

Prevention Options for Women

EMPOWER

HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are among the most critical public health issues facing developing countries today. Increasingly, women need expanded and improved options for protecting themselves against both HIV/STIs and unwanted pregnancy.

EMPOWER is PATH's product-based program to expand women's prevention options. The five-year EMPOWER program focuses on a family of female-initiated technologies—including cervical or intravaginal barriers, female condoms, and topical microbicides—that can help women protect themselves against disease and unwanted pregnancy. In addition, EMPOWER fosters collaboration among researchers, clinicians, manufacturers, and developing-country programs working to advance these options.

Goals

EMPOWER is working to reduce the impact of HIV and related risks by increasing the range and quality of women's choices of prevention methods. Specific goals of the EMPOWER program include:

- **Improving existing barrier devices** by making them easier to use, more comfortable, and less expensive.
- **Accelerating the development** of new products by assessing existing products, facilitating product formulation and production, and validating product designs through user evaluation.
- **Introducing new technologies** by collaborating with partners in developing countries and the private sector, and developing appropriate training and introduction materials.

Strategies

EMPOWER builds upon PATH's experience developing health products for users in developing countries and low-resource settings. PATH's user-driven product-development approach is the foundation for ensuring that product attributes meet women's needs. Collaboration and strategic linkages with groups involved in related product development and evaluation activities—for example, the Global Campaign for Microbicides—will enable EMPOWER to accelerate product development and ensure that the public-sector priorities of availability, access, and affordability are protected.

EMPOWER believes that vaginal and cervical barrier methods, which have not been significantly refined for more than 100 years, hold tremendous promise for women seeking to protect themselves against HIV, STIs, and unwanted pregnancy. The increased efficacy offered by using emerging microbicides with barrier methods, for example, could fuel a global introduction campaign that would have significant short- and mid-term impact. In addition to expanding prevention options themselves, EMPOWER is working to promote this family of products as a whole and, ultimately, to increase the support of providers and policy makers who can help ensure that women have access to the options they need.

Outcomes

EMPOWER is stimulating the innovation and exchange of information needed to develop appropriate, user-friendly methods of pregnancy and disease prevention for women. In addition to increasing knowledge of female-initiated barrier products in developing countries, EMPOWER anticipates that the five-year program will:

- advance an innovative intravaginal barrier device from prototype to pilot production;
- generate a decision and proof-of-concept for incorporating microbicides into barrier materials;
- identify microbicide candidates for product development;
- identify formulation and manufacturing options for a woman's condom and microbicide;
- develop and test product designs for an intravaginal barrier and a woman's condom;
- establish clinical evaluation sites in developing countries for barrier and condom evaluation;
- identify partners in key countries for marketing the intravaginal barrier; and
- develop and test relevant training and introduction materials.

Barrier methods and topical microbicides ultimately will benefit women, their families, and their communities. Through EMPOWER's efforts, policy makers, program planners, and women will be able to consider additional options that ensure women's reproductive health.

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About PATH

PATH is an international, nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the health and well-being of people living in the developing world and low-resource settings. Since 1977, PATH has managed more than 1,000 projects in 120 countries.

PATH champions the development, introduction, and adaptation of appropriate and innovative solutions to public health challenges. PATH places special emphasis on improving access to high-quality reproductive health technologies and services, and on preventing and reducing the impact of widespread communicable diseases.

For more information about PATH, please visit www.path.org.