**Unique café idea that aims to root out fatal ignorance among women**

By ROSE NYAWIRA NJOROGE

The women who streamed into the Casablanca Bar in Hurlingham on March 24 were not looking for a frosty drink or a hot party. Instead, they came for cold, hard knowledge that could literally save their lives.

After kicking off their shoes or flopping onto cushioned stools in the bar, with the low lighting, brightly coloured couches, and other vivid Moroccan furnishings, these bar patrons weren't gathering to complain about work or gossip about men. They wanted the “411” on topics like hot flashes, contraceptives and cervical cancer.

Ranging in age from 19 to 49, these women were part of a growing worldwide movement to bring science to the masses known as the Café Scientifique, or Science Café.

But wherever they are held, Science Café organisers believe they can make a difference.

Consultant Ruth Wanjala, a former communications assistant for the African Technology Policy Studies Network, was introduced to the Science Café concept in 2006, when she won an essay competition at a café sponsored by the British Council in South Africa.

In April 2008 Wanjala and a young scientist friend, Ms Juliet Muthu, hosted the first Kenyan Science Café. Muthu, a scientist with the Kemri Wellcome Trust, is an external relations manager.

The first Kenya Science Café topic focused on the Kenya Aids Vaccine Initiative. Ensuing topics included Child Health, the Malaria Vaccine and Male Circumcision.

Asked why she wanted to bring the Science Café to Kenya, Wanjala says: “Having worked in a communications department, I realised that the scientific output we were producing — brochures, journals, articles — were rather out of touch with what the scientists were doing.

“The research message wasn’t really getting out. Whenever we would go for conferences, the sessions were long and too technical. People often fell asleep.

“However, during the lunch break, I noticed the public would engage with the scientists to ask questions or simply discuss. I thought an informal set-up might encourage greater engagement between the public and the scientists,” she adds.

At the recent café, the featured speaker was Dr Carol Odula Obonyo, a University of Nairobi obstetrician and gynaecologist, who also operates her own practice. She was joined by her colleague Catherine Muyosya, a nurse.

The two specialists drew on their extensive knowledge to answer the questions in layman’s language. The areas of coverage ran from menopause, diet, exercise, infertility, hormone replacement therapy, fibroids, contraceptives, cervical cancer and the HPV virus, pap smears, and sexually transmitted diseases.

Dr Obonyo thinks the Science Café could be an important venue for spreading health information for women.

“Men have over time perfected the art of bar networking, but this now encompasses more purposes than just business. It is fairly common to find men sharing with their mates about issues affecting them, be it their health, their kids or their marriages.

“Today’s woman, in her quest to be the backbone of her family. When she’s sick she can give more support.”

The Science Café is important because for once, we can forget the diapers, the formula and work and just talk, catch-up and discussing our health. Nothing’s more important because a woman is the backbone of her family. When she’s sick she can give more support.”

At Casablanca Bar, the questions were as varied as the topics, and ranged from the sobering to the hilarious. There were frequent gags of shocked realisation, and sometimes even horror, after learning the possible cost of one’s ignorance.

For example, one woman came to the café to get information about cervical cancer.

“Why should we rush when we fall sick to seek a cure, when all we needed was the right information to protect ourselves from disease even if that meant getting free medical advice in a bar or café?”

**Special Report**

The number of Kenya Science Cafés that have so far been held

So far, only six Kenya Science Cafés have been held. Last year, lack of funding was a problem. But Café organisers recently benefited from The International Engagement Award of the Wellcome Trust, and will now host the event monthly.

Even with minimal advertisement for the events, the turnout has been laudable. Most of the advertisements are made by Kenya Science Café has been through word of mouth and email.

In this day and age, if it’s cool and involves the public you can find it on Facebook. The group name is Kenya Science Café.

Kenya Science Cafés are currently being held in Nairobi, but there are plans to take the concept to Mombasa and Kisumu. Organisers also plan to vary the settings to reach people of all economic backgrounds.

But wherever they are held, Science Café organisers believe they can make a long-term contribution to good health in Kenyan society.

For example, many women who attended the recent event vowed to get their pap smears and mammograms done as quickly as possible. To avoid this event, they wanted help put scientists more in touch with public needs.

But not least, the public will also understand science-related public policies,” Wanjala says. “We won’t have people thinking; ‘I need to have a polio vaccine because my local district officer said I had to.’ They will know precisely why it is important.”