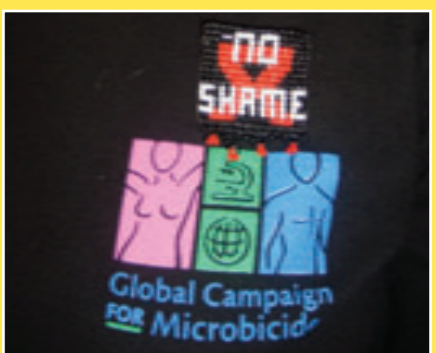


Mobilising

African Communities in Microbicides Advocacy in the UK

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Issue

Building on awareness of microbicides amongst HIV organisations in London, the UK African Microbicides Working Group reached out to HIV advocates across the UK to increase our advocacy base through engagement with migrant networks and their links to decision-makers.

Description

The Working Group collaborated with agencies in Manchester and Edinburgh to bring together African community workers, people living with HIV, faith leaders, healthcare professionals and government officials to learn about microbicides and to explore opportunities for microbicides advocacy. The events provided participants with information about microbicides research and development, clinical trials taking place globally and ethical considerations. Participants were taken through exercises to explore how they can actively campaign for microbicides.

Lessons learned

- Working in partnership with HIV organisations across the UK enabled us to reach wider networks to increase our advocacy base.
- Advocates quickly identified links between the sexual health needs of their local communities and the impact that microbicides would have on HIV prevention rates.
- Although there was much interest to learn about microbicides and to engage in advocacy, participants expressed concerns about the scientific and research process.
- There was a mixture of enthusiasm and frustration about when a microbicide will be developed and made available.
- Participants felt the need to engage men more in campaigning efforts.

Next steps

- The Working Group will regularly update advocates, including decision-makers, on scientific developments to increase knowledge and manage the expectations of advocates.
- We will reach out to HIV treatment advocates, with an emphasis on the role of men in advocacy.
- There will be greater interactions with scientists, including laboratory tours, to enhance the scientific literacy of advocates.
- Advocates will liaise with their local decision-makers and speak from an informed and unified position when opportunities arise to work with the media and to inform government consultations and decisions on HIV, sexual health and gender.

Questions we are often asked when we talk about microbicides

If a microbicide is placed in a vagina as well as on the penis, would that give people double protection?

Microbicides in current research are meant to be used in the vagina and not the penis and to see what protection they offer if HIV negative women have sex with HIV positive men. Once we have these microbicides, they could be tested to see if they might offer protection to HIV negative men who have sex with HIV positive women when HIV positive women use the microbicide vaginally. This is known as 'bi-directional' protection.

A 40-60% effective microbicide seems too low for anybody. Might this be a violation of someone's human rights?

In most settings, women have no access to barrier methods (condoms) to protect themselves against HIV, including male and female condoms. We should strive to make condoms widely available. But in many cases, women would still be unable to negotiate condom use, and are left with no option to protect themselves. Even a 40-60% effective product is better than nothing. For some, a clear human rights violation is not providing people with condoms and other tools that they can use, even after 25 years of HIV.

It is important to address the use of microbicides rectally, given that many people engage in anal sex for various reasons (to remain virgins, as a sexual preference or choice, and as a contraceptive method). Sexual practices, particularly amongst young people, are constantly evolving so it is important to carry out this social research.

Efforts are underway to develop rectal microbicides, which both men and women could use. Rectal microbicide development is much more difficult and severely underfunded, so it may be several years before they are developed. Advocates are urging vaginal microbicide developers to test their products to ensure that they are safe for rectal use.

Is the gel obvious? If a husband discovers or believes there are extra fluids in his partner's vagina, she may be forced to explain why this is the case. This defeats the point of it being a user-controlled tool that women can use without men knowing.

Many women have stated that they do not want to tell their partners that they are using a product, but that they will have the discussion once. That way, they do not have to negotiate every time they have sex, and can apply the product themselves ahead of time without discussing it. Some women have reported that their partners like the fact that they were lubricated.

Why is there need for a campaign? It seems logical that we need microbicides so why a campaign?

We do not have microbicides so we have to call on governments to fund the research and development of microbicides. Unless there is concerted global advocacy and demand for microbicides, it is unlikely that they will ever exist. Once they do exist, we also have to ensure that the women who need them will have access to them. So the Campaign will need to continue.