

Empathy – the missing ingredient

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Here is a story...

In our research office in Harare, we were visited one day by a woman, about 40. She said she had been looking after a relative in hospital and now had to return home after 4-5 weeks. She knew her husband would have been fooling around while she was away, because that's what men do.



She was weeping with shame. She wanted us to give her some female condoms, so that she could protect herself when she got back.

How would she explain this to her husband? Wouldn't he accuse her of being unfaithful while she was in Harare?



She didn't know what would happen. She just needed something to protect her while she negotiated her way out of it.

Anyway her husband knew she was a faithful woman, so if he accused her, he knew he would be lying. That was a chance she was willing to take.



- Unprotected sex was not.

We gave her five – that's all we could spare from the project.



- Another time, a driver turned up saying he was from Minister so and so – a woman. He had been instructed to pick up some condoms. No story, no explanation.
- We explained this was a research project. Female condoms were not yet licensed for general use, we were not permitted to give them out without seeing the client.



Empathy

is one's ability to recognize and understand the emotion of another. Empathy is often characterized as the ability to "put oneself into another's shoes", or experiencing the outlook or emotions of another being within oneself, a sort of emotional resonance.



WHO consultation on reuse of female condoms 2000

Women asking for advice on how to re-use female condoms were defeated at the international level by the recommendations of microbiologists for whom standards of hygiene were more important than the number of women who got infected with HIV in the time it took to ponder the question.



biohazard

- The used condom was considered from the biohazard point of view - splashes in eyes while washing something a woman had just taken out of her vagina
- YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS !!!



- A woman microbiologist finally admitted that she could not conceive of a situation where women could not say no to sex rather than using a washed condom



- We are a hundred realities apart
- When studies were done in SA it was found that there were more bugs in the sink than likely to be in the condom
- We are looking for a “good enough” solution not a perfect one, one women and men can use in their daily lives



But

- This separation of realities exist at home also, in the dissonance between users and health workers, policy makers, programme implementers
- How do you know what the problems are if you haven't tried the method yourself?
- Do obstetricians have to be women?



- The only way is to listen to those who know from first hand experience or to try it ourselves
- What does it feel like to try putting in a female condom when there isn't a place to wash your hands after?
- Do you have to hold on to the outer ring so it doesn't disappear inside, or the penis go down the side?



What is a minimum standard?

- Take it out, wash it with ordinary soap and water, fill with water, check for holes, rinse well, pat dry with clean towel, wrap in a tissue, pop into pocket and find a discreet time to replace near the bed, remember to baby oil before reuse [lubricant very important]
- What we always did with diaphragms



- Reuse five times - cuts the cost of a female condom by 5
- Concerns of men often around whether sex workers use the same condom over and over with several clients
- Terrified that this means their penises come in contact with other men's semen
- Feel this puts them at risk of infection!



How is this different from unprotected vaginal sex

- Assumes that sw wash out between intercourses
- How is this possible at the back of a bar or in an alley?
- Part of expectation of dry sex practice.
- Assumption that safer sex is to protect the client not the sw



At national levels

- policy makers and medical professionals insisted on the same standard of care, so if women in the West are not asked to wash and reuse female condoms why should "our" women have to do this.
- the ideal was a brand new condom every time for everyone, and they used their power to insist on this, but not to make sure that enough brand new condoms were provided for every person who wanted to use them.



Plurality of needs

- women and men have different needs at different times
- Sex workers more enabled to choose with clients, may be able to use male condoms with some, female condoms with others
- And nothing with their "trusts" just like "other" women



- Men more able to use condoms with sw and casual relationships and girlfriends, than with wives
- Nurses and other frontline hw major barrier to people's ability to negotiate condom use.
- Not able to explain from experience how to use condoms, esp female condoms



- People in positions of power, either through politics or technology, who are charged with looking after the well-being of their constituents, make decisions for them based on their own values and assumptions.
- These can only be challenged by civil society groups who have confidence and knowledge, or have allies among professionals who can advise them.
- Advocacy groups better positioned to give appropriate information and to support people in use



Partnerships

- Have to be based on respect
- Advocacy groups have to be confident, well informed, skilled, knowledgeable, funded, networked



The unheard

The danger is that those with the loudest voice will have their rights respected, and those with the least power, the invisible, the fearful, the stigmatized, will not be heard, will not know how to use the system

will thus be the ones who continue to carry the heaviest burden of the impact of HIV and other disease epidemics



