Here, I need to insert a bit of recently acquired knowledge: it takes so much more than access and education to cause a shift in cultural norms. While I suppose I have always been fully aware of this, I never realized what an incredible impact marketing (in this case social marketing) had on behavior change. I guess this is what happens when you work for the social marketing experts of the NGO world, eh? You learn. A lot.

As a soon-to-be public health professional, and a forever activist for health and social justice, I have gone through much of my adult life believing that if we just provided access and education, it would be enough (i.e.- all people need is access to condoms and a bit of education on how to use them, all people need is a latrine in their community and a run-down of how important it is to use it to stop the spread of disease, etc.). This, however, is not the case.

It takes much more to create this collective shift in consciousness; and it’s often not best approached at the individual level. Although one-on-one attempts at behavior change are effective to a degree, they are not nearly as efficient as larger scale approaches. Perfect example... Smoking back in the states. How did it become so socially unacceptable to smoke cigarettes? Public policy was a major contributor- combine the effect of smoking bans in public places with some seriously effective advertising campaigns, and you’ve got yourself one widely undesirable behavior.

The reader’s digest version is as follows: you need to, somehow, create widespread desire to change behavior, either by formulating a plan to make current behaviors unacceptable, or by making the adoption of new behaviors the hottest new thing going. By using standard marketing techniques (such as mass media) you create a channel through which these messages can be communicated, effectively, to the public. Let’s face it - the media (in some form) has infiltrated almost every corner of the planet. Even in the most poverty stricken nations, young people want, and wear, Nike. Marketing works, everywhere, as evidenced by this widespread demand... Liberia included.

Social marketing just puts a little spin on things. Instead of selling a brand of sneaker, we’re promoting a brand of condom. One of my current projects is to evaluate the effectiveness of some of our marketing messages. Obviously there is a ton of overlap between my research and the work of the social marketers on the team designed to make the consistent use of Star condoms desirable.... in the same way wearing Nike is desirable... striving to create changes in social norms... actively striving and having impact!