Perceptions and Attitudes about Male and Female Condom use amongst University and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) College Students in South Africa: A Qualitative Enquiry of the 2014 Higher Education and Training HIV/AIDS (HEAIDS) Programme First Things First Campaign

Ntombizodwa Mbelle1*, Musa Mabaso1, Tinyiko Chauke1, Salome Sigida1, Dhee Naidoo1 and Sibusiso Sifunda1

1Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa

Summary

In South Africa, the high levels of HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancy among young people represent huge public health concerns. Condom use has been widely promoted as an integral part of prevention of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections including HIV particularly among the youth. This paper explores perceptions and attitudes of university and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) students regarding both male and female condom use in South Africa. Secondary data utilised was from the qualitative enquiry of the 2014 Higher Education and Training HIV/AIDS (HEAIDS) Programme. The aim of the First Things First campaign was to explore perceptions and attitudes of 390 students in South African TVET colleges and public Universities regarding male and female condom use. Out of 38 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 36 Key Informant Interviews (KIIIs) from 36 institutions, a high proportion (98.6%) showed positive attitudes towards the male condom and its usage. They indicated the types of condoms they preferred; their understanding of condom distribution on campus, sources of access for condoms and factors that may hinder and facilitate continued and consistent condom use. It is evident that HEAIDS should continue to diversify the types of condoms offered to students, and that more effort is required on improving the uptake and utilisation of female condoms.

Abstract

In South Africa, condom use continues to be promoted as one of the key barrier methods against unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS. However, high incidence of HIV infections and unintended pregnancies among young people in the country continues. This paper explores perceptions and attitudes of university, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) students and First things First (FTF) coordinators regarding the availability and utility of both male and female condom use in public institutions of higher learning in South Africa. This study used secondary data from a qualitative enquiry of the 2014 Higher Education and Training HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS) FTF campaign. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) TVET and university student and Key Informant Interviews (KIIIs) were conducted among TVET and university FTF coordinators, NGOs and government departments. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, sections of interviews which were in local languages were translated and then data analysed.
using thematic analysis the majority (98.6%) of the participants showed positive attitudes towards the male condom and its usage. There was an indication that the perception and attitude on condoms and condom use has changed over the years. The setting and peer-to-peer programs such as FTF campaigns may have played a significant role in the change of attitude and the uptake of condoms. Participants from both TVETs and public universities indicated the types of condoms they preferred; their understanding of condom distribution on campus, sources of access for condoms and factors that may hinder and facilitate continued and consistent condom use. It is evident that HEAIDS should continue to diversify the types of condoms offered to students. More effort is required on improving knowledge of female condom, the uptake and utilisation of female condoms.

**Key Words:** Students; Condom Use; Perceptions; Attitudes; Universities; TVET Colleges

**Introduction**

In South Africa, condom use has been widely promoted as an integral part of dealing with the challenges of sexual and reproductive health especially among the youth [1,2]. Condoms are the most effective barrier for preventing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV amongst sexually active individuals [1,2,3]. According to the 2012 Household National Survey, survey revealed that youth aged 15–24 years had a significantly higher percentage of condom use compared to other age groups [2,3]. However, rates of HIV as well as unintended pregnancies particularly amongst teenagers remain high amongst the South African youth [2,3].

Other studies have shown that higher level of education is strongly associated with consistent use of male condoms among both women and men, possibly due in part to better access to condoms and sexual and reproductive health information and services [4,5]. Another recent study among students at South African Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges in South Africa revealed that there was high awareness about sexual transmission of HIV and the role of consistent condom use in prevention [6]. On the contrary, the same study population reported low condom use, and about half of male respondents and a third of females considered that condoms feel unnatural [7]. In addition, 38% of male students and 40% of male staff felt that condoms changed the sensation of orgasm [6]. Although higher education has been strongly associated with consistent condom use, it is evident that knowledge alone is not a predictor of desired behaviour.

