

PEOPLE WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE EPISODE 09

Title: Anita Varney – Health Facilitator, Fishtown/Liberia
Author: Stefanie Duckstein, HA Afrika/ Nahost
Editor: Christine Harjes
Translator: Tony Dunham
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Characters

Narrator: Male voice
Voice Over: Anita Varney, 36

INTRO

Hello and welcome to today's program in the Learning by Ear series about people who contribute in different ways towards changing our society. Today we are going to meet Anita. She is a health facilitator in a fairly remote area of a West African country. So, let's go all the way to the west of Liberia, to Fishtown.

1. SFX: Women's Workshop

Ab: 0:48: Anita: "Women oh women. Thunder, Thunder.

(Clapping hands) It's sexually transmitted infections.

Gonorrhoea.

All: Gonorrhoea.

Anita: Syphilis.

All: Syphilis

Anita: You're rapping for yourself ...Good!"

They are having fun this afternoon up here on one of the three hills that make up Fishtown. The names of sexual diseases are flying across the room and spilling out into the yard. Anita is hopping from one leg to the other and is trying, in spite of the shimmering heat, to hold the attention of 30 women.

2. SFX: Women's Workshop

Anita points with her finger at photos of infected sexual organs. The women shuffle about in their seats and giggle. The topic of the workshop: STI, which stands for Sexually Transmitted Infections. Not exactly an exciting topic so, according to Anita – “You have to entertain them, otherwise they get bored.”

3. SFX: Women's Workshop

Anita Yawasese Varney, who is at least 1,80m tall, towers over all the others. She is always bigger than all the others. She dresses casually in sneakers and tight jeans with her mobile phone hooked onto her belt. Anita is 36, she's a midwife and a health facilitator for Medica Mondiale, a German women's rights organization. Medica has built up a small office here in Fishtown. 'Women and girls don't have it easy in their country,' says Anita as she shakes hands with the girls as they leave.

4. *Sound Clip Anita, Eng.*

„Well as women of Africa especially we have the tendency that women are subjects in their homes. Women are there to just say ‚Yes Sir‘ to the husband. They have no right to suggest. Because the men feel that they are the roosters, they are the only ones to crow. No other. They are the ones that are controlling the homes. So even their wives, they have control over their lives.“

According to Anita that's not to be accepted in the long run. She shakes her head vigorously and puts her hands on her hips.

5. *Sound Clip Anita*

„This is why we are fighting. We try to advocate for human rights to bring women to the level where they should be accepted in the community as helpmates and not just as wives to be beaten upon or to just used in the home, to be subject to their husband.“

The civil war in Liberia lasted for 14 years. According to Medica Mondiale two out of every three women were raped. Small children and old women among them. Lots of the women were kidnapped and forced to become soldiers or prostitutes. Even when the war came to an end in 2003, the violence didn't stop. Anita says that trust and respect between men and women has to be built up again slowly, very slowly.

6. *Sound Clip: Anita*

„It’s a battle: the men feel threatened that if the women take that position it’s like they will be removed from their throne, and the women will overthrow them. So it’s a great battle between women and men. They are here to accept that fight. But gradually we are getting there. And they are accepting that notion that women are their helpmates and contribute positively if they are given the chance.“

7. SFX: Road Fishtown

Liberians like to say, there’s nothing in Fishtown, not even fish. Even those who live in Fishtown say it. That’s not totally true. The inhabitants have dug the small provincial capital in the south east corner of Liberia out of the deepest jungle. A dusty main street divides the town from west to east. At the Thursday market dry fish are for sale piled up in a pyramid. Not only that, Fishtown has a town hall, a football pitch, a police station, a handful of small shops and let’s not forget the three hills that border the small town.

8. Sound Clip: Anita

„Oh. The hill. I’m talking and at the same time climbing the hill. So I’m going out of breath. Please. (Laughs).“

Anita struggles up the incline to Luise Kwe's house. A yellow football shirt is drying in the sun. Luise's granddaughter is splashing about in a plastic bath. Luise beckons us into a room cooled by the adobe walls and hurriedly looks for a booklet in which she has meticulously listed every birth and house visit.

9. SFX: Luise house

Luise is one of the innumerable traditional midwives. She learned how to assist births and lead women through their pregnancies from her mother and in one of Anita's courses. Luise has brought many Liberian children into the world in her 62 years. Anita turns up when there are complications and Luise doesn't know what to do. It was only yesterday, says Luise as she frowns, only yesterday that she had to take her neighbour to the clinic. She was doubled over in pain. Anita patiently follows Luise's run down of events and asks about the mother's nutrition and girth measurement, and the condition of the child.

