

Socio-cultural Dimensions Inhibiting Female Condom Use by the Female Students: Experiences from a University in Rural South Africa

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Abstract : Global HIV and AIDS trends show that Sub-Saharan Africa is the hardest-hit region, and women are disproportionately affected and infected by HIV. The trend is conspicuous in South Africa, where adolescent girls and young women (AGYW), female university students included, bear the burden of HIV infection. Although the female condom (FC) is the only female-oriented HIV and AIDS technology that provides dual protection against unwanted pregnancy and HIV, its uptake and use remain erratic, especially among the youth and young women in institutions of higher learning. This paper explores empirical evidence from the University of Venda (UniVen), which is in the rural areas of Limpopo Province in South Africa, and also among higher learning institutions experiencing low uptake and use of the FC. A phenomenological approach consisting of in-depth interviews was utilized to collect data from a total of 20 female university students at UniVen who were purposively sampled based on their participation in HIV and AIDS dialogues and campaigns conducted on campus. The findings that were analysed thematically revealed that notions of rurality and sociocultural beliefs surrounding women's sexual and reproductive health are key structural factors that influence the low use and uptake of the FC at the rural university. The evidence thus far revealed that female students are discouraged from collecting or initiating FC because of cultural dictates or prescripts which place the responsibility to collect and initiate condom use on men. Hence the inference that UniVen female students' realities are compounded by notions of rurality and society's patriarchal nature that intersect and limit women's autonomy in matters of sex. Guided by the women empowerment theory, this paper argues that such practices take away UniVen female students' agency to decide on their sexual and reproductive health. The normalisation of socio-cultural and harmful gender practices is also a retrogression in the women's health agenda. The paper recommends a holistic approach that engages traditional and community leaders, particularly men, to unlearn and uproot harmful gender norms and patriarchal elements that hinder the promotion and use of the FC.

Keywords : female condom, UniVen, socio-cultural factors, female students, HIV and AIDS

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