills training, education and job placement assistance, nutritional support, counseling, information and services in HIV/AIDS and RH. To this end, MFM’s corps of door-to-door campaigners undertake frequent home visits, engaging the male and female members of the household in one-on-one conversations and counseling.

For the first three years, the organization survived entirely on volunteer time and donations from campaigners, health professionals, regional health bureau offices, and Tigray development NGOs.

**“Pathfinder came at just the right time, and their support strengthens Mums for Mums’ activities where they most need it.” -- Project Manager Kahsu Bekuretsion.**

However, prioritizing the interrelated needs of vulnerable women led MFM in many new directions, often requiring the organization to stretch well beyond

its capacity in responding to these needs before being able to adequately fund and supervise all activities. Mums for Mums needed funding, increased organizational capacity, and technical guidance to succeed with its expanding portfolio. By 2004, “it was time for the one-woman show to end,” says Wzro. Tibereh, and she applied for funding from PIE, who committed technical assistance and funds from PIE donors UNICEF and SIDA.

With these new resources, MFM employed a qualified program manager, Kahsu Bekuretsion, by Tibereh’s admission “the greatest thing Mums for Mums has done.” Since receiving PIE’s support, training, and technical guidance, MFM has flourished, boasting 21 employees, 110 HIV/AIDS campaigners and supervisors, 49 new community health agents trained in family planning and home-based care, a VCT clinic, and an expanded skills training program for CSWs, including catering for clients living with AIDS.

**“We were able to do all this because Pathfinder came in. Pathfinder saved Mums for Mums.” --Wro. Tibereh.**

MFM’s activities have been directly supported and guided by PIE’s long experience in integrating community-based health services. PIE provided the technical advice to help MFM integrate their HIV/AIDS counseling and support with RH/FP information and services, pointing out that women who are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS are equally vulnerable to poor reproductive health and maternal mortality, and in need of counseling and referrals. To strengthen MFM’s community linkages and referrals, PIE built the capacity of local health facilities in RH/FP and maternal health services and HIV/AIDS interventions, through provider training, supplies, and renovations.

PIE’s support of Mums for Mums was the catalyst for their successful expansion and scale-up of community-based activities, and led to its dramatically increased program reach, diversity and impact.

*(cont’d on next page in box)*



*MFM supervising campaigners Terbas and Zaeed going over their client logbooks.*

**“It is very satisfying work. I am changing myself; I am changing my family.” --Zaeed**



Wro. Lemlem Gabremedhin, pictured here with her two daughters, is a 30-year-old beneficiary of Mums for Mums' skills training program. She used her seed loan to start a home-prepared food business. MFM reunited her with

her eldest daughter, 16 years old, who had been working in the streets. She now attends school and helps her mother at the restaurant.

At first, Lemlem feared for the survival of her business, as she was only receiving about 5 clients a day and barely covering costs. Lemlem was among four women MFM chose last year to prepare food for bedridden PLWHAs and their children. She now prepares two meals a day for 15 CHBC patients. Her client load has since increased independently of this development and she is now happily engrossed in her brisk business.

**"It is nice to see that she is past being supported and is supporting others. There is nothing more satisfying than this feeling."**

*—Terbas, campaigner who reunited mother and daughter and follows up on Lemlem once a week.*

**"Prostitution allows you to afford food, but not peace of mind. I am now healthy, happy, and enjoy my meals with my children. I have never worked this hard and yet felt so good. Previously all I knew how to do was sit outside and wait for men."** —Lemlem

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Pathfinder International is pleased to take part in the launch of a new initiative: The Kokeb Kebele, or "champion village" pilot initiative (KKI), is implemented in collaboration with HCP, ESHE/JSI, and WLE, under USAID funding and leadership. KKI is designed to integrate health and education programs at the community level, through linking schools, parents, health providers, trained community volunteers, and local and district leaders with NGOs in a joint effort.

The primary goal of KKI is to empower and mobilize community stakeholders to identify health and education related problems, devise solutions, develop plans and implement activities to attain goals, which are set exclusively by the community. This approach aims to build community ownership, capacity and sustainability of such programs.

Focus areas of KKI are youth health and education, maternal and child health, RH/FP and ASRH, HIV education, environmental hygiene, nutrition and malaria control.

PIE and other partners supporting the community's efforts hope to streamline their sometimes competing activities through a common entry point, resulting in a refined programmatic approach that boosts community level benefits for all stakeholders.

At present the KKI is piloting in five SNNP districts, two of which, Damot Gale and Alaba, PIE takes the lead in the organization and implementation of program goals. Community level health workers, teachers and parent-teacher organizations do the ground work and meet monthly to discuss and update the Action Committee, formed of 6-8 community members, including health extension workers, community leaders, youth groups, and religious groups, to analyze program progress and achievements and identify solutions. All meet quarterly with the lead USAID partner in their district to share experiences and plan next steps.

- 4 KKI is a pioneering approach to setting and meeting development targets in Ethiopia, targets that are crucial to the wellbeing of individuals, communities, and the nation as a whole.



*KKI partner delegates from PIE, ESHE, WLE, HCP and government line offices in the district.*