

The case for female condom provision

The female condom is made from polyurethane, a strong thin material that conducts heat well and is lubricated internally and externally and can enhance physical sensation. There is also a new version made from nitrile. Couples have reported that use of female condoms does not interfere with pleasure.(3) Research has shown that one of the factors that makes female condom programmes successful and increases their use is taking the opportunity to promote the female condom as an enhancement (1). Users of the female condom report that the outer ring can provide positive stimulation for women and the inner ring for men. (2)

Female sex workers in Colombo, Sri Lanka, encouraged their male clients to insert the female condom as a means to increase pleasure for both people. Sexual excitement was used as a negotiation technique, with clients finding the process very arousing and perceiving the female condom as a sex toy and enhancement to the sex act. Sex workers reported charging more money for sex with the female condom than without it. In an acceptability study, more than 90% of condom users claimed to like the female condom very much, with nearly 60% saying that their clients liked it and were excited to watch its insertion.(4) In Madagascar, women using the female condom became aroused and, as a result, had an increase in vaginal lubrication—sometimes for the first time in their lives.(5)

Some organizations have used the increased pleasure that the female condom is thought to produce as a selling proposition. In Senegal, the Society for Women and AIDS in Africa promoted female condoms alongside local erotic accessories, such as incense, frilly underskirts, and *bine-bine* beads, which are worn on women's hips during sex. The noise that the female condom makes during intercourse is similar to that made by *bine-bine* beads; thus, it was associated with erotic activity.(6) Similarly, in Andhra Pradesh, India, the noise of the female condom was eroticised when female sex workers told clients that it only made that sound when they were "doing it right".(7)

In Mongolia, the national programme to introduce the female condom included pleasure enhancement as an element of condom marketing and branding. The Lady TRUST brand was sold with a package insert that described enhancement of sexual pleasure for both men and women, including rubbing of the outer ring on the clitoris and the inner ring on the penis. The original estimate was that 10 000 Lady TRUST female condoms would be distributed in the first year of the project, but this target was achieved within the first 6 months.(8)

1 Philpott A. Eroticizing the female condom, how to increase usage. 13th International Conference on AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections in Africa; Sept 21–26, 2003; Nairobi, Kenya: reference no 350823.

2 Rivers K, Aggleton P, Elizondo J, et al. Gender relations, sexual communication and the female condom. *Crit Public Health* 1998; **8**: 273–89.

3 Burt K. Whatever happened to the Femidom? *The Guardian*; Aug 23, 2005. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,1554324,00.html> (accessed August 10, 2006).

4 WHO. The female condom: a guide for planning and programming, chapter 2. http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/publications/RHR_00_8/RHR_00_8_chapter2.en.html (accessed Jan 25, 2006).

5 Community Development Services. Acceptability of the female condom among street based commercial sex workers (CSW) in Colombo. <http://www.femalehealth.com/articles/Srilanka2002.htm> (accessed August 10, 2006).

6 Philpott, A. The Female Condom and Sexual Pleasure. The Pleasure Project. Presented at the XV International AIDS Conference, July 11–16 2004; Bangkok, Thailand. www.the-pleasure-project.org (accessed Sept 1, 2006)

7 Ibid.

8 Eswaraprasad CH. Needs Serving Society in Chilakaluripet and CHANGES, Kakinada, Andra Pradesh, India. In: *The Female Condom: the Indian experience*. Delhi, India: Female Health Foundation and Hindustan Latex Family Planning Promotion Trust, 2004. http://www.femalehealth.com/CountryPro.les/india/india_otherdocs/india_acceptabilitystudy.html (accessed Sept 3, 2006).

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Positive safer sex interventions

The female condom is a strong, soft, transparent polyurethane sheath inserted in the vagina before sexual intercourse, providing protection against both pregnancy and STIs, including HIV (see www.femalecondom.org). It forms a barrier between the penis and the vagina, cervix and external genitalia. Polyurethane is stronger than latex, odourless, causes no allergic reactions, and, unlike latex, may be used with both oil-based and water-based lubricants. It can be inserted prior to intercourse, is not dependent on the male erection and does not require immediate withdrawal after ejaculation. **With correct and consistent use, the female condom is as effective as other barrier methods and has no known side effects or risks.**¹ One factor that has aided female condom promotion is the increase in sexual pleasure and the opportunity to eroticise the condom, reported by many users. Others were that men supported its use for family planning and perceived peer support for using it. In addition, sex workers who were skilled in negotiating safer sex found the female condom to be a good alternative when male condoms were unpopular.² The pleasurable physical and psychological effects of female condom use can be crucial in negotiation for safer sex. The lubrication and thinness of the material makes sexual intercourse feel slippery, natural and fun. The fact that the man's erection does not have to be constant is an added benefit for many. Some people value its slightly larger size. **People can prolong intercourse, taking breaks (e.g. for other kinds of sex play or something completely different) and do not need to take the condom out.** The heat transfer through the polyurethane is another feature that many report makes sex feel more "natural" or enjoyable ...

In Zimbabwe, there is a new word in the Shona language – *ketecyenza* – invented to describe the gorgeous tickle that men feel when the inner ring of the female condom rubs on the penis.³ In Zambia and Ghana men have reported feeling excited by the tapping of the inner ring on the penis. In the absence of their partners, men reported buying a female condom for masturbation with the inner ring (Personal communication, Cira Endsley and Charity Binka, as above). In India, women reported their first orgasms as they inserted the lubricated female condom inside themselves.⁴ In a Sri Lankan study, a quarter of **sex workers charged clients more to use a female condom** by convincing them it was an erotic accessory, although the condoms were provided free of charge.⁵

Two sexual health NGOs in Andhra Pradesh, India – Changes in Kakinada and Needs Serving Society in Chaliakaluript – also found during research on the acceptability of female condoms among sex workers that if men raised objections, they would say that **the condom feels like a "natural vagina"**, that the lubrication in the condom is similar to skin-to-skin sex and that the inner ring touches the penis in a pleasurable way. They too were able to request a higher price for their services due to these features. According to Cheswera Prasad of Needs Serving Society, Andhra Pradesh, an organisation working with sex work communities, when a client of a sex worker complained about the noise, the sex worker said: **"It only makes noise when men are good."**⁶ In Mongolia, the female condom has been promoted by sex workers, by an HIV prevention programme and through branding and marketing with pleasure as a key feature [in particular by Marie Stopes International, with the support of UNFPA].

1 The Female Condom: A Guide to Planning and Programming. Geneva7 UNAIDS/WHO, 2000.

2 Rivers K, et al. Gender relations, sexual communication and the female condom, *Critical Public Health* 1998;8(4):273–89.

3 Eroticising the female condom, how to increase usage. ICASA African AIDS Conference, No.350823, July 2003.

4 The Female Condom: the Indian experience. Report by Blackstone Facts for Female Health Foundation and Hindustan Latex Ltd Family Planning Promotion Trust. Delhi, February 2004.

5 Acceptability of the female condom among street based commercial sex workers in Colombo. Report by Community Development Services, supported by UNAIDS. Colombo, June 2002.

6 Sex in Queer Places. Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations. June 2002. At: www.afao.org.au.

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