



## SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF STUDENTS ABOUT THE FEMALE CONDOM

### REPRESENTAÇÕES SOCIAIS DE DISCENTES SOBRE O PRESERVATIVO FEMININO

### REPRESENTACIONES SOCIALES DE DISCENTES SOBRE EL PRESERVATIVO FEMENINO

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#### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to identify the social representations of public school students about the female condom. **Method:** a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive study supported by the Theory of Social Representations, with 94 high school students from public schools, the Free Speech Association technique was used with the term "female condom". Data analysis was done through the IRAMUTEQ textual analysis software that originated a figure of similarities and the word cloud. **Results:** the students represented the female condom as a possibility of "safe sex" and an important technology that favors autonomy, prevention, protection from sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancy, but lack of familiarity with the method and relations of gender identified as factors that make it difficult to use. **Conclusion:** it was found that the female condom is important for 'prevention of diseases and protection against pregnancy', this implies in the practical theoretical process about the importance of health education and increase of female condom adherence in sexual relations. **Descriptors:** Students; Female Condoms; Sexuality; Women's Health; Social theory; Health Education.

#### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** identificar as representações sociais de discentes de escolas públicas sobre o preservativo feminino. **Método:** trata-se de estudo qualitativo, exploratório e descritivo, apoiado na Teoria das Representações Sociais, com 94 estudantes do ensino médio de escolas públicas, utilizou-se a Técnica de Associação Livre de Palavras com o termo indutor "preservativo feminino", a análise dos dados deu-se por meio do *software* de análise textual IRAMUTEQ que originou uma figura de similitudes e a nuvem de palavras. **Resultados:** as discentes representaram o preservativo feminino como possibilidade de "sexo seguro" e importante tecnologia que favorece a autonomia, a prevenção, a proteção de infecções sexualmente transmissíveis e da gravidez não planejada, mas a ausência de familiaridade com o método e as relações de gênero foram identificadas como fatores que dificultam a utilização. **Conclusão:** constatou-se que o preservativo feminino é importante para 'prevenção de doenças e proteção contra a gravidez', isso implica no processo teórico prático acerca da importância da educação em saúde e aumento da adesão do preservativo feminino nas relações sexuais. **Descritores:** Estudantes; Preservativo Feminino; Sexualidade; Saúde da Mulher; Teoria Social; Educação em Saúde.

#### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** identificar las representaciones sociales de los discentes de escuelas públicas sobre el preservativo femenino. **Método:** se trata de un estudio cualitativo, exploratorio y descriptivo, apoyado en la Teoría de las Representaciones Sociales, con 94 estudiantes de la enseñanza media de escuelas públicas, se utilizó la Técnica de Asociación Libre de Palabras con el término inductor "preservativo femenino", el análisis de los datos se dio a través del *software* de análisis textual IRAMUTEQ que originó una figura de similitudes y la nube de palabras. **Resultados:** los discentes representaron el preservativo femenino como posibilidad de "sexo seguro" e importante tecnología que favorece la autonomía, la prevención, la protección de infecciones sexualmente transmisibles y del embarazo no planificado, pero la ausencia de familiaridad con el método y las relaciones de género fueron identificadas como factores que dificultan la utilización. **Conclusión:** se constató que el preservativo femenino es importante para la prevención de enfermedades y protección contra el embarazo, lo que implica en el proceso teórico práctico acerca de la importancia de la educación en salud y aumento de la adhesión del preservativo femenino en las relaciones sexuales. **Descriptor:** Estudiantes; Preservativo Femenino; La sexualidad; Salud de la Mujer; Teoría Social; Educación en Salud.

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INTRODUCTION

In terms of the number of cases of people living with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in the female population, there are differences in gender relations, especially in relation to sexual practice and conception. The growing phenomenon of HIV feminization is associated with the non-recognition of women's belonging, to the risk of contracting the virus that, at the beginning of the epidemic, it was attributed to groups with socially reprehensible practices / behaviors.<sup>1</sup>

Brazilian adolescents are exposed to Sexually Transmissible Infections (STIs) and the risks of abortion made underground, among other factors, due to the irregular use or non-use of preventive methods, including the female condom. Among young people aged 13 to 19 years, the number of AIDS cases has been higher among girls and, in this context, black women constitute a group of the population where HIV is most advanced when considering the race / gender indicator. Since the end of the last century, the segments most affected by HIV have been characterized as: women, young, heterosexual and with low financial income.<sup>2</sup>

The female condom was approved by the National Agency of Sanitary Surveillance (ANVISA) in 1997 for commercialization, and in 2000 the Ministry of Health passed the first batch for the state health secretariats to offer it to women in situations risks. The device pretends to be a facilitator in the achievement of the sexual autonomy of the woman enabling her to discuss with her partner about the practice of "safe sex".<sup>3</sup>

