



Microbicides, Sex and gender relations

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Definition of Microbicides

- **A mode of manipulation of women's genital organs that aims at modifying the properties of the biological substances of women and men and the gender relationships.**
- **A cultural and technical intervention based on selected representations of female and male substances and on negative representations of gender relations and man sexuality.**
- **They are based on the universal values of Health and Human rights as defined by W.H.O. and U.N.O.**

Methods

- Analogy and comparison with other techniques in sexual and reproductive health (Contraception)
- Comparison with the *use* and *meaning* of genital (vaginal substances) in different cultures and in western history
- ➔ In order to understand and highlight the cultural and symbolic meaning of current Microbicides approaches and raise some questions

History of contraception

- **Sterilization : voluntary and/or involuntary**
- **Intra-uterine devices (Germany) : women**
- **Condom (England) : man**
- **Withdrawal (France) : women and men**
- **Oral contraceptives : women**
- **Abortion : women and men ?**
 - ➔ **More or less linked with intercourse**
 - ➔ **More or less voluntary**
 - ➔ **Involve more or less women and men or both**
 - ➔ **Based on different sexual skills**

Syphilis

- **The woman (as the whore) was represented as the "bad" one**
- **Mandatory treatments, segregation and deportation of women**
- **Men had to protect themselves against women**

Genital / vaginal substance use in African cultures

- **Substance use is based on Positive / Negative conceptions of biological fluids :**
- ➔ **Positive : Making the vagina more wet and more dilated, Valorization of women sexual activity and orgasm, Higher social status of women**
- ➔ **Negative : Making the vagina dry and less dilated, Repression of woman sexuality and orgasm, lower social status of women and higher economic dependence and vulnerability (urbanization increases vulnerability)**

Assumptions

"Most of the world's women don't control when, with whom and with what protection, if any, they have sexual relations". (WHO- Fact Sheet No246- June 2000).

Why must the technology be controlled by women?

- We know from experience with contraceptives that when women control use and when they don't need to involve their partners, the method is used more effectively.
- Condoms (male or female) offer protection but they are not used and women cannot control their use.
- Studies have shown very low use of male condoms even in favorable circumstances.

Remarks

- **Female controlled contraception : does not work as well as it is assumed.**
- **High prevalence of unintended pregnancies and abortion even when contraception is available (US, UK, France).**
- ➔ **Condoms : are used differently in different contexts (type of partner) and are more used when they are negotiated by woman and man**

Psychological context of intercourse

- **When do women have sex ?**
 - ◆ **Love and pleasure**
 - ◆ **Marriage**
 - ◆ **Procreation**
 - ◆ **Commercial sex work**
 - ◆ **Sexual Abuse and rape**
- **Risk factors : Love (Henriksson, 1995), Social proximity, Sexual attraction, "knowing" of the partner, trust (Giami, Schiltz, 1996)**
- **The "good circumstances" for sex are the higher risk factors**

Alternative suggestions ?

- ➔ **Developing communication and social skills among women instead of suggesting strategies based on dissimulation towards men ?**
- ➔ **Developing men willingness to protect themselves and their partners ? (no studies on acceptability by men ?)**
- ➔ **Giving an erotic meaning to prevention techniques : enhancement of shared sexual pleasure and well-being ?**

**Will the Microbicides stand on the
Wet or *Dry* side of vaginal
manipulations ?**

Thank you ...