As the intellectual backbone, potential role models and future leaders of South Africa, higher education students are thus an important target for HIV risk-reduction interventions such as correct and consistent use of condoms to reduce the risk of HIV infection [8,9,10]. Provision of both male and female condoms has increased. However, male condoms use is higher than female condom use which remain underutilized [10,11]. Condoms are accessible and available free in the South African public health sector [12] as well as in Universities and TVET colleges, with a progressive increase of scented condoms which are meant to attract the youth in particular sustainability [13]. There is therefore a need for improved understanding of student's perception and attitudes about both male and female condoms use in order to understand how best to increase use of condoms overall.

This study explores perceptions and attitudes towards male and female condom use among University and TVET College students in South Africa, using Higher Education and Training HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS) data collected as part of from First Things First (FTF) campaign evaluation across the country in 2014 [13].

HEAIDS is a national effort designed to develop and support the HIV mitigation programmes at South Africa’s public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and TVET colleges [10]. The FTF is an HIV counselling and testing campaign offered at higher education and training institutions as part of HEAIDS. The campaign contributes to an objective of the 2012-2016 National Strategic Plan for HIV, STIs and TB to maximize opportunities for testing for HIV. The FTF campaign is complemented by a variety of promotional elements including activities that help facilitate the distribution and effective use of condoms.

**Methods**

**Study Design and Procedures**

The current study uses secondary data from the 2016 HEAIDS data collated from the FTF programme evaluation, which took place across Universities, TVET colleges in South Africa [13], government departments and non-governmental organizations. This was an impact evaluation study of the First Things First campaign offered by HEAIDS in universities and TVET colleges. It had qualitative and quantitative components and covered questions on HIV, Sexually transmitted Infections and TB. This paper utilized qualitative data only, focusing on Perception and attitudes about male and female condom use.

Purposive sampling was done. Participation criteria included being either a student at the TVET or university, involvement as a provider or user of the FTF program.

A total of 38 FGDs and 36 KIIs were conducted amongst students aged between 18 to 22 years at public Universities and TVET Colleges; 28 and 10 FGDs were conducted in TVET colleges and Universities, respectively. Each group comprised of a minimum of 8 to a maximum of 12 participants, with a total of 390 who participated in these focus group discussions, more females (n=291) than males (n=99). KIIs were conducted with individual FTF coordinators in TVETs, universities, NGOs and government departments.
Questions pertinent to male and female condoms and condom use in campuses were as follows:

- Since the introduction of FTF, has there been increase or decrease in availability of male and female condoms at higher education institutions?
  - Probe for the following:
    - attitudes towards male condoms and their use;
    - attitudes towards female condoms and their use;
    - preferred types of condoms;
    - understanding/knowledge of how condoms are used;
    - condom distribution on campuses,
    - sources of condoms and factors that may hinder and facilitate continued and consistent condom use

Data Triangulation

Secondary qualitative data from FGDs and KIIs were triangulated in order to identify concurrence and divergence of views among the different institutions. Conclusions were drawn from triangulated data. Discrepancies between the data were considered on the basis of the number of FDGs and KIIs discussing pertinent issues on the identified themes.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted by senior researchers and PhD interns, all of whom are experienced researchers who were also trained specifically for the evaluation. Face-to-face interviews and discussions were conducted in pre-arranged classrooms or offices at the institutions. No pilot was conducted owing to the 2014 HEAIDS HIV survey providing adequate data on the FTF. Procedures included study introduction, written informed consent for both participation in either the FGDs or KII and the recording of interviews, FDGs and KIIs took between 1 hour, 30 minutes and 2 hours to reach saturation. External assistance was utilized to transcribe verbatim and translate from local languages to English. Both senior researchers and research interns (n=9) conducted thematic analysis using Atlas ti, and also wrote the report.

The current study is based on data collected as part of FGDs and KIIs conducted among students and FTF coordinators at Universities, TVET Colleges, government departments and NGOs.

Findings

Participant Characteristics

The sample consists of both 291 female and 99 male students at first and second year of study. The participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 22 years. The participants indicated that they had participated and benefitted from the HEAIDS programme. The participants represented students from both rural and urban colleges across South Africa.

