

Case Study 4: Female Condom Strategy

Key Messages:

- Introduction of female condoms broadens the suite of HIV and STI prevention options available for women exchanging sex.
- Consistent education on how to use female condoms and their benefits increases people's interest in using them.

Background

A major focus of Tingim Laip's (TL's) work in PNG is ensuring that men and women who are part of the target population are empowered to consistently use male and female condoms. Condom promotion is core to all of TL's interventions. TL also works with partners and stakeholders to ensure that condoms are readily available when they are needed.

The Female Condom Campaign aimed to create a supportive environment to improve availability and acceptability of female condoms across all TL locations in PNG. The goal of the program was to increase female condom use by 25% in all TL locations.

The target populations included women who exchange sex (WES) for goods or money, while secondary target audiences included mobile men with money (MMM), truck drivers, buai traders, security guards, and 'gatekeepers' (or those men and women who influence the exchange of sex such as guesthouse and bar owners, mummy/daddy bosses and condom distributors).

The female condom campaign was delivered in line with TL's existing peer-based prevention strategies with three different interventions:

1. Interpersonal communication: Key messages concentrated around female condom information, use and negotiation, and myths. These messages were disseminated by TL volunteers and Field Officers to their peer networks throughout the campaign.
2. Community engagement: Gatekeepers and service providers were targeted in locations where members of KAPs are based. Key messages around female condom information, use and negotiation, including myths were developed for each of the community target populations to encourage them to promote and make female condoms available.
3. Mass media: A range of communication items/channels to reinforce peer and community based messages were used. Posters, wristbands and lanyards were used to reinforce and remind target populations of key messages.

TL compiled a distribution guide for field staff and volunteers to improve condom promotion, demonstration and distribution amongst key affected populations in locations where risk and vulnerability are high.

Rationale

The risk of HIV infection for PNG women is high – nearly 50% of people living with HIV (PLHIV) in PNG are women (Robinson, 2013). Research from around the world has shown that consistent and correct use of condoms for both men and women significantly reduces the risks of contracting HIV¹.

¹ http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/condoms/20090318_position_condoms.pdf

Female condoms are relatively new in PNG. There is limited knowledge of female condoms amongst key populations and there is stigma associated with them, misconceptions and fear of using them.

TL's approach to condom promotion and accessibility for key affected populations is based on recommendations from UNAIDS² and is in line with the draft Papua New Guinea 1st National Strategy on Comprehensive Condom Programming (2013-2017) which promotes equitable access to male and female condoms through leadership and condom security.

Outcomes

- Some women and men have responded positively to the new condom option. In Hagen, a former female sex worker now working as a Project Officer for TL has taken the lead in promoting female condoms among fellow colleagues and peers with a very positive response. In places such as Jiwaka the male condom is still preferred, while in Markham, some female sex workers are using the female condom and it has gained popularity among married women in the Umi Market area.
- Women reported in Hagen that they are able to insert the condom and have it in place for up to 8 hours ahead of time, allowing them to plan ahead. Some women like the pre-inserted condom for when they are travelling along the highway in the event they come upon a roadblock and are subjected to lineups. This makes them feel more protected. Women also said they liked to insert a female condom when they are planning to get drunk as intoxication makes it more difficult to remember to use condoms.
- Women in Hagen and Jiwaka reported that they liked that the bottom ring of the female condom makes men reach ejaculation faster. The women call this the 'magic ring'. Some men also like the female condom in Hagen because they are looser than a male condom. The fact the inner ring makes the men cum faster when they are drunk makes them happy because they think the woman has a 'beautiful vagina'. Some women in Central describe wanting to carry the female condom with them because 'every Friday they have their friends coming from Moresby, and when they are drunk they don't know what they are doing'.
- In Daru, the rate for women who exchange sex went up from K20 to K40, even as high as K50 for using the female condom. Women like using it because when they are in a rush.
- The interest in the female condom in Jiwaka has been increased through consistent education on how to use it. But women in villages find they don't have the time or privacy to insert the female condom so they put it on the man. Some men who have used them are interested in them.
- In Milne Bay, there has been a significant increase in distribution of female condoms and there is evidence of a growing community empowerment among young women exchanging sex in Alotau. Community empowerment is a core component in all global guidance on HIV and sex work.

"They call it fast money. Many WES are using female condoms. When they go to a hot spot and want to rush, the male condom takes long...When they start using the female condoms, it's different, now they use it because it's so fast – 'fast money'. The women ask me for 'fast money'." – Field Officer, Daru

"I like the female condom better. I put it in before I head out to make my money [sell sex]. If the man wants to pay, he pays for me and the condom!" WES, Milne Bay.

Challenges

- Many women are 'too scared' to try female condoms. This may be caused by:

² UNAIDS, Making condoms work for HIV prevention: cutting-edge perspectives, 2004

- Low self-esteem and a lack of confidence to carry and/or negotiate female condom use
 - Lack of knowledge and awareness about female condoms
 - Misconceptions about female condoms and how to use them
 - Belief that women are 'not important and are often 'led' by men
- Cultural restrictions/taboo can prevent women from discussing sensitive issues such as condom use
- Alcohol use can be a barrier to making a decision to use a condom
- The time and privacy required to insert a female condom can be barriers to its use.

Lessons Learnt

- The introduction of female condoms broadens the suite of HIV and STI prevention options available for women exchanging sex.
- Consistent education on how to use female condoms and their benefits increases people's interest in using them.
- Working with male peers to educate them about female condoms increases a positive response from them.
- Continued work needs to be done in education and distribution to create an increasing demand for the female condom. TL supported the development of local linkages between volunteers, street vendors and establishments with other projects, organisations and Provincial AIDS Committees for ongoing access to condom stocks. TL also developed strategic alignments with key companies such as industries, security and trucking companies to help sustain condom promotion and distribution beyond the life of the project.