The female condom is recommended as a contraceptive method of the barrier type, which prevents STIs, especially HIV, made of polyurethane and has efficacy when introduced into the vaginal introitus. It has been considered as reliable as the male condom and its use means freedom of choice by facilitating the exercise of female sexual autonomy and, in addition, providing greater knowledge of women in relation to their body.<sup>4</sup>

It is known that autonomy is part of sexuality, which is one of the areas that need to be considered, because it permeates all times and spaces, constitutes identities reflecting itself in the health-disease process. Sexual health is defined as the ability of women and men to enjoy and express their sexuality in a positive, informed and safe manner, without risk of sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, coercion and violence.<sup>5</sup>

It is perceived that social representations are born of the continuity between the outer universe and the individual, from the individual/collective interrelations, as a result of the understanding of phenomena, people and objects in society and of the inherent power of the human being to create objects, events, attitudes and representative behaviors. Through the Theory of Social Representations (TSR) we obtain the meanings constructed by the students, through messages mediated by language, socially established and anchored in the context of the individual who emits them.<sup>6</sup>

The TSR promotes the consensual analytical perception of something popular that enters the conviviality of women as the female condom. This research will contribute to highlight the importance of health education and the need for adequate guidance on the use of the female condom, especially in the population of young women.

OBJECTIVE

- To identify the social representations of public school students about the female condom.

METHOD

It is a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive study, anchored in the Theory of Social Representations. Social representations are constructed in the exchange of popular knowledge in which one can construct a vision about something that was already known with a certain position or modify it through the social experience.<sup>7</sup> The TSR provided the necessary deepening to the object in study, that is, to identify the social representations of students about the female condom.

As participants in the study, 94 students from three public schools in the municipality of Senhor do Bonfim - Bahia - Brazil, where there were high school graduation classes, were enrolled. The following inclusion criteria were adhered to: self-declaration of women, regularly enrolled and attending the state public school in the urban zone; to be students of the third year of the middle level, in the night shift, with age greater than 18 and less than 29 years. Students from schools located in the rural area of the municipality were excluded.

An instrument composed of sociodemographic data and the Free Words Association Technique (FWAT) was used. To validate the stimulus to be used in the FWAT, it was necessary to perform a pilot test, which was carried out in a school, following the

same inclusion criteria of the study, in the city of Juazeiro - Bahia - Brazil. The expected result was confirmed by starting the data collection, which occurred in November and December 2017.

The hierarchical ordering of the evocations generated by the term "female condom" was ordered in order of importance (from one to five). The data collection took place in the following way: in each of the classrooms, with the presence of all the students of the class, sharing the same space and at the same time, the instrument was distributed individually, thus guaranteeing the anonymity of the participants.

The data was analyzed through the software of textual analysis called the Interface of Routles Analyzes Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires (IRAMUTEQ), which makes possible different types of analysis, from the simpler ones, such as basic lexicography (calculation of frequency of words), to multivariate analyzes that include the descending hierarchical classification and the similarity analysis.<sup>8</sup> The evocations were processed based on the lexical analysis, a technique adopted regularly by researchers of the social representations that allows to detect the co-occurrences between the words showing the link between the evocations and helping to identify the representation structure. The production of the tree of similitude and the cloud of words was chosen.

The study was submitted to the Human Research Ethics Committee of the State University of Bahia (UNEB), and was approved under the CAAE number 65439317.3.0000.0057. Consideration was given to ensuring the ethical and legal principles governing research recommended by Resolution n. 466/2012, the National Health Council (NHC), the Ministry of Health.

RESULTS

It was found, in the sociodemographic characterization, that of the 94 female self-declared students, 60.6% of them were between 18 and 24 years old, and 36.1% were older than 25 years. As for religion, 58.5% were Catholic; 25.5%, evangelicals and 11.7% said they had no religion; 85.1% self-declared themselves black and, in relation to marital status, 70.2% self-affirmed single and 25.5% married; 55.3% reported having started sexual life after completing 16 years and 27.6%, before the age of 16; 11.7% said they had not yet had their first sexual experience and about 70% of the participants stated that in one year they had between one and two partners.

With respect to the data derived from the FWAT, from the term female condom, figure 1 is the graph resulting from the processing using the software IRAMUTEQ - tree of similarities.

