

Scaling Up Female Condoms in Malawi

July 2010

BACKGROUND

Malawi is dramatically scaling up its female condom program. Over the past decade, female condom pilot projects have transformed into a robust program with commitment from diverse stakeholders including the Government of Malawi, civil society, donors, and the private sector. Many of the factors that afforded Zimbabwe success with female condoms have been reflected in Malawi's efforts.

HISTORY

The FC1 female condom was first piloted in Malawi in 2000 with funding from the United Nations (UNFPA), but registered little success. Initially the product was sent to clinics for distribution without first training providers, which led to misinformation and low uptake.¹ In 2004, the FC1 female condom was then re-piloted in 22 areas across the country, and subsequent studies found greater acceptability.² From 2006 onward, programs have been scaled up with the goal of making female condoms available across Malawi by 2010.³

Similar to Zimbabwe, Malawian civil society and grassroots advocates played a major role in raising the urgency and visibility of female condoms with donors and the government. Hunger Project Malawi (HPM), a nongovernmental organization that strives to end hunger and poverty, began working with female condoms among rural populations in 2003 with notable success. HPM was one of several organizations that convened an NGO female condom stakeholder meeting in 2006 to urge the government to increase availability and access to the method.⁴ As a result, the National AIDS Commission agreed to hold the first ever stakeholder meeting, which paved the way for future annual meetings.

FEMALE CONDOM REINTRODUCTION

Commitment and coordination among the Ministry of Health – Reproductive Health Unit (RHU), Population Services International (PSI)/Malawi, donors such as

UNFPA and its Comprehensive Condom Programming initiative, and civil society organizations allowed for strategic public/private sector introduction of the FC2 female condom in 2008. That year, the government began distributing unbranded FC2 female condoms for free through the public health system. At the same time, PSI/Malawi, with support from the Ministry of Health and UNFPA, launched a social marketing campaign featuring a rebranded *Care* female condom, which was positioned for dual protection against HIV/STIs and pregnancy. Drawing inspiration and best practices from Zimbabwe and Zambia, the Malawi *Care* campaign combines peer education, media strategy, and female condom distribution through hair salons.

Factors Enabling Dramatic Scale-Up of Female Condoms in Malawi

- Favorable climate toward prevention for women
- Commitment from Government of Malawi
- Needs assessment and National Condom Strategy
- Financial and technical support from donors
- Involvement of NGOs and civil society
- Coordination among stakeholders and sectors
- Capacity-building of service providers
- Media outreach and training on female condoms

Today, with support from UNFPA and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) support, PSI/Malawi works with salon owners to conduct trainings with staff on educating and promoting female condoms with their clients through information-sharing and demonstrations. *Care* female condoms are sold mainly in beauty salons, as well as pharmacies and private clinics. Recently, barber shops have been included as education and distribution sites, as a way to engage men. PSI/Malawi is looking to expand its reach

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with partners in rural areas such as the Farming and Milk Producers' Associations and with marginalized populations such as sex workers.⁵ A two pack of *Care* female condoms sells for about US\$0.25, a price that is subsidized by UNFPA.⁶

New donors such as USAID and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria (GFTAM) began financing commodities in 2009. USAID has committed to shipping 5.2 million FC2 female condoms between 2010 and 2011 and the GFTAM has committed to procuring 200,000 units apiece in 2010 and 2011, and an additional 500,000 units in 2010.⁷ Also in 2009, female condoms entered the main supply chain with technical support from the John Snow Inc. implemented USAID | DELIVER Project.⁸ USAID | DELIVER provides supply management and forecasting support and offers monthly stock reports to ensure commodity needs are met. Because female condoms are now part of the main supply chain, district health authorities have the option of including female condoms in their budgets. Although the door has been opened for health officials to request female condoms, they must also pay a five percent handling fee.

SUCCESSSES

Malawi's female condom program is showing promising results. Some 2,400 Malawian hairdressers now sell FC2 female condoms and serve as advocates. In 2009, 28 district hospitals, 100 health centers, and 58 NGOs were distributing female condoms.⁹ According to UNFPA, over the course of three years, female condom distribution through the public sector alone increased from 124,000 in 2005 to nearly one million in 2008.¹⁰ *Care* female condom sales have more than doubled since the product launch, from almost 40,000 units in 2008 to 90,000 units in 2009.¹¹

CHALLENGES

There are still many challenges to expanding female condom access in Malawi. Stock outs, weak health systems and service provider turnover, and limited resources for programming are routinely mentioned by stakeholders. At the local level, financial support, advocacy, and capacity building for comprehensive

female and male condom programming must be scaled up to ensure barriers to access and use are removed. For instance, even where female condoms are provided for free by the government, health institutions must pay a handling fee, which their inadequate budgets cannot support. Other obstacles concern programming. One example is that there has been no money available to procure pelvic models for female condom demonstrations, which are valuable for showing women and men how insertion works.¹² Sustained commitment from donors, particularly for programming, is imperative moving forward.

NOTES

¹PlusNews. "Malawi: High Hopes for Female Condom," *PlusNews*, July 29, 2008. <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?ReportID=79506>

²Countdown 2015 Europe, *Female Condoms Now! How European Governments Can Help to Increase Access to Female Condoms for Women in the Developing Countries* (Brussels: Countdown 2015 Europe, 2009).

³Ibid.

⁴Hunger Project Malawi, *Position Paper on the Availability and Access to Female Condoms in the Prevention of HIV Infections and Other Reproductive Health Services*. (Blantyre: Hunger Project Malawi, 2006).

⁵Countdown 2015 Europe. 2009.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Sandra Mapemba, interview by Kimberly Whipkey, April 6, 2010.

⁸Beth Deustch, interview by Kimberly Whipkey, April 8, 2010.

⁹UNFPA, *UNFPA Global Condom Initiative – Scaling Up Male and Female Condom Programming: Malawi Jan-Dec 2009*, (Lilongwe: UNFPA, 2009).

¹⁰UNFPA. "Empowering Women to Protect Themselves: Promoting the Female Condom in Zimbabwe," UNFPA, October 1, 2009.

¹¹Sandra Mapemba, "Breaking Down the Barriers to Achieve Gender Equity—The Female Condom Programme in Malawi" (power point presented at the United States Agency for International Development, Washington, D.C., November 19, 2009).

¹²UNFPA. 2009.