

## **The Female Condom: a HIV-Prevention Method We Cannot Ignore**

### *Launch of the International Platform on Female Condoms at ICASA*

The feminisation of the HIV pandemic, the large unmet need for contraception, and the slow and insufficient progress towards meeting Millennium Development Goals 5 and 6 on maternal health and halting and reversing the spread of HIV show the urgent need for access to female condoms. The Universal Access to Female Condoms (UAFC) Joint Programme works to make female condoms available and accessible for all by urging for more investments on large-scale female condom programmes, research and development.

Joint strategies are needed to make the female condom accessible, such as collaboration between South and North, cooperation between donors and NGO's, and active engagement with the private sector. Therefore the UAFC Joint Programme launches an International Platform. At the International Conference on AIDS and STI's in Africa (ICASA) that is held in Dakar, from 2<sup>nd</sup> until the 6<sup>th</sup> of December, the launch of this platform will take place on December 4<sup>th</sup>.

The purpose of the Platform will be to broaden and strengthen the support base for female condoms, to share knowledge and expertise on female condom programming among actors, and to solicit explicit commitment. It will provide the opportunity to initiate joint advocacy activities on the female condom. The platform will consist of fifty participants, with influence in the field of HIV/AIDS and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, knowledge on female condoms, and/or previous experience valuable for future female condom programming.

### *Why is universal access to the female condom necessary?*

Gender inequity is an important driver of the HIV epidemic. The feminization of HIV-infections has become a reality: 76% of the HIV-positive youth in sub-Saharan Africa are female. Women and girls also suffer from the consequences of unplanned pregnancies which often lead to unsafe abortion. Although contraceptive use has increased globally at an impressive pace over the last decennia, there is still a tremendous unmet need for quality reproductive health, family planning services and STI/AIDS prevention programmes.

The female condom is the only female-initiated method which provides protection against both HIV infection and unwanted pregnancy. Studies have shown it is acceptable to users, increases the proportion of protected sex acts, decreases STI incidence, and is cost-effective when provided in addition to male condoms. Furthermore, it assists in women's empowerment. Most importantly, the female condom exists NOW, whereas a vaccine against HIV and microbicides will take years before they will become available.

The stumbling blocks so far for making the female condom accessible for all have been the high commodity cost, insufficient research and development, a general lack of competition in the market and a lack of mass marketing and awareness creation, rather than the presumed unacceptability of female condoms by potential users.

### *Outline of the UAFC Joint Programme*

To achieve access to the female condom for all, the 'Universal Access to the Female Condom' (UAFC) Joint Programme is initiated by four organizations; Oxfam Novib, World Population Foundation (WPF), IDA solutions and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign

Affairs (DGIS). These four form the current steering committee that will be extended with four additional international members. The Hewlett foundation, DANIDA and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been the first to grant funding.

The goals of the UAFC Joint Programme are to:

- reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies
- reduce the incidence of new cases of STIs and HIV-infection

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