

Ensuring government accountability for expanded access to female condoms in South Africa

THE BIG PICTURE

In South Africa, high rates of unintended pregnancy, maternal mortality, and HIV infection make it critical for women to have access to prevention tools that meet their needs. One important tool is the female condom, which the government of South Africa has promoted through its public-sector distribution program since 1998. However, despite marked interest and demand from women in the country, procurement and distribution of female condoms have remained relatively low over the years, especially in comparison to male condoms.

In 2012, the South African government launched a new National Strategic Plan on HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and tuberculosis (TB) for 2012-2016 that included ambitious female condom procurement targets. Reproductive health advocates viewed these targets as progress toward expanded protection options for women. They also saw an opportunity to monitor and encourage implementation, especially since translating health policies into concrete programming remained a challenge in South Africa. Over 18 months, they implemented a series of advocacy activities to maintain a steady drumbeat of attention on female condoms and increase accountability among South African officials for procurement and programming. The conclusion of these advocacy efforts coincided with the government releasing its largest-ever tender for female condoms, requesting a supply of 54 million units over three years. This number tracks closely with the targets laid out in the HIV/STI/TB National Strategic Plan.

IDENTIFYING THE POLICY CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

Female condoms are the only woman-initiated technology available today designed to provide “dual protection” from both unintended pregnancy and STIs including HIV. In South Africa, where women and adolescent girls have a great need for dual protection, female condoms offer an important prevention method. The South African government initially introduced



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female condoms in 1998 and today supports one of the largest public-sector female condom programs in the world. Still, the amount supplied by the government has not kept pace with demand. Whereas more than 350 million male condoms were distributed annually in 2008/2009, female condom distribution stood at approximately 3 to 4 million units—an inadequate number to meet the needs of all sexually active women and men in the country.

In 2012, due in large part to ongoing demands from women's rights and HIV/AIDS groups, the South African government launched two new strategies calling for increased availability and distribution of female condoms. The National Contraception and Fertility Planning Policy and Service Delivery Guidelines placed strong emphasis on dual protection and enhanced female condom programming through primary health care and community-based distribution, while the four-year National Strategic Plan for HIV/STIs/TB increased female condom procurement targets to a record high of 25 million units in 2016/2017.

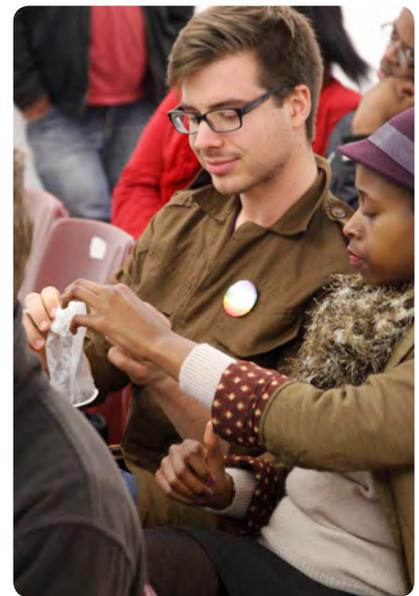
Sexual and reproductive health and rights advocates welcomed these policies but remained concerned that the policy targets would be confined to paper and not fully implemented. They felt that key government decision-makers lacked sufficient knowledge about female condoms and that this might affect ongoing commitment. They also wanted to ensure that policymakers would emphasize quality programming—including good counseling and a range of product choices—in addition to procurement numbers.

The launch of these two policies coincided with initial efforts by PATH and partners to bring the Woman's Condom, a second-generation female condom developed by PATH and research organizations, to market in the country. Given the organization's long history of female condom advocacy and interest in creating an enabling environment for female condoms in general, PATH was eager to support an advocacy initiative in South Africa to help translate these supportive policies into practice through strengthened procurement and programming for female condoms.

To develop and implement the initiative, PATH partnered with Women in Sexual and Reproductive Rights and Health (WISH) Associates, a South African reproductive health and rights advocacy group. Together they conducted a joint advocacy planning process in early 2013 to identify goals, target policymakers, and key opportunities for influence. The outcome was a schedule of targeted activities over an 18-month period from April 2013 to October 2014 that would advance greater access to female condoms and keep pressure on government decision-makers to meet targets laid out in national policies.

IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

The advocacy strategy outlined a steady drumbeat of activities to educate, inspire, and motivate decision-makers. Two of the most important events were a pair of high-level policy dialogues on female condoms, which were held in partnership with the Democratic Nursing Organization of South Africa (DENOSA) and brought together influential decision-makers from a range of



PATH/Robert Hamlin

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sectors to discuss policy opportunities and actions. During the meetings, organizers solicited action pledges from participants, including commitments by officials to advocate for condom choice and accessibility.

