Successful Advocacy Strategies for Woman-Centered Prevention

“Putting something in control of the woman empowers her in a way that a male condom does not.”

Dr. Krishna Jafa
Global HIV, TB and Reproductive Health Director
Population Services International

The Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE) recently commissioned an outside organization to conduct qualitative research to gather donors’ and female condom advocates’ perspectives on what effective female condom advocacy looks like, and how CHANGE has supported such advocacy through its Prevention Now! Campaign.

EFFECTIVE FEMALE CONDOM ADVOCACY...

...IS EVIDENCE-BASED

To develop sound advocacy messaging promoting the benefits of female condoms and dispelling myths and misinformation, advocates rely on evidence that is scientifically accurate, well-researched, and comprehensive. As part of the Prevention Now! campaign, which targets U.S. decision makers to increase support for woman-controlled prevention methods, CHANGE and their collaborators have collected, reviewed, and condensed evidence from a variety of sources in reports and fact sheets on female condoms. Advocates appreciate having this repository of reliable information; one mentioned the collection of documents on the Prevention Now! website as a place she repeatedly turns to for the latest “well-done and well-researched” information on female condoms, while another U.S.-based advocate called CHANGE a “trusted source of information.” Several United States Government (USG) representatives mentioned how critical advocates’ presentation of this type of evidence is to guide and bolster their decision making on funding and programming for female condoms.

...DOCUMENTS AND TELLS ILLUSTRATIVE STORIES

Stakeholders around the globe also highlighted the need to share individual stories and positive examples of successful female condom programming to complement advocacy messages based in quantitative evidence. These personal stories put a human face on the movement and illustrate for decision makers how female condoms respond to people’s needs and how programming can overcome perceived or real barriers. One interviewee described how women in a Malawian village asked his team for a female-controlled HIV prevention method. He used this opportunity to demonstrate to decision makers and donors that female
condoms would meet local demands, telling them, “Here’s a community that has asked for this product. We have a choice here to respond to the need of the people or not. But [if not], we will have to stand up tomorrow and say that we did not respond to their need.” By using this story, the Hunger Project was able to secure collaboration and further programming interest from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for female condoms where there had previously been very little support due to a perceived lack of demand.

International implementers also mentioned that the power of illustrative examples from female condom programming has been highly successful in “demonstrat[ing] [to donors and decision makers] that you can still get around the barriers” to female condoms – such as those in extremely poor, remote, and conservative settings with high gender inequality.

The stakeholders made clear that positive stories about female condoms are extremely powerful in dispelling myths about demand and describing the settings in which they can be effectively used.

...COVERS A RANGE OF TOPICS

Ensuring women’s access to and use of female condoms requires advocacy that encompasses a spectrum of topics, including procurement, programming, and comprehensive services.

Procurement

The U.S. government’s procurement of FC2 female condoms has risen significantly since the launch of Prevention Now! – from 4.7 million units in 2006 to almost 9 million in FY14. Yet there have been – and continue to be – several challenges with procurement of female condoms which advocates seek to address. One barrier to procurement is high prices, which advocates have sought to drive down by pushing for competition in the market. Many respondents also mentioned the challenges at the global level with FDA approval and WHO prequalification – a prerequisite for aid agencies which purchase and distribute female condoms in bulk. Several stakeholders felt that advocating for a more enabling regulatory environment and working with companies to foster healthy competition to produce better products at lower prices – as well as assisting more companies in meeting international donor quality standards – are important roles for advocates and donors alike. They noted that the prequalification of the Cupid female condom was a major milestone in this area that resulted in part from advocacy pressure by organizations like the Universal Access to Female Condoms (UAFC) Joint Programme and the Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition (RHSC). At the national level in many countries, in addition to regulatory challenges, purchasing and forecasting for female condoms remain difficult, even when condoms are free or highly subsidized by donors. Some organizations have confronted this challenge by successfully engaging with USAID missions in their countries to fulfill unmet need for female condoms – such as the Hunger Project in Malawi, which received advocacy training and technical assistance from CHANGE. Now, USAID-procured female condoms are delivered directly to their program sites, moving the Hunger Project’s distribution from 15,000 to 30,000 FC2 female condoms per quarter and much more successfully meeting the increasing demand. The Hunger Project Malawi is also working with health care providers to troubleshoot supply chain and logistics issues at the subnational and local levels, in order to avoid stockouts in remote areas and improper forecasting that underestimates the increasing demand for the product. Effective female condom advocacy engages in dialogue with stakeholders to promote change at all of these levels, ensuring consistent and localized access to a quality product at competitive and/or subsidized prices.
Another topic almost universally mentioned by stakeholders is the importance of advocating for program funding to accompany procurement and distribution of female condoms. Because providers and potential clients are often less familiar with female condoms than with other prevention methods, they require an initial investment in programming to ensure that they are offered and used correctly with a high rate of satisfaction. Many global and local implementers echoed the need for programming or “education” funding, indicating that promotion with both providers and potential clients is essential to ensure uptake – particularly in areas where familiarity with the method is low and misinformation is prevalent.