Three (3) themes predefined themes on male and female condoms and condom use were used. These were:

Perceptions towards condoms, attitudes towards condom use and related challenges. Almost 90% discussed perceptions towards condoms, whereas all (100%) discussed attitudes towards condom use and just above 60% discussed related challenges to male and female condom perceptions and condom use. A number of sub-themes emerged under these major themes.

Table 2. Predefined themes for focus group discussions and Key informant interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of FGDs and KIIs who discussed the theme</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions towards condoms</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>98.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes towards condom use</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>60.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Generally, both male and female students reported that condoms are widely available on campus. Places where students reported to access condoms are the students’ residence, female and male toilets, the Student Representation Council (SRC) office and the HIV Counsellors’ or Coordinators’ offices. It was also widely reported that once the mostly preferred condoms have run out from the usual outlets students opt for the plain ones.

TABLE 1: Institutions and data collection approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutions</th>
<th>Number of institutions</th>
<th>Key Informant Interviews</th>
<th>Focus Group Discussions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TVET</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Departments</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perceptions towards Condoms

Majority of the participants found the female condom unappealing compared to the male condom. The primary reason given by both male and female participants was that the female condom did not seem user friendly hence the decision to use the male condom. According to most females condom appeared to require more effort to use, thus leading to low female condom uptake. Similar findings were expressed by Mthembu (2013) who found that there is low (7%) female condom uptake [14], whereas Mugadza et.al. (2016) found low usage 4% of the female condom [15].

“For female condoms they don’t like it’s probably like 1 out of 10 people who come to get female condoms, others no, not really” (Female student).

“People reject female condoms, … they tell you they are like, I am not going to use that one, I mean it is too much for me – it’s too much admin. That is why we don’t take it” (Female student).

Another participant reported that she knows of other female students who use the sponge found inside the female condom for make-up, she emphasised that it appears that they have no use for it except for make-up purposes. She further stated that instead of stocking up large amounts of female condoms that are often wasted, the HEAIDS programme should rather stock up more flavoured male condoms as they are popular amongst students.

“…I must say I also heard funny stories also about the female condoms, that the lubricant has been used for hair or the skin” (Female student).

One of the participants reported that the current negative perceptions regarding the female condom are based on the attitudes to the earlier version of the female condoms and show lack of knowledge about the new female condom. These negative perceptions persist even though the appearance, the feel of the female condom has changed, and a lot more effort has gone into making it more appealing to females. Mthembu (2013) also reports negative perceptions towards female condom.

“Femidom was introduced first, then after two years or a year … there was another one - the new Femidom which can be used immediately, not after waiting for 8 hours to put it in. So I think people still have the old information which had stigma, and I think the problem is also with the approach of how it was introduced. If you approach it in a proper and interesting way, then maybe women will use it more” (Female student).

The packaging of the female condom was identified as another factor contributing to low uptake of female condoms and the negative attitude and perception attached to it.

“I also kind of agree with her, but another thing that I’ve noticed with the female condoms that are distributed by wellness workers. They have this sponge inside of them and they are not nicely covered – they are just sloppy. So that sponge makes the condom look and appear to be bigger than it really is. And that makes people feel uncomfortable” (Female student).

“You know they look disgusting, honesty they do …Oh no, that thing is scary” (Female student).

In addition, both male and female students from a TVET College remarked that the female condom does not look appealing and that they are a “turned off” when engaging in sexual activities, while others said that the “Female condom must Fall”, implying that government should discontinue its supply.

Furthermore, some students expressed the view that the type of male condom a person used was considered by their female counterparts to represent a person’s status, particularly among the male students. The male students pointed out that if one presents ‘Choice’ (the government provided condom) condoms to their sexual partners - in particular the non-flavoured ones, a person is considered cheap and the perception is that the condom will break and that it has an unpleasant ‘rubbery’ scent. Other views on non - flavoured condoms go as far as being out-rightly negative as they affect how the male students’ – financial standing and even sexual relationships are perceived. This is how one student put it:

“when I show my girlfriend blue condoms she says I’m cheap…they also say it makes the whole room smell, when you had sex with someone the whole room smells” (Male student).

