



Safe sex and good sex are not mutually exclusive, yet many educational materials give this impression. At best, the conventional line seems to be that safer sex is a necessary evil – protect yourself or face the consequences. Anne Philpott reports on The Pleasure Project, an initiative which promotes safer sex by focusing on the prime motivators for actually having sex: desire and pleasure.

## Can Safe Sex be Good Sex? Mixing Pleasure

By Anne Philpott, The Pleasure Project

The Pleasure Project was born out of frustration. A frustration that we in the HIV prevention world do not talk about sex, desire and pleasure. A huge element of sex is missing in sexual health. I finally snapped, and decided to try and change this, when sitting in a session of an international AIDS conference, listening to a presentation and not even realizing that the presenter was talking about sexual intercourse. It could have been an airborne disease that was being discussed: the details of the sexual act described were so obscured in clinical language. Our own taboos about sexual and especially pleasure were impinging on our ability to discuss sexual realities, restricting our ability to work towards reducing HIV and other sexually transmitted disease transmission.

During this time, I was working to promote the female condom. In a wide variety of settings, women were “selling” the use of the female condom as a pleasure accessory and not a preventative measure against disease or pregnancy as a means to encourage men to use them. They would introduce the female condom in an entirely sex-positive fashion as a new sex toy or device, without mentioning disease or HIV. In Sri Lanka, women told me how they invited men to insert it to provide a ‘new thrill’ for the men. In Senegal women were promoting the female condom’s occasional noise as a turn on similar to that of the local sex “bine bine” beads. In Ghana, men were buying the female condom to masturbate with as this reminded them of the pleasurable “tickle” of their penis on the inner ring of the condom – and indeed in Zimbabwe a whole new word “ketecyenza” had entered the Shona vocabulary to describe this sensation. I felt that my traditional sexual

educational background promoting the condom as “good for you” was just not enough, not creative and indeed not as pleasure-focused as these people all over the world who were telling me these great condom marketing tips.

To add to these Feelings I attended a Sexual Liberation conference in London, for people working in the sex industry, owners of sex shops, porn and erotic film makers and people working to create sexual pleasure through their resources or selling sex. I spoke to many people there who were equally keen to include safer sex instructions with their materials or use condoms in their porn films. I also worked as a safer sex consultant for two erotic film makers, advising and informing them to include male and female condoms in their films. This worked well, the condom use was integral to the action and not simply included as a “health warning”. The pleasure industry, I found, was just as keen to learn more about safer sex as the safer sex industry was to learn more about pleasure. And so The Pleasure Project was born.

*The Pleasure Project:  
Because sex education is  
rarely sexy.  
And erotica is rarely safe.  
Putting the sexy back  
into safer sex.*

The Pleasure Project was launched at this year’s International AIDS conference in Bangkok, where it received a great reception, a huge audience and lots of media coverage. For the first time, an explicit erotic film was shown at an International AIDS conference. A range of fascinating speakers from around the globe spoke of their experiences including the use of the Karma Sutra as an educational tool, the promotion of water-based sexual lubricant in Asia, pleasuring women safely through erotic literature after a positive HIV diagnosis, turning young gay men onto safer sex through erotic literatures and selling condoms through erotic imagery in India.

Many people commented that this was the first time that they had seen any sessions that actually mentioned pleasure and desire at any HIV conference – a shocking omission for a disease extensively spread through pleasurable sexual contact.

### Pleasure Projects

#### Modern Loving – the first safer sex erotic video

Modern Loving is the first erotic instructional video for heterosexual couples that is entirely safe and features only safer sex. However, the video does not preach or promote itself as a health resource or sex educational



#### What is The Pleasure Project?

The Pleasure Project is an educational resource promoting safe sex to men and women.

*A single belief underpins our aims: we can have safer sex if we know how to have good sex.*

Our message is unique in the world of sexual education; it is positive, exciting, liberating and sexy. There's nothing revolutionary about this approach – all the evidence suggests that positive incentives are a far more effective change motivator – we're just starting from a position that is still rarely adopted in safer sex programming.

The Pleasure Project aims to build bridges between the pleasure/sex industry and the safer sex world by ensuring that erotic materials include discussions of safer sex, and that sexual health and training materials include pleasure as a key element. Many safer sex and HIV organizations avoid discussing sexual desire and enjoyment, while the pleasure industry avoids talking about safer sex, with few erotic films and resources featuring condom use and non-penetrative pleasurable sex as the norm. We want this to change. We want to provide sex education with the emphasis on 'sex', not 'education'. Sex is exciting, fun, and empowering. Our message should be too.

tool; this is a subtle element of its overall purpose – to turn its viewers on. The film is sexy and shows “real” couples having sex and is designed to be viewed to improve your sex life. The safer sex is a beautiful coincidence and a subliminal message – that safe sex is sexy. We don't talk about sexually transmitted infections or AIDS; instead we show safer sex as the norm and as a turn on. The Pleasure Project provided condom consultancy on set for the film to ensure that the sex was always safe but the film was still sexy.

#### Sexual Health Toolkit – in collaboration with CARE International

The Pleasure Project is currently designing a sexy sexual health toolkit in collaboration with Care International based on pilot work in Cambodia and Vietnam. This educational and training resource will enable sex educators and trainers to promote safer sex in a sex-positive way in their own settings and projects, thereby increasing safer sex and condom use through behaviour modification. This encourages people to change because they are keen to adopt behaviours, and not because they are avoiding a disease. This will be available in January 2005.

#### Global Pleasure Database

We are conducting interviews, a literature review and wide research to gather a global database of any work in the sexual health field that has utilised pleasure to motivate safer sex. This will take the form of listings and case studies of best practise, also available early 2005.

So far, the reception to The Pleasure Project has been almost universally welcoming. Sexual health professionals seem to realise that we need fresh approaches to tackling the ever-increasing AIDS epidemic. Motivating behaviour change towards a pleasurable experience seems

extraordinarily simple, we just don't see it in the same light when sex is involved because we have got so used to thinking of sex and disease in the same breath, and pleasure and sex as two separate entities.

**For more information, contact Anne Philpott on [info@the-pleasure-project.org](mailto:info@the-pleasure-project.org) or visit [www.the-pleasure-project.org](http://www.the-pleasure-project.org)**

## and Prevention