**March 28, 2011**

**Washed, dried, and re-used: loving through thick and thin**

By JOY WANJA jwanja@ke.nationmedia.com and BONIFACE MWANGI mwangib@ke.nationmedia.com

Girls giggled shyly. Men squirmed in their seats. Teenage children smiled mischievously.

The fellow on television was making a grave but somehow quizzical announcement: The Republic of Kenya had run out of condoms.

Statistics were trotted out and worrying scenarios painted.

One television station even aired footage of people washing condoms in Isiolo for recycling. Never mind that the national HIV/Aids prevalence rate stands at 6.3 per cent.

Welcome to Kenya’s bizarre condom culture.

In Nyeri’s Witemere slums, where the arrival of a consignment of government condoms was greeted with jubilation last week, a young man, Jibril, told our reporter he made a small fortune selling condoms from King’ong’o Prison’s voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) centre.

He would just drop there for “counselling” and voila, leave with the merchandise. And there is always a ready market.

“People here cannot afford the flavoured or other hyped-up types of condoms,” he says, explaining why the shortage is a business opportunity.

On Wednesday last week his stock was down to four sheaths. Then he had a brainwave. Why not lease them and make money over and over? “I leased them to people I know… mostly women,” he says.

“We have to take all the measures we can because we have to protect ourselves from HIV/Aids and other venereal diseases.

“At the same time, we have to feed our children,” says Tabitha, a mother of two. She admitted that she was recycling her only female condom since the shortage hit the town.

“We doubled our price to Sh300 after we started experiencing a shortage of customers,” a commercial sex worker who identified herself only as Wangechi told us in her dimly-lit shack.

In Witemere, 60 per cent of the habitants are single parents, while 30 per cent are married.

The commercial sex workers we interviewed admitted they were using polythene bags as condoms although they were aware of the possibility of contracting diseases or unwanted pregnancies.

A number of them said they had fallen pregnant, while most feared disclosing their health status. To the women here, abortion is as common as the poverty that surrounds them.

“When the desperate women here conceive accidentally, they are left with no choice but to either abort or give birth and sell the children for Sh30,000 to wealthy barren women who visit the slum occasionally,” says a gaunt-looking Wacuka, who recently aborted after the only condom she had burst during intercourse.

Community health worker Jane Kagure expresses concern that there will be increased cases of HIV infection if the government does not move quickly to remedy the situation.

She claims that some health workers are hoarding condoms while others are selling them secretly.

In Nairobi, Ms Grace Kamau, a programme officer at Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme, says the shortage has prompted commercial sex workers to engage in risky behaviour that could increase chances of HIV infection.

“Many sex workers have resorted to unprotected sex rather than risk having their families going hungry,” she said.

But as the government runs out of subsidised condoms for free distribution to the public, the female condom, although almost five times more expensive, has become popular.

“Most of them have switched to using female condoms. Although it is expensive, they can use it with multiple partners and later wash it,” she explains.

The distribution rate has also decreased in the past month and the organisation is looking forward to partnering with donors that can donate the condoms.

“Previously, we distributed 7,200 condoms a day, but since the shortage we only manage 1,700, which is a quarter of our normal daily distribution. We even go for two weeks without giving out any condom.”

The condom dispenser in public entertainment places is also proving to be unpopular. The campaign was started by the government in 2009 in a programme that introduced condom dispensers in strategic places such as pubs, lodgings, and clinics.

But the campaign has failed in some pubs and lodgings because people are a bit embarrassed.

“Even at my local kiosk, I am embarrassed to ask for a pack, so I end up buying bread or pegs when I find a neighbour at the shop,” says a young man who did not wish to be named because he wanted to keep his sex life private.

“Some eyes are judgmental, yet we are only protecting ourselves.”

Bar owners were also said to be hoarding the free government condoms in order to force patrons to buy the commercial ones, which are almost twice as expensive.

Public Health director Shahnaaz Sharif says the shortage indicates that the January consignment of 19 million condoms lasted only six weeks. A new consignment is expected on April 10.

This, however, is an emergency supply of 45 million condoms in response to an increased use from 8 million a month last year to 20 million currently.

Two years ago, Kenya experienced a surge in condom use that was largely attributed to higher condom acceptance among unmarried people and the use of commercial sex workers’ networks for distribution.

About 1.45 million people are living with HIV and Aids in Kenya. In December last year, Teso North residents in Amagoro complained about acute shortage of condoms in the area.

