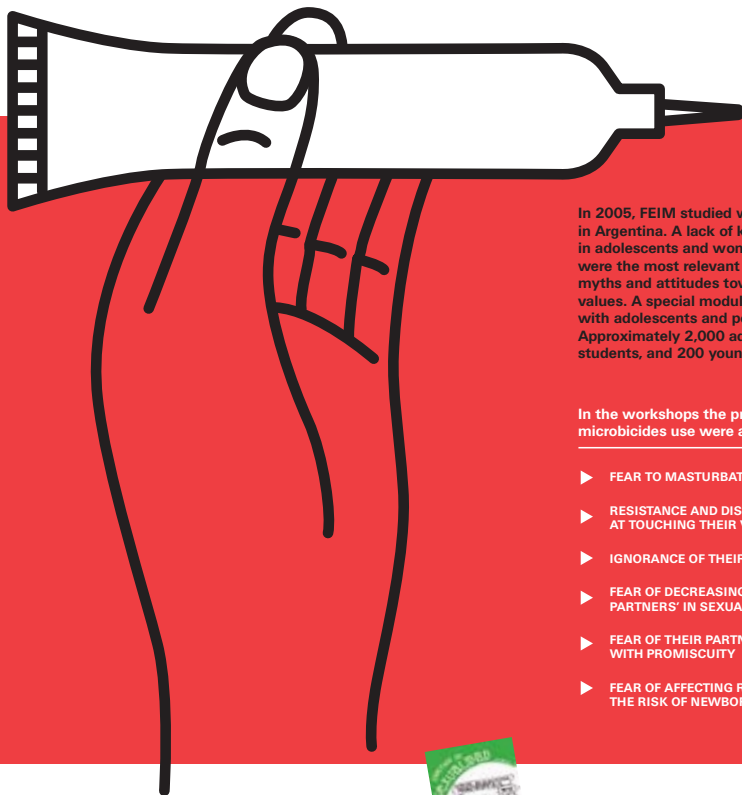




IMPROVING WOMEN'S ACCEPTABILITY OF MICROBICIDES IN ARGENTINA

by Mabel Bianco*

* M.D., M.P.H., Epidemiologist, President of FEIM (Foundation for Studies and Research on Women).



In 2005, FEIM studied women's knowledge and acceptability of microbicides in Argentina. A lack of knowledge and low levels of acceptance, especially in adolescents and women 35 and over, were the most relevant findings, due to which, since 2006 FEIM has addressed myths and attitudes towards sexuality, body knowledge and cultural-religious values. A special module on Microbicides was incorporated into workshops with adolescents and poor women (20-45 years old) in Buenos Aires City. Approximately 2,000 adolescents, 13-18 year old public secondary school students, and 200 young adult women from poor areas were reached in 2006/7.

In the workshops the principal myths about microbicides use were addressed, such as:

- ▶ FEAR TO MASTURBATE WHEN INSERTING THE MICROBICIDES
- ▶ RESISTANCE AND DISGUST AMONG WOMEN AND ADOLESCENTS AT TOUCHING THEIR VAGINAS FOR INSERTION
- ▶ IGNORANCE OF THEIR BODIES, PARTICULARLY PERINEAL AREAS
- ▶ FEAR OF DECREASING WOMEN'S PLEASURE AND THEIR PARTNERS' IN SEXUAL INTERCOURSE
- ▶ FEAR OF THEIR PARTNERS ASSOCIATING VAGINA HUMIDITY WITH PROMISCUITY
- ▶ FEAR OF AFFECTING REPRODUCTION AND INCREASING THE RISK OF NEWBORN MALFORMATIONS

To address these myths, information about microbicides, their presentation and action mechanisms were incorporated into all workshops and activities. Awareness and discussion about sexuality, women's sexual role and values, the real meaning of masturbation and all associated fears, gender inequities, particularly in sexual relations, as well as violation of their reproductive rights, and women's HIV risk were principal issues addressed in workshops using interactive techniques such as role playing, posters



and the production of media messages, among others methods. Problems specifically addressed were how to negotiate safer sex with partners and how health providers accept the need to carry condoms that not only men but also women have, without them being considered prostitutes. Still, in many public health services, condoms are freely distributed to men but not women.



Principal findings

Female adolescents in health services in some areas are not informed and do not receive condoms and contraceptives if they are not accompanied by an adult. Among adolescents, even when they are familiar with and use condoms (73.3% of those who have sexual intercourse), they don't use them always. They would prefer to use a method that they can control for themselves instead of having to ask their partners. Among women 20 and over, condom use is much lower (32% and not always). They need something to protect themselves without having to ask their partner to use a condom, however, they still need more explanations in order to accept microbicides, and they express fear of being considered "unfaithful" if their partners find out that they are using microbicides, just as they do when ...



The principal challenges registered were: the persistence of traditional cultural-religious values that maintain taboos around sexual matters, which exists alongside an increase in adolescents' and women's sexual activity, as well as the promotion of eroticism by the media and internet. The media and publicity industry promote eroticism and all kinds of sexual practices, but cultural values reject this, creating guilt and a double message for adolescents that feel peer pressure to be "easy" on the one hand and the pressure of their family and the fear of being celibate until marriage, on the other. This stops them from learning how to have responsible relationships, from knowing their bodies and from recognizing the right to pleasure especially for female adolescents. Still, when they realized that microbicides are inserted into the vagina, the majority (93%) said "how gross". Working with younger women (under 25 years-old) we found that this group accepted the idea more than older women. Another problem was the ignorance of their "perineal" area. Less than 80% of all women -adolescents and adults- did not know about the "orifices" in the vulva area, and those who did know had never seen or touched them. Many of them use tampons, but nonetheless express how nasty it is that microbicides are to be inserted into the vagina.

Improving the acceptability of microbicides requires overcoming the ignorance of and disrespect for women's sexual rights, such as, for example, the right to know and speak with ...

pleasure in sexual intercourse. Machismo and strong conservative religious and cultural values needs to be addressed by reviewing values and rebuilding attitudes. Even though not all people practice Catholicism or other religions, the Catholic Church's influence on cultural values, especially women's passive role in everything related to sex and women's sexual and social subordination, requires being deconstructed by women activists and health providers so that they be more open and able to understand and practice protection methods. Women act according to cultural patterns not because they believe in them, but in order to not be stigmatized by their social group.

In aiming for our work to have a larger impact on all societal levels, we went beyond the long sessions and face to face activities with individual women, and responded to the fact that many Sexual and Reproductive Health NGOs and activists did not know about microbicides either. As a result, we planned parallel workshops with these groups in order to raise their awareness and facilitate the knowledge and acceptance of microbicides in preparation for their entry on the market.