

True Women

A population training and education program aimed at adopting healthy behaviors in the field of family planning and reproductive health, as part of the national program called Romanian Family Health Initiative (RFHI) implemented by JSI Research & Training Institute and partners, was aired between March 6th and April 10th, 2006, on TVR 1 (Public TV Channel) in a six-show series called *True Women*. RFHI is a six-year technical assistance project implemented by JSI R&T and funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

According to the audience-rating system, 466,000 women of reproductive age (15-49 years) were exposed to at least one important topic or key message (i.e., they watched at least five minutes of the six-show series). This accounts for 8% of the overall number of women of reproductive age in Romania. If we only take into account the RFHI expenditure, without the TVR contribution, the show conveyed to every woman in the audience at least one key message for only 0.2 cents, which is less than 1 RON (1 USD = 2.7 RON)!

In 2004, for the first time in Romania, the number of births was higher than the number of abortions (883 abortions for every 1,000 live births). At the same time, modern contraception use rate increased from 23% in 1999 to 34% in 2004, according to studies conducted at a national level.

Taking into account the context and the need for programs focused on health problems that are typical for women of reproductive age, the Romanian Family Health Initiative was launched in 2001 after a memorandum of understanding was signed by the Ministry of Health, JSI R&T, and USAID. The objective of the partnership was to increase access to and use of family planning and reproductive health services for disadvantaged people. Financing comes from USAID.

A key component of the program is made up of activities and projects to inform and educate women about available services. This component has included various approaches, such as: organizing meetings with women working in factories, developing and disseminating information materials (brochures) in easy-to-understand language. The development of a mini-series combining educational materials with the kind of entertainment that is typical of feature films has been very successful and a very innovative way to share information and education for women.

This project film, called *True Women*, is the first in Romania that deals with reproductive health-related problems in a special way that is both entertaining and educational. It addresses problems that are typical of the various stages in a woman's life, starting from the first menstrual cycle through menopause. The series has a cast made up of professional actors and received full support from TVR. The Public TV Channel produced six shows, each including one episode followed by a live discussion that reviewed key messages in the show and featured special guests. TVR provided the set, the production, and moderation resources, as well as the broadcasting space every

Monday at 5:00 PM for six weeks between March 6th and April 10th. The project managed to attract a number of celebrities who became involved in conveying the show's message to the audience by using their own life experience as examples.

The mini-series reached its goal to inform women in an accessible, fair, and detailed way about how important it is to plan each pregnancy and to use contraception. It also addressed the following objectives: the importance of consulting the appropriate specialists, the importance of leading a healthy lifestyle while pregnant, to detect cervical and breast cancer as early as possible, the importance of preventing sexually transmitted diseases, and to improve the unpleasant effects of menopause.

The project was supported by health professionals, such as: Dr. Alin Stanescu (Institute for Mother and Child Care), Dr. Borbala Koo (Executive Manager – the Society for Contraceptive and Sexual Education), Dr. Ileana Munteanu (The “IC Parhon” Endocrinological Institute), and Marlene Farcas (Executive Director – The Romanian Cancer Society). The project received the contribution of several Romanian celebrities who agreed to share their experiences that were similar to those of the characters in the series.

Dana Nalbaru (Romanian singer) was a special guest in the show to highlight the main stages that a mother-daughter relationship needs to go through when the latter becomes a teenager. Bianca Brad (Romanian actress) shared her experience as a pregnant woman, being the mother of an 8-month old baby boy, while Corina Chiriac (well-known Romanian singer) and the series' health specialists spoke about the main features of menopause and the effects it has on a woman's life. The last show featured special guest musicians including Cristina Haios from “Impact” and Mihai Sturzu from “Hi-Q” who spoke openly about their own experiences. They reinforced the message of protection against sexually transmitted diseases and preventing situations that put youth at risk as key issues for young people in Romania.

The *True Women* series has been widely disseminated throughout Romania and has aired on several regional television stations. It continues to be used in RFHI program activities addressing women's health and reproductive health issues.