Other areas that have suffered scarcity include Nyeri, Thika, Isiolo, Mombasa, and parts of Nairobi. Statistics show that commercial sex workers and their clients account for 14.2 per cent new sexually transmitted infections.

Drug users are responsible for 3.8 per cent of the infections while men who have sex with other men account for 15.2 per cent.

Heterosexual couples in steady relationships account for 44.1 per cent of new infections, compared to 20.2 per cent among people in casual relationships.

advertisement

Advertisement

Most Popular

 [1 News FULL SPEECH: State of the Nation address](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/State-of-the-Nation-address-by-President-Kenyatta/-/1056/2259718/-/ifkdlnz/-/index.html)

 [2 Politics Bensouda seeks private hearing](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/Bensouda-seeks-private-hearing-/-/1064/2259124/-/4q5kno/-/index.html)

 [3 Showbiz Eric Omondi pulls prank on fans with Lupita look-alike](http://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/showbiz/-Lupita-look-alike/-/1950810/2257194/-/uhqg59/-/index.html)

 [4 Politics Women leaders threaten to strip over MP’s remark](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/Women-leaders-threaten-to-strip-over-MP-s-remark/-/1064/2259858/-/idmrv0/-/index.html)

 [5 News Baby smashed to death on floor](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Baby-smashed-to-death-on-floor/-/1056/2257658/-/14j2l65/-/index.html)

 [6 News Security heightened over car bomb threat](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Security-heightened-over-car-bomb-threat/-/1056/2259424/-/928e06/-/index.html)

 [7 Video Mzee Kipaika hosts Uhuru, Ruto for lunch in Kajiado](http://www.nation.co.ke/video/-/1951480/2259600/-/f8m7oy/-/index.html)

 [8 World Obama agents sent home from Europe for boozing](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/world/US-Secret-Service-Agents-Amsterdam-Drunkenness/-/1068/2259224/-/och1cf/-/index.html)

 [9 Kilifi Baby mauled to death by dogs in Kilifi](http://www.nation.co.ke/counties/Kilifi/Baby-mauled-to-death-by-dogs-in-Kilifi/-/1183282/2259758/-/11lpniqz/-/index.html)

Advertisement

Most Commented

 [1Homosexuality a serious problem as terrorism, says Duale](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/Homosexuality-a-serious-problem-as-terrorism--says-Duale/-/1064/2258336/-/kgxersz/-/index.html)

 [2Uhuru Kenyatta seeks US help to fight terrorism](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Uhuru-Kenyatta-seeks-US-help-to-fight-terrorism/-/1056/2257000/-/enj23bz/-/index.html)

 [3US centre defends Raila invitation as 'badge of honour'](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/-/1056/2253852/-/14dlrqn/-/index.html)

 [4Thugs turn luxury homes into tombs - Business - nation.co.ke](http://www.nation.co.ke/business/Thugs-turn-luxury-homes-into-tombs/-/996/2252774/-/vmsaxi/-/index.html)

 [5Gunmen kill two in attack on Kenyan church: police](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Likoni-Church-Attack-Mombasa/-/1056/2254740/-/xqeh0pz/-/index.html)

 [6Seven days to public transport crisis](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Seven-days-to-public-transport-crisis/-/1056/2257724/-/q3j4y5/-/index.html)

 [7Kenyans in the US to be issued with IDs: Embassy](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Kenyans-in-the-US-to-be-issued-with-IDs-Embassy/-/1056/2253446/-/v907ne/-/index.html)

 [8Daily Nation: Living - Breaking News, Kenya, Africa, Politics, Business, Sports, Blogs, Photos, Videos](http://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/Living/-/1218/2257996/-/qdp0xl/-/index.html)

 [9New law allowing polygamy passed - Politics - nation.co.ke](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/Marriage-Bill-Amendments-Polygamy-MPs-National-Assembly/-/1064/2252204/-/s7b8trz/-/index.html)

 [10Mother of son with bullet in head died shielding him](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Mother-of-son-with-bullet-in-head-died-shielding-him/-/1056/2256444/-/2l0t01z/-/index.html)

[](http://www.nation.co.ke/photo/-/1951220/2251216/-/c04lut/-/index.html)

**Photo gallery**

[**Search for missing Malaysian plane**](http://www.nation.co.ke/photo/-/1951220/2251216/-/c04lut/-/index.html)