

Indian women’s perceptions of vaginal rings—feedback for development of multipurpose prevention technologies

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Background

Among Indian women of reproductive age, 21 percent have an unmet need for family planning [UN, 2008], and 40 percent have reproductive tract infections/sexually transmitted infections (STIs) at any given time [GOI, 2007].

New vaginal rings are being developed to serve as multipurpose prevention technologies to protect women from pregnancy and STIs, such as HIV. However, data on ring acceptability in low-resource settings is limited. Assessing and addressing women’s perceptions and attitudes when developing these new technologies could ensure these products better meet women’s needs.

Purpose

This qualitative assessment explored perspectives and attitudes among women in low-resource settings on the hypothetical acceptability of vaginal rings as a multipurpose prevention technology. Features that influence product specifications and cultural factors that may affect use were also explored.

Methods

Women from slum and lower-income areas around Delhi were recruited for a total of 13 focus group discussions (FGDs). Composition of these FGDs was defined by age, marital status, contraceptive use, and number of children. Guides for the FGDs were developed to explore product attributes and product-related behavior. The study received ethics approvals in the United States and India.

During the FGDs, we first showed participants NuvaRing®. Then we introduced non-medicated rings with attributes similar to rings in development. Women handled the non-medicated rings, which differed in material, ring diameter (54–57 mm), and thickness (4–7 mm). The dimensions reflected different options for duration and use.

Results

A total of 103 women from lower-income or slum areas in Delhi participated in 13 FGDs between December 2012 and January 2013.

Results continued

Table 1. Summary of women’s product perceptions and preferences by participant group.

	Married; traditional methods	Married; 1+ children; modern methods	Married; no children; modern methods	Unmarried
Product attributes				
Size	Small, thin	Small, thin	Small, thin	Small, thin
Color	Any	Any, transparent	Any, transparent	Any, transparent
Intended use	Dual purpose	Dual purpose	Dual purpose	Dual purpose
Duration of use	1 month	1 month	1 month	1 month as trial, then 3 or 6 months
Side effects	Increased wetness acceptable	Increased wetness not acceptable	Increased wetness not acceptable	Increased wetness acceptable
Biodegradability	Not acceptable	Not acceptable	Not acceptable	Not acceptable
Product-related behavior				
Accessibility	Obtained at provider first time, then by self	Obtained at provider first time, then by self	Obtained at provider first time, then by self	Obtained at provider first time, then by self
Use during intercourse	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wear patterns	Continuous with break for cleaning	Continuous with break for cleaning	Continuous with break for cleaning	Discontinuous (would not wear during menses)
Cleaning	Little privacy	Adequate privacy	Adequate privacy	Adequate privacy
Disposal	Trash	Trash	Trash	Trash

Conclusions

Low-income women in Delhi, India are:

- Willing to try vaginal rings.
- Not concerned about wearing a ring during sex.
- Keenly interested in dual protection (prevention of pregnancy and infections).
- Indifferent about color of the ring when the device is new.
- Emphatic about being told ahead of time that the device may change color due to staining from menstrual blood.
- Comfortable with thinner rings; willing to try thicker rings after becoming familiar.
- In favor of starting with a one-month ring; willing to transition to longer-term ring after gaining experience.
- Interested in accessing rings for the first time at a clinic/provider, with the goal of managing ring resupply independent of a facility.

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