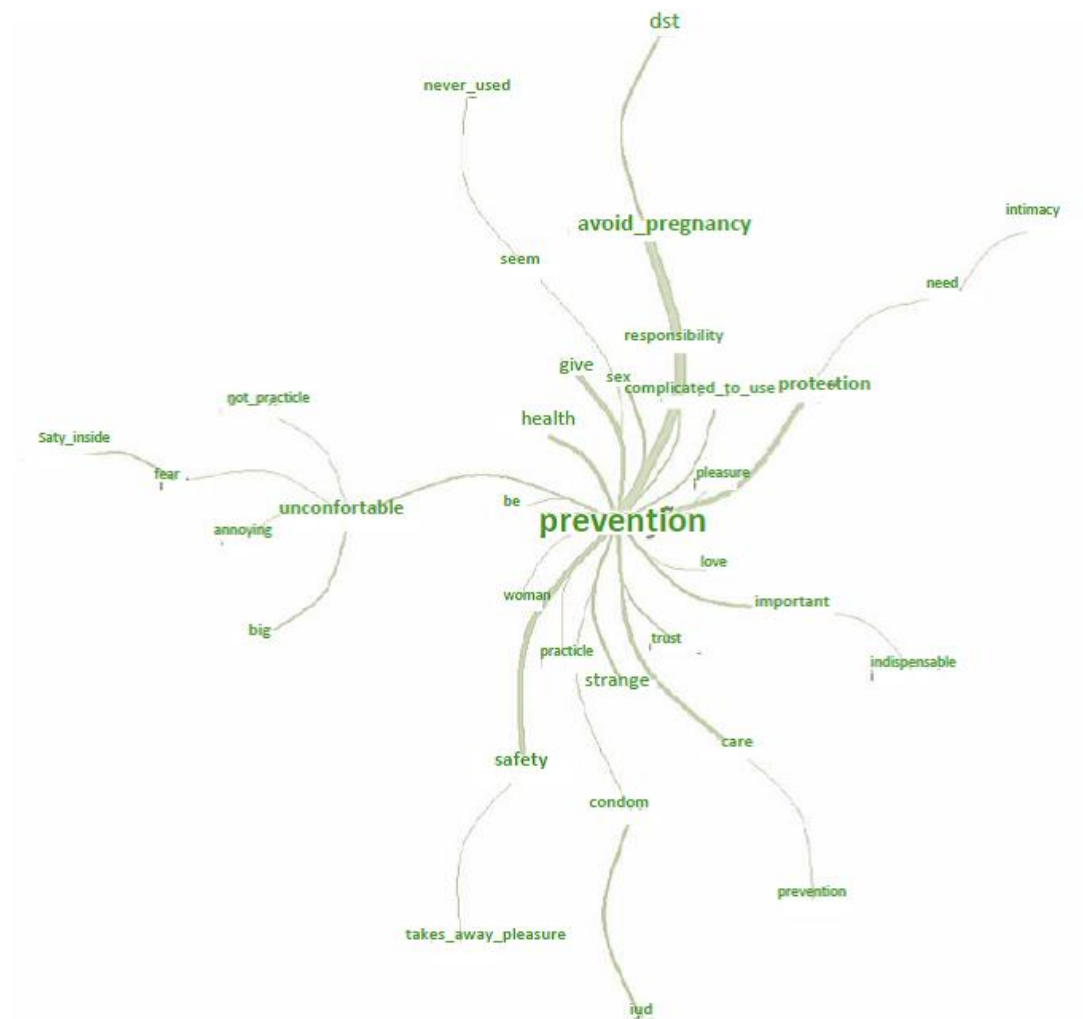


Figure 1. Tree of similarities to the term inducer "female condom". Senhor do Bonfim (BA), Brazil, 2018.

The cloud of words resulted from the analysis of data by IRAMUTEQ (Figure 2) and is presented as a graphic element of confirmation

of the representations evidenced in the tree of similarities.



Figure 2. Cloud of words to the term inducer "female condom". Senhor do Bonfim (BA), Brazil, 2018.

## DISCUSSION

It is observed in the tree of similarities, figure 1, the formation of two blocks or ramifications composed by the terms "prevention and uncomfortable". The term "prevention" centralizes the block with the largest connections and the term "uncomfortable", with the least number of associated words. To indicate a certain similarity to the semantics between the words

"prevention / protection" and in a methodological proposal to give greater visibility to the idea of continuity / extension, it was verified that the two summed terms were evoked 90 times among the 94 participants of this research, making a total of 95.7%.

In the tree of similarities, a representation centered on the functionality attributed to the technology of the device and anchored in a reified knowledge disseminated by the



Brazilian government, in order to massify its use driven by the public policies of HIV / AIDS prevention and by the pharmaceutical industry.<sup>9</sup> The study carried out in Brazil pointed out that, especially when talking about sexually transmitted infection, HIV / AIDS and unplanned pregnancy, the female condom is evidenced as a method (technology) that favors women's autonomy, especially in that the partner refuses to use other methods.<sup>10</sup>

The term "prevention", in Figure 1, is associated with the term "avoidance", confirming that, historically and culturally, avoiding pregnancy is a burden on women. The terms "security", "protection", "responsibility" and "trust" have formed the central block (prevention) and support the idea that the female condom be understood as a "protection / prevention" device to ensure health and of well-being, as well as the decision-making power over women's bodies.

