



CARIBBEAN CIVIL SOCIETY SHOWCASE SERIES

Showcasing projects and programmes supported by the CVC/COIN Vulnerabilised Groups Project and aiming to strengthen rights-based responses to HIV in the populations most vulnerable to HIV

Empowerment and Outreach:

A peer education project for transgender sex workers



Nairovi Castillo, COTRAVETD's President, presented to the Inter-American Commission at a hearing on Homicides of LGBT persons and impunity in the Americas. Photo: Fran Afonso

In the Dominican Republic, Empowerment and Outreach is operated by **La comunidad de Trans-Travestis Trabajadoras Sexuales Dominicana (COTRAVETD)** – “The Community of Trans-Transvestite Dominican Sex Workers”. Since 2004, COTRAVETD has been the only organisation in the country working to reduce stigma and discrimination and marginalisation of transgender and transvestites engaged in sex work.

CONTEXT

Globally, transgender women who engage in sex work are one of the populations most vulnerable to HIV and most in need of prevention, treatment and care. This is according to a global review of the HIV burden in transgender women conducted by John Hopkins School of Public Health, published in the Lancet's February 2013 edition¹. The study sampled ten low-income and middle-income countries, and found HIV prevalence in transgender women at nearly 18 percent. Overall prevalence was over 27 percent among transgender women engaging in sex work. The research highlights a major lack of HIV data for transgender populations worldwide. In the Dominican Republic, COIN's mobile clinic interventions have recorded over 60 percent prevalence of syphilis in transgender sex workers — a fair indication of unsafe sexual practices — but there have been no HIV seroprevalence studies to date.

Employment discrimination and lack of other income opportunities are the main reasons transgender women all over the world engage in sex work². In 2011, PANCAP/CVC-COIN³ surveyed 90 transgender and transvestite sex workers in Santo Domingo and Santiago and found the average age to be 22 years old. Many are coerced into their first sexual experience, and many start sex work at age 16. For a third, primary education is their highest level of education, and while two thirds start secondary school, only half of those actually finish.

In the Caribbean, hate crimes against transgender people are acted out with impunity across the region. In the Dominican Republic, transgender-led organisations have recorded 17 murders within their community since 2006. Only one case has been successfully prosecuted. Most transgender sex workers in Santo Domingo work on the streets, exposing them to coercion and violence from both the police and clients. Verbal abuse, threats, and physical violence are everyday realities for transgender women. PANCAP/CVC-COIN's studies found that 80 percent had been arrested or detained by the police and 36 percent had exchanged sexual favours with the police to avoid arrest. Nearly half had experienced violence at