

'Dry-Sex' Practice Harms Zambian Women

By Dorcas Chileshe

Health experts and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in Zambia have expressed concern over the prevalence of dry-sex practice among women. This involves inserting herbs in the vagina to absorb the natural lubricants, making it dry and tight during intercourse. Some women add herbs to their porridge or tea to achieve the same effect. It is estimated that 60 percent of married women in Zambia practice dry sex but the figure could be higher, as many women keep it a secret.

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Medical experts say the practice increases the risk of transmitting HIV/AIDS, because of the bruises or small cuts that occur in the vagina as a result of friction during intercourse without natural lubricants.

Jenny Nyirenda, a reproductive-health expert at the Central Board of Health in Lusaka, the Zambian capital, adds that the practice is also increasing the number of cervical cancer cases in the country. “Women insert all sort of herbs, which are not even properly cleaned, and these cause serious infections in the vagina and uterus which in the majority of cases result in cancer.”

Community Youth Concern (CYC), an NGO that promotes youth and family welfare within communities, has set up a vigorous campaign to discourage dry-sex practice. Its executive director, Monica Shinkanga, comments, “We have a lot of educated women trekking to traditional doctors in shanty compounds to buy such herbs

alongside uneducated women, so where are we going to find role models?” She says some women are refusing to listen to the gender advocates who are touring the country, campaigning against dry sex, because they are suspected of having a double discourse. “How can you convince women to stop practising dry sex when they see you yourself buying the herbs?”

Targeting the Tradition Makers

The CYC has now decided to target traditional counsellors, popularly known as *alangizi*, primarily because they give counselling during initiation and weddings ceremonies. “We have decided to target these people because they are the agents of behavioural change in the communities,” says Shinkanga.

She says people getting married treat the counsellor’s advice as sacred and feel compelled to do whatever they are instructed, because they believe that the *alangizi* inherit their wisdom from their ancestors. Tradition rules

that the woman should always give her husband sexual pleasure.

CYC held its first sensitisation workshop a few months ago. The traditional counsellors who attended have promised to stop teaching people who are getting married to practice dry sex and instead to inform them of its dangers. Despite these efforts, there has been considerable public resentment towards the campaign against dry sex.

Vivian Mulenga, a 30-year-old housewife in Lusaka, says many Zambian men have been taught that sex is best when the woman's vagina is dry and tight like a virgin's. She believes that it is men who determine the sexual lives of most women. Some women who have attempted to abandon dry sex have been beaten and threatened with divorce. "In our culture, it is a cause for shame to be divorced because you cannot satisfy your husband sexually."

Erlinda Banda, a university student, says women should not embrace harmful traditional practices in the name of upholding the culture. "Of course it is important to preserve our culture, but should women risk getting cervical cancer just because tradition requires them to use herbs to please men sexually?"

"Some men demand dry sex simply because they have heard others talking about it highly in bars and sports clubs," says Rodwell Chalima,

a Lusaka resident. But, he adds, "there is nothing pleasant about dry sex because both the man and woman feel pain and they experience cuts, through which HIV infection can easily occur."

A lot of people who practice dry sex are failing to use condoms successfully because of the friction, which can lead to breaking of the condom. Organisations like CYC will only make a breakthrough in their campaign if they start educating men about the dangers of the practice.

Other people have suggested that CYC should start targeting young men, instead of those who have already been brainwashed in the belief that dry sex is best. "It is difficult to change people who have deeply rooted cultural beliefs, and the only hope lies in those who are not yet contaminated," says one young man.

CYC believes that dry sex may soon be a thing of the past, if the government, NGOs and churches take a positive approach towards eradicating the practice.

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