Inclusion in comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention programs

While noting the importance of program funding to accompany female condoms, stakeholders were quick to point out that female condoms also need to be an integral part of all sexual and reproductive health programs that offer contraception and HIV prevention methods, particularly those programs that strive to be female-centered. Many mentioned that female condoms are often left out of these programs entirely, or not explicitly featured or mentioned as a dual prevention method. Several respondents voiced this as a key advocacy issue at international, national, and local levels. U.S.-based respondents spoke to the importance of female condoms being explicitly included in the recent USG HIV prevention guidance documents, attributing this inclusion and much of the language to advocacy and pressure by organizations such as CHANGE. Outside the U.S., the organization Zambia Health Education and Communications Trust (ZHECT) highlighted their advocacy work, which was carried out with technical support and a small grant from CHANGE. The advocacy project targeted government programs and the local offices of USAID and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to promote the inclusion of female condoms in prevention of mother to child transmission (PMTCT) and male circumcision programs.

...TARGETS A DIVERSE RANGE OF DECISION MAKERS

In order to ensure that female condoms are properly procured, funded, programmed, and accessed, successful advocacy should target a wide spectrum of decision makers—from the very local level up to international agencies, within and across many countries. At the international level, advocates have been engaged with multilateral donor agencies (including UN branches and conferences like the Commission on the Status of Women) to improve procurement procedures, build investment in female condom programming, and include female condoms in operational and regulatory policies. At the national level, advocates have targeted governments to demand the procurement of female condoms and the inclusion of the product in national condom, family planning, and HIV programs and policies. National advocacy efforts, such as the Zambia and Malawi examples mentioned above, have also successfully targeted local USAID Missions and UNFPA offices to ensure that they collaborate with local counterparts to procure female condoms and fund female condom programming.

Many stakeholders mentioned the sustained advocacy work on female condoms that CHANGE has done with the U.S. Congress and USG organizations, calling CHANGE “the main player in the U.S. advocacy arena.” One USG representative said that as an independent organization, CHANGE can call for things that we [the USG] cannot. Another said that “there is nothing more powerful than getting a query from a Congressman,” such as those prompted by CHANGE’s work to educate legislators. Fellow advocates also commended this work, saying, “It’s really important that CHANGE is on [Capitol] Hill; it’s a super important.
role.” USG representatives also appreciated the consistent advocacy touchpoints made by CHANGE, including informal conversations and technical documents, which they felt resulted in the inclusion of specific language around female condoms in USG policies like the USG guidance. They called this continued engagement “a good reminder that [female condoms] are out there and to keep investing in them.”

Several USG and partner organizations mentioned CHANGE’s and other advocacy organizations’ use of social and print media to disseminate essential advocacy information to individuals and civil society organizations to put pressure on decision makers.

...IS COLLABORATIVE

Effective female condom advocacy relies on the power of collective voices, information exchange, peer learning, and mutual support. Almost all of the stakeholders interviewed noted the powerful advocacy results that have been harnessed by convening organizations and individuals through coalitions, networks, or working groups. They noted examples of collaboration including: taking unified positions on particular advocacy topics, such as the FDA classification regulations; founding and launching Global Female Condom Day, which united almost 200 organizations worldwide in support of the initiative on its inaugural day in 2012; and organizing events that convene a broad range of program implementers and advocates to formally and informally exchange success stories and approaches. Stakeholders identified CHANGE as both a key participant and a frequent convening power in these collaborations.

Stakeholders noted that collaborative exchanges – such as those hosted by CHANGE – enable advocates, donors, government representatives, and implementers from the U.S. and global south to hear each other’s stories, exchange information, or learn technical skills in advocacy. Several USG stakeholders mentioned the power of hearing from advocates working in sub-Saharan Africa. Domestic U.S. organizations, such as AIDS Foundation of Chicago (a founding member of the National Female Condom Coalition), also found stories of successes and challenges to be really helpful in understanding how U.S.-based advocacy and programming fits into the global context. Several U.S.-based respondents mentioned the launch of Global Female Condom day, with one calling it “a clarion call, a rallying cry in support of a single focus” and another noting that “it’s taken off in ways we never imagined.” Sub-Saharan African advocates were also grateful for CHANGE’s training workshop that brought them together to strengthen their advocacy skills and exchange information with each other, calling it “a very powerful tool for us.”

Finally, several stakeholders emphasized the true collaborative spirit of the female condom advocacy movement, with one saying: “CHANGE has always been a good collaborating partner with us and a few different groups that work together to strengthen each other’s [advocacy] campaigns. There is a feeling of comradery and community, a common goal of universal access. It’s really a pleasure to work with them.”

Effective female condom advocacy is evidence-based, documents and tells illustrative stories, covers a range of topics, targets a diverse range of decision makers, and is collaborative.
ABOUT CHANGE

The Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE) is a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization that promotes the sexual and reproductive health and human rights of women and girls globally by shaping rights-based and just U.S. policies. CHANGE advocates for effective, evidence-based policies and increased funding for critical programs.

PREVENTION NOW.net

ABOUT PREVENTION NOW!

In 2006, CHANGE launched the Prevention Now! Campaign, a global initiative to increase access to woman-initiated prevention methods, especially female condoms, to stem the spread of HIV and reduce unintended pregnancies. Since then, the campaign has successfully increased U.S. political, programmatic, and financial support for female condom procurement and programming.

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