Obembe et. al. (2017), in a study on investigating the perceived confidence to use the female condoms amongst undergraduate female students from selected tertiary institutions from Ibadan Southwestern Nigeria, found that Only 10.8% had good perceived confidence to use a female condom [16].

Attitudes towards Condom Use

In general, students displayed positive attitudes towards condom use. The majority indicated that they were confident in taking a pack of condoms that are displayed in public areas on campus. However, the concern was on female students who are less confident in taking or accepting condoms that are on display on campus. One of the male students at the TVET
College explained:

“Female students do take the condoms, and then from our side we won’t do the same as we really like we really experience lesser numbers when it comes to females, because now they’re still a little shy because people are looking at them and say - what, what, what, ja, ja, ja. But it’s more, it’s more guys going to for condoms and all that!” (Male student).

The non-branded ‘Choice’ condom offered by the Department of Health is unscented and freely available. Whilst students take the ‘Choice’ condoms, many expressed preference and fondness for the branded flavoured male condoms. They argued that if the Department of Health wants to improve the uptake of condoms among young people, supplied condoms need to compete with branded condom ranges, which seem attractive and provide a variety of options compared to the non-branded ‘Choice’ condoms. One female student stated the following:

“Maybe it is the oil base and water base lubricant that people were comparing choice and other brands. I think for me the water based condoms are good, it does not have to be flavoured [interjection (P1-M)] like those in the packaging called Love. They are all water based but not flavoured and I think the department of health should put all the categories likeness ‘fatherlight’” (Female student).

Flavoured condoms were mostly preferred due to their pleasant smell. One male participant stated this as follows:

“They are just great scented” (Female student)

Another male participant said the following about the grape and strawberry flavoured condoms:

“Also, like in the campus if they do bring condoms it shouldn’t be those old condoms that smell badly, they should bring the new condoms such as purple, pink” (Male student).

A male student in one campus expressed a similar view towards non-flavoured condoms:

“I would like to thank the department of health if they are there ones distributing these condoms because previously we were using Choice with no flavour – although it was a waste of time taking these condoms to your house then the next minute the girl does not want to use choice condoms” (Male student).

In addition, most participants revealed that they were aware that condoms can be used to prevent pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and HIV infection. In all focus group discussions the ‘popularity’ of condoms among students on campus was confirmed. This is evidenced by the condoms running out weekly, and the growing demand was elaborating by a participant who stated:

“…when I started here 3 years ago, students would ask privately and say; can I have a condom? Now they openly say “where are the condoms man” we want the condoms and I’m going to come again soon to ask for more. So they are open about it and they want more and more each time” (Male student).

Through most FGDs especially among male students, the motivation for using condoms appeared to be due to mistrust in a relationship. A male university student articulated this point by saying:

“ma’am, girls here want both … me and a taxi driver. The taxi driver gives money, I give comfort, so how do you know if she becomes pregnant it’s me? The better thing is to use a condom when you are with her, then she can’t say it’s me who gave her a sickness or pregnancy, neh?”(Male student)

Challenges

The positive perceptions and attitude towards condom use in most campuses were challenged when young women on campus failed to negotiate the use of condoms especially with older boyfriends due to fear of losing financial support from them. Most of those who expressed this view felt that this forces them to oblige with the demands of non-condom use with older partners,

“Do you know that it’s very difficult to keep up money-wise here, as a university student? You need to dress up, you need to eat you need to drink - understand? (laughs) you see the cars parking outside - they belong to sugar daddies. See on Friday around 6 to 8 you see girls getting to the gate when beautiful cars come, it’s all money, money, money! So how are you going to say let’s use a condom?” (Female student).

A young man from a different FGD in another College commented as follows:

“Yha there are people who are dating like older people I don’t know if it’s their preference or I guess some are doing it for like for financial situations” (Male student)

Another challenge was unavailability of condoms for minority groups such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersexual (LGBTI) students. Most of whom noted that their experiences of HEAIDS campaigns are that of feeling left out of the campaign as some of the methods of protection such as dental dams (a thin piece of latex designed to prevent sexually transmitted diseases meant mainly for women who have sex with other women) and lubricants that they require are rarely available on campus or during campaigns. They contend that government programs neglect key populations when it comes to condoms.