10. Sound Clip Anita:

„Working with the community as a social worker, you don't have to be up there and they are down. So you have to mingle with them, accept their way of live and then they will accept you. But if your try to show you are so different, so professional, a dignitary person they won't accept you. The message you have to carry to the community will not pass on. Even if they are sitting on the floor, you sit with them. If they try to give you a higher seat, you deny yourself, just to make them feel you are the same with them and you accept whatever they offer you.“

It's not always easy, says Anita, to subordinate her own life, and then she becomes reflective and clears a strand of hair away from her brow.

11. *Sound Clip Anita*

„For me, this is my challenge as a health worker and married women. I'm married with three kids. I have my husband in Monrovia. He is there with the kids and I'm here. The problem I'm having, my husband is complaining all of the time: Oh, you have to come home, take care of your children; no one is there to serve as a parent for them. Those children need to be shown love, they need you too. You can not just turn your back and just prioritise your job. He calls on me every time, he is complaining all of the time. I have him to convince to carry on my job.“

Sometimes when the yearning to see her husband and children, Joel, Francis and Franita, grows too big, she gets in a shared taxi and travels the two days to the capital Monrovia. Life is easier there. The health care is better, people deal in all sorts of things There's even a cinema in Monrovia. And yet it is exactly in such moments that she thinks about Fishtown and about that she is needed precisely there in some way.

12. *Sound Clip Anita*

„From the very first beginning I was not a health worker. I was just Anita from high school. I had this dream that I had to pursue. Whatever dream you have that you want to become in life you can make it. You can do it depending to yourself, on your determination and your perseverance. So Anita like any other woman in life can make it. I encourage women; they can also reach there and touch the lives of people that are in need of them. That is the most important thing. If you touch the live of someone then your living is not in vain. I strongly believe that.“

13. *SFX Anita walking*

14. *SFX thunder storm*

The wind rattles the corrugated iron rooves. Out of the east the coming rainy season sends the first storm. Anita is on her way to the hospital in Fishtown. Liberia's Ministry of Health runs here a green and white bungalow which contains three small rooms for patients, a lab and a delivery room. A fridge for medicines whirrs driven by the loud vibration of a generator. Anita pushes her way past a group of young women. Their clothes are stretched against their round bellies. Anita draws herself up in front of the crowd and pulls her shoulders back.

15. *Sound Clip Anita*

„Good morning everybody. My name (is) Anita. The topic we are talking about: taking care of the children

All: „Taking care of our children.“

Using vivid terminology Anita underlines the importance of food rich in vitamins. Lots of fruit and vegetables, clean drinking water. The women follow her talk with curiosity.

16. *SFX: Training at Clinic*

Less than 30 minutes later Anita is already hurrying to the next appointment. In the hintermost room of the clinic Martha is lying in colourful sheets exhausted but happy. She gave birth last night. Her seventh. Her first birth in the clinic.

17. *SFX: Anita talking to mother*

On her way home Anita is also a bit exhausted. Sometimes, as she says, the fate of women in her country gets to her. They have to fight against so many different things. The nutrition is so often without variation, the drinking water is not always clean. But worst of all is the sexualized violence. Rape inside of the family happens often. Medica Mondiale has taught her how to cope with the psychological strain so that she can help women who have been made insecure through violence and are frequently traumatised. Even so, it's not always easy.

18. *Sound Clip Anita*

„Hmm. Whoa. Sometimes it’s difficult especially when you come across a case that is so incredible that humans can not imagine. Let’s say a man assaulted a baby. Such cases weigh down on me so heavily. I try to identify some coping-mechanisms. I have identified accepting the fact that those things happen. It is part of life. What has been done cannot be undone. It’s just the matter of accepting the fact and then working on it and cope with it. Because if you continue to refuse those things that have happened you can’t understand and accept the way.“

The organization Medica Mondiale is having an effect. Its German founder, Monika Hauser, was awarded the Right Livelihood Award in 2008. And this made Anita cross the whole continent to Sweden to attend the award ceremony in Stockholm. It was her first trip to Europe. Anita slaps her thighs. She still has to laugh when she thinks of the ceremony.

19. Sound Clip Anita

„I wore my African attire, African slippers, my African hair attire. I was so admirable for them because usually they don't see those type of dress code there. I had so many of them coming: can I have I photo, you look so gorgeous. Oh my god. (Laughs). As tall as I am I was just above their heads. And my hair attire was covering all those in the back. It was so huge. One guy came, he said I have a compliment for you look so gorgeous in your African attire but I'm glad I wasn't sitting behind you. Because I wouldn't have seen a thing.“ (Laughs)

OUTRO

Did you like this story? If you'd like to send us your comments, read more about the topic or just listen to Anita's story again, then visit our website at: [d w world dot de slash l b e \(www.dw-world.de/lbe.\)](http://www.dw-world.de/lbe)

Thanks for listening and we hope you'll join us next time for a new story in this Learning by Ear series called People Who Make a Difference.

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