Despite being designed for autonomous use, research suggests that partner approval is often desired or culturally preferred in women's microbicide use. Microbicide study participants have described many ways product use affects relationship dynamics, from improving sexual pleasure to increasing exposure to social harms (SH), including exacerbating intimate partner violence (IPV). While a continuum of male partner involvement, starting with women's decisions to disclose, have been previously examined (see Fig 1), an in-depth understanding of the role of conflict and violence has not been explored to date.

FIGURE 1. Continuum of MP involvement in microbicide use

As the dapivirine ring proceeds closer to licensure, this knowledge, which is critical to supporting women's agency to use microbicides safely and effectively, is a priority.

CONFlict AND vIOLENCE

Themes of mistrust and jealousy underpinned descriptions of conflict, as did couples' limited ability to discuss challenging issues.

- Disagreements around finances, alcohol use, and going out with friends was fueled through controlling behaviors by both partners such as tracking each others' whereabouts.
- Sexual negotiation proved difficult. Only two women were sexually 'in control'. Men reported sexual compromise, while women reported sex on men's schedules.
- Violence was common. Half of women with non-supportive partners reported experiencing physical violence and a third of men reported perpetrating IPV.

PARTNERS AND MICROBICIDE USE

ASPIRE participation and ring use did not present a major source of disagreement for many, however, both men and women highlighted mistrust aligned with ring use.

STRATEGIES FOR SAFE MICROBICIDE USE

Women used selective disclosure, ring removal around partners, changes in sexual behavior, as well as clinical staff intervention to safely use the ring. Additional counseling on relationship communication was desired.

FINDINGS

Findings suggest several barriers and opportunities for microbicide use in contexts where some sexual relationships are characterized by control and violence.

- The use of microbicides in sexual partnerships may offer opportunities for women and men to more openly discuss both emotional and physical aspects of their relationships;
- Acceptance of male control, sexual coercion, and violence among this population remains an issue;
- Open communication and conflict negotiation skills are critical for empowering women to navigate female-initiated HIV prevention use and encouraging healthy and safe relationships.

Findings have informed the development of a complementary community- and clinic-based intervention to be piloted in the HOPE Open Label Extension Study.

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