In the year following the first policy dialogue, WISH Associates and PATH focused on keeping the issue—and the pledged commitments—visible to policymakers by utilizing individual “influencers,” including journalists, civil society champions, and women and men with personal experience using female condoms. To generate quality media coverage on the topic, PATH and partners cooperated to conduct a journalist training and work with reporters to develop a set of “editors’ guidelines.” This training resulted in numerous articles and radio spots that helped maintain public visibility of female condoms.

Civil society ambassadors were recruited to further spotlight the need for increased access to female condoms among their networks and through public forums. The ambassadors participated in awareness-raising events such as Global Female Condom Day, posted female condom messaging to their social media channels, and penned female condom articles and opinion pieces.

Additionally, through a collaboration with the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town, the Association for Progressive Communication, and I am Somebody, WISH Associates solicited “digital stories” from South African users of female condoms to document diverse women’s and men’s attitudes toward and experiences with female condoms and to illustrate demand for the product.

At a follow-up policy dialogue, PATH, WISH Associates, and DENOSA took stock of the stakeholders’ advocacy activities and progress. The dialogue suggested a sharpened interest and commitment to the issue. For example, a high-ranking National Department of Health HIV health official gave a presentation stressing the government’s desire to work toward the 25 million procurement target in the National Strategic Plan on HIV/STIs/TB while at the same time increasing the variety and number of female condoms in South Africa. Advocates also screened the female condom digital stories they had collected—attendees remarked that it was their first time hearing about real-life experiences with the product and that the stories strengthened their resolve to increase female condom availability.

ACHIEVING THE POLICY GOAL

In November 2014, the government released a three-year tender requesting supply of 54 million female condoms, tracking closely with the targets laid out in its National Strategic Plan on HIV/STIs/TB. The yearly procurement average of 18 million units in the 2014 tender represents more than a three-fold increase over the baseline of 5.1 million units procured in 2010. It also represents an increase over the November 2013 procurement tender for 15 million units, which was awarded to multiple female condom products.



PATH’s 10-Part Approach to Advocacy Impact

Successful policy advocacy is guided by systematic analysis and pragmatic processes. PATH’s ten-part framework, outlined below, is a methodical approach to policy change that has helped over 600 individuals in more than 100 organizations in countries around the world to achieve health policy change.

- Identify the advocacy issue
- State the policy goal
- Identify decision-makers and influencers
- Identify the interests of the decision-makers and influencers
- Clarify opposition and potential obstacles facing your issue
- Define your advocacy assets and gaps
- Identify key partners
- State the tactics you need to reach your goal
- Define your most powerful messages
- Determine how you’ll measure success

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This achievement was due to several factors including an authentic commitment by the South African government to improve the health of women. The important work of champions to maintain pressure on policymakers to keep their promises, however, demonstrates the value of advocacy in ensuring policy implementation. Advocates are now focused on ensuring that the government implements high-quality, accessible, and comprehensive programming for female condom products while continuing to increase product procurement to meet demand.

FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

- **Ensuring a steady stream of coordinated actions helped keep the pressure on decision-makers and set a new standard for female condom advocacy.** PATH, WISH Associates, and partners were able to take past advocacy efforts by reproductive health and rights groups to a new level through a dedicated and sustained push focused on female condoms. Previous advocacy related to female condoms had been primarily opportunistic and uncoordinated.
- **Building local partnerships was key in holding the government accountable.** PATH's approach of coordinating and mobilizing local South African civil society and media partners to deliver advocacy messages was critical in persuading government decision-makers to act on their commitments.
- **Using policy dialogues to discuss the female condom advocacy agenda helped create ownership by policymakers.** The two policy dialogues facilitated broad buy-in from decision-makers to the advocacy agenda and provided a forum for reporting on successes. This demonstrated how personalized and focused settings can offer a vehicle for reinforcing national-level commitments.
- **Identifying creative methods for showcasing the issue can be an important way to reach policymakers.** In addition to traditional policy dialogues and forums, PATH and WISH Associates used powerful multimedia productions on the female condom that illustrated demand and personal experience and provided justification for increasing procurement numbers.



Coordinating and mobilizing local South African civil society and media partners to deliver advocacy messages through creative means—such as the “Dance4Demand” Global Female Condom Day campaign in 2014—was critical in persuading government decision-makers to act on their commitments.



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