“Hmmm I guess then if in your campus there are no ordinary condoms that we see everywhere you will find very less of things
that are designed for HIV or STI protection for people that fit into LGBTI categories I doubt you even know dental dams - does anyone know what dental dams are? Has anyone seen lubricants?” (Male student).

Tobin-West et al. (2014), in a study on accessibility of female condoms also found among challenges on access to female condoms included unavailability and difficulty with insertion [16].

Discussion

The views expressed by students were both positive and negative. On the positive side, most participants revealed that they are aware that condoms can be used to prevent unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV. This concurs with previous studies that found that most South African youth know that condoms prevent HIV, STIs and unwanted pregnancies [17]. Similarly, most participants reported that condoms are widely available in campus in large quantities on a daily basis. The ease of access due to readily available through various outlets and adequacy was also reported which is a positive feedback for HEAIDS.

On the other hand, whilst male condoms are viewed positively by students in general, male students seem reluctant to use the less quality ‘Choice’ condoms as they present them as of low economic status, owing to the bad smell and poor aesthetics [18]. Literature r associates reluctance to use to condom breakage with factors such as “rough sex” or sex acts characterised by over-exuberance or longer than average duration [19]. Notably, the flavoured condoms introduced by the HEAIDS programme on campus have contributed to the increase in the uptake of condoms among students as compared to previous years [20]. Preference for quality of condoms over others was also found in a study conducted by Beksinska, Smit, and Mantell in 2012 [21].

The finding that regardless of the fact that the earlier female condom version had been replaced with a new type, students do not use it as much as they use the male condom is worrying. The observed collection and misuse of female condoms is consistent with observations made in another study [22]. The negative perceptions towards female condoms have been attributed to low level of awareness, knowledge, acceptance and utilisation [23]. These findings highlight the need to continue to increase their availability in public spaces on campuses across the country coupled by a rigorous campaign to promote the use of female condoms.

Furthermore, literature supports the finding that condoms are used introduced in relationships due to mistrust [24]. Elsewhere, condom use has been associated with being involved in a causal sexual relationship and increased level of perceived risk [25]. On the other hand, as observed in the present study unprotected sex has been linked to beliefs that condoms feel unnatural and reduce sexual pleasure [26]. This has implications for the development of positive messages towards condom use.

In addition, the inability of female students to negotiate condom used with older sexual partners due to fear of losing benefits has also been reported in the general population where unprotected sex among young girls and women has been associated with the “sugar daddy” phenomenon [27]. These findings have implications for young women’s sexual and reproductive health and highlight the need for HEAIDS to design intervention strategies that empower and improve rove young women's ability and skills to negotiate safer sex.

The findings also indicate that minority groups, sometimes referred to as ‘key populations’, are not well catered for in the programming of health services including health promotion and education on prevention of STIs and HIV. Furthermore, most students who identified as belonging to LGBTBI populations reported non-use or inconsistent use of condoms. This highlights a need for a HEAIDS intervention package tailored and targeted at LGBTI population.

The qualitative study design does not allow the results of the study to be generalised to other students in other higher education institutions. Despite this limitation, this study provides a useful qualitative enquiry of the student’s perception and attitudes towards male and female in selected Universities and TVETs. Based on these findings it is clear that through campaigns such as FTF, the HEAIDS programme has played a pivotal role in creating a dialogue regarding condom use, increasing access and availability of condoms. FTF normalised the dialogue on condom use and made condoms easily accessible. Subsequently contributing to the positive perceptions and attitudes about condom use in reported in most campuses across the country.

There is a need for campaigns that targets beliefs that condom use implies distrust of one’s partner, and that condoms are a hindrance to intimacy. There is need for programmes that address gender power dynamics in relationships that influence condom use or lack thereof. There is a need for effective yet rigorous interventions and campaigns regarding the female condom, and dissemination of knowledge. There is a need to improve knowledge, acceptance and utilisation of the female condom among female students.

References