In the prevention block, the terms "complicated to use", "strange" and "take pleasure" are also considered, which are in opposition to the focus of the functionality of the condom when revealing the difficulties perceived by the students as to its use. For condom use, it is necessary to manipulate the intimate region and to know it, and the physical presence of the condom can cause changes in the appearance of the female genital region. Thus, such "strangeness" can be associated with the absence or reduction of the libido in the partner, which runs away from the historically constructed feminine role of being an object of desire and pleasure, and its use or negotiation can lead to mistrust related to female/male.<sup>4,3</sup>

The female condom is rarely used by women, as revealed by the national survey conducted in 2011, where an expressive percentage of the participants knew the female condom (80.6%) and claimed to have an active sexual life. In contrast, in that study, only 8.4% used it as a method.<sup>11</sup>

A study conducted by the Federal University of Ceará, with the participation of 35 women aged 18 to 54 years, of those 27 (77.1%) women associated the use of the female condom to STD prevention and pregnancy unplanned, but only two women (5.7%) claimed to have autonomy to use the female condom when the man refused to use the condom. In this and another study, the women pointed out that the non-use of the female condom is associated with the non-acceptance of the partner and the difficulty of negotiating with them.<sup>12,13</sup>

The term "uncomfortable" linked to the words "big", "annoying", "not practical" and "fear" is centered in the second block, formed in figure 1, which reinforces the difficulties that women face or think with the use of the female condom. The terms that support the second block contradict the main ideas exposed in the first block or can point to the emergence of a subgroup that distances itself from the others because it presents a differentiated social representation.<sup>14</sup> In revealing the rejection of some women against the characteristics of the method (large and for internal use) or their lack of familiarity with the object, it is possible to infer the existence of failures in sexual health education in schools.

Some of the evocations in block two of the tree of similarities denote the lack of knowledge of functional aspects of the female condom, since the external border, possibly considered by the students as "large", is useful to cover the part of the vulva, offering greater effectiveness in preventing STI compared to the male condom, which protects only the penile body and mucosa of the vaginal canal. The outer edge of the condom can even increase female pleasure by exciting the clitoris during intercourse. The material is sturdy, highly oiled and offers comfortable movements with less risk for disruption compared to male condom.<sup>12,15</sup>

The stimulation to the adhesion to the female condom has been developed in health units and sexual and reproductive health actions. However, it is still perceived that the knowledge of some women regarding the female condom reveals a superficial technical information about the method, besides the issuance of value judgment, evidencing that there was previously no opportunity to know, to touch the object or even of using it.<sup>14,16</sup> These aspects can generate strangeness and discomfort in the handling of the method, fear of accomplishing something that was not previously attributed to it or the breakdown of the barrier of gender dominance.<sup>17</sup>

The contents that stand out in the word cloud of figure 2 are evident. On the one hand, the positioning of the participants in relation to the female condom as a preventive device - "pregnancy avoidance", "protection", "safety", and "Cheers". On the other hand, they express feelings and judgments that pervade the group of belonging, judging it uncomfortable, strange, big and complicated to use.

It is important to emphasize the importance of the term "prevention", in figure 2, that this representational content, for

young female students, may make it possible, in the context of combating STI / HIV / AIDS and unwanted pregnancies, access to effective technology.<sup>18</sup>

It is verified, however, that students from public schools in São Paulo, between 14 and 19 years old, of both sexes, report that the protective methods are limited to the use of the male condom. The adolescents from the study revealed that girls do not know the female condom, use the morning-after pill as a method to prevent pregnancy, have unprotected sex and are vulnerable to STIs.<sup>5</sup>

The lack of knowledge and difficult access to the method, fear and resistance of the majority of adolescents and young people indicates that health education, through topics such as sexuality, should be inserted early in the school environment, before even of the sexual practice (first sexual relation), considering the relevant social role of the school in opportuning decision-making processes and conscious choices, thus providing possibilities for the sexuality experience in a safe and healthy way.

The main limitations of the study are the fact that the research did not cover the level of elementary education, which could have increased the social representation of the female condom. The choice of students over the age of 18 met with the ethical demands of engaging adolescents in research that addresses issues related to sexuality. The fragility of studies involving young students about the theme strengthened the need to build this research, which was used by a significant number of students (94) compared to the universe available in the field.

## CONCLUSION

It has been identified that the female condom is important for 'disease prevention and protection against pregnancy'. This implies in the practical theoretical process of work of the health professionals, especially the nurse, about the importance of health education in the school environment and research on this subject with groups of women who use the condom. The study aims to contribute to the increase of female condom adherence in sexual relations, as opposed to its preventive functionality, and knowledge of this technology to students, adolescents and young people in public schools.

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