

Reducing Condom Breakage by Using Condom Lubricants: Evidence from Brothel-based Sex Workers in Nigeria

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Introduction

The HIV prevalence rates have exceeded the 5% mark in Nigeria, though recent figures show a drop from 5.8% to 5.0 % (FMOH 2003). This prevalence is still low compared to that of many sub-Saharan countries, and as such interventions among sex workers may still be useful in slowing down the epidemic. Prevalence among sex workers is much higher than among the general population, as figures from the National AIDS and STD Control programme in the last sero-prevalence study among high risk groups showed an increase from 22.5% in 1993/4 to 36% in 1996 (FMOH 1997).

Sex work in Nigeria is a feature of most Nigerian cities and junction towns where long distance drivers stop over to rest and refuel for the night. Commercial sex occurs in both residential brothels and in more informal settings in barracks areas commonly called mammy markets, and by street sex workers. In recent years the sex industry has grown largely due to the downturn in the economic situation in Nigeria, as many young women with poor prospects of getting jobs turn to sex work for survival (Ladipo et al 2002, Orubuloye, Caldwell and Caldwell 1994). For sex workers, the only available means of protection from sexually transmitted infections remains the consistent use of condoms. As female condoms are largely unavailable or unaffordable in Nigeria, the use of the male condom is crucial in reducing the spread of HIV during sex work. Many sex workers in Nigeria however do not use condoms consistently during sex work and a variety of reasons can be adduced to this (FHI 2000.) These include unwillingness of clients to use condoms, condom breakage, faith based invulnerability to HIV infection

and low HIV risk perception. (Ladipo and Ankomah, 2001).

A previous study carried out in 2001 found that up to a quarter of sex workers complain of at least one episode of condom breakage in the last one week (Ankomah, Anyanti, Omoregie et al 2004). In the same study, about three fifths of the 2792 sex workers surveyed in the study also claimed that they use oil- based lubricants during sex to reduce the possibility of condom breakage, aid penetration, and reduce pain during sexual intercourse (dyspareunia). Examples of lubricants mentioned in the study were Vaseline®, Canesten® cream, various forms of hair cream and oils. It is likely that the use of these oil based lubricants contributes to the high level of condom breakage. This suggested the need for a socially marketed water based lubricant for use in commercial sex as the few water based lubricants in Nigeria are quite expensive and difficult to access by sex workers. As a result of these issues, the Society for Family Health decided to conduct a qualitative study to test product acceptability of a water-based condom lubricant.

Distribution of samples and data method

Free water based lubricant (Lubrica®) in pillow packs were distributed to sex workers in about 700 brothels all over Nigeria, both in brothels where the Society for Family Health staff had worked and had not, between the last week of August and November 2003.

Field staff in all regions were trained on how to conduct Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) by research staff of the Society for Family Health, and subsequently conducted a minimum of six FGDs in each region to get feedback from the sex workers. Issues discussed included whether or not Lubrica® helped in reducing condom breakage, and the perception of sex workers on whether Lubrica® was better than oil based lubricants. Other key objectives of the FGDs were to determine how useful Lubrica® would be in negotiating condom use with clients as well as preferred sources of supply. Twenty six focus group discussions were conducted in 13 cities all over the country after distribution to obtain feed back.

Results

Effect of *Lubrica*® on condom breakage

With the advent of *Lubrica*®, complaints on condom breakage by the sex workers had almost vanished. This is evidenced by the fact that none of the SWs that participated in the study reported any condom breakage during the period they used *Lubrica*®. Instead, almost all testified that through out the period in question they have not experienced any condom breakage. A sex worker commented after using the *Lubrica*® for some time that;

'The (male) condom did not break for me, since I collected this oil (lubricant)...I like the cream it makes sex to be easy. It does not allow the (male) condom to burst'

It was very useful with persons who had had vaginal tears or injuries as a result of child birth or female circumcision. It reduced the possibility of perineal injury during sex as it facilitated easy penetration especially with men who have large penises or who wanted to be rough during sex. Sex workers were able to successfully negotiate with their commercial partners as they found that condom use with water-based lubricants made sex a lot more pleasurable as it increased sensitivity. In addition, they commented that it reduced dyspareunia (painful intercourse) especially when the customers had delayed ejaculation (due to drunkenness) and so kept thrusting for a long time.

'Customers have been injuring me previously, at least once a week. But since I began to use the cream, I have not had any injury to my private part (perineal area). In the past I had had an injury during child-birth which had to be stitched (and since then) if I meet a man (have sex), the place (perineal area) will tear and sex will pain me but now it is very easy to have sex without pain.'

Quicker ejaculation

Many of the sex workers found *Lubrica*® useful in another way: it resulted in quicker ejaculation therefore freeing them some time for additional customers. This is seen as an added advantage to the sex worker as she can attend to more clients thereby making more money with less fatigue and more satisfied customers. This is as clients, though they pay before sex, will not leave if they do not ejaculate, or will request for their money back claiming that they are not satisfied, or may even become violent. As a sex worker vividly described;

'The customer dey reach 30 minutes before (has sex for at least 30 minutes), but because the oil (Lubrica®) was so enjoyable, he came within 10 minutes. As the man releases (ejaculates) quickly you will not suffer pain (referring to when the man spend too long before he ejaculates which is very stressful on the sex worker).'

Perception of *Lubrica*® compared to oil based lubricants

Although a few had some minor complaints about *Lubrica*®, it is obvious that majority felt the *Lubrica*® was a very good substitute to other oil-based lubricants they used previously such as Vaseline and Canesten® cream which is a fungicidal agent used to treat thrush (Candidiasis). Various differences they were able to note were that unlike water or saliva which was prescribed in the past for condom use, *Lubrica*® does not dry during the sex act. Some had complained that when using

water/saliva they had to stop and wet themselves again which tends to spoil the spontaneity of sex when using condoms both with customers (clients) and with non commercial partners.

'The oil is great! Since you gave us the oil (Lubrica®) I have stopped using Vaseline oh. It is much better than Vaseline®; it makes the man to come (ejaculate) quickly'.

Pleasure/Sensitivity

Another important attribute of *Lubrica*® was that it helped the sex workers in convincing and initiating clients including regular boy friends who don't like using condom on the pretext that they don't enjoy sex with condom. It was obvious that negotiating condom use by sex workers was problematic, as was seen from other studies, clients complained of lack of pleasure when using condoms, and as such sex workers who were at an economic disadvantage were unable to enforce condom use. *Lubrica*® however gives them a bargaining chip.

On pleasure and sensitivity, sex workers stated that the sensation felt during *'skin to skin or flesh to flesh'* (a phrase used to describe having sex without condoms) which is a key factor militating against condom use by many clients is now achievable when using condoms. Generally sex workers enthused that the *Lubrica*® increased sensitivity and pleasure during sex for both client and sex worker. To them, it felt as natural as if they were not using condoms. Some clients even wondered to some of the sex workers whether the condom had burst or come off as sex using *Lubrica*® felt like the *'real thing'*. The FGDs were replete with comments such as *'it feels like skin to skin (like the natural thing)'*, *'it looks like flesh to flesh'* and *'you will not know that the person is wearing a condom, please this lubricant is very good'*.

Sex workers were able to successfully negotiate with their non-commercial partners (who rarely use condoms) as they found that condom use with water-based lubricants made sex a lot more pleasurable.

'My boyfriend was doubtful about whether he should use the Lubrica® or not as he had never use it before, but he was very satisfied after use'

'I deceived my boy friend to use am and he was so happy that he shook my hand after sex'

Matters arising

A key issue that arose was the possibility of *Lubrica*® use without condoms.

Some sex workers also complained of peppery sensations when used frequently though this was not common, and that certain clients who liked dry sex complained that it made the vagina *'too wet'*.

Conclusions

It is recommended that programmes working with sex workers in Nigeria and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa encourage use of water-based lubricants as it is likely this will increase the level of consistent condom use both in sex work and in non commercial non marital relationships. Issues that are likely to arise are cost issues, and the need to socially market the lubricant as it is unlikely to be cheaper than the oil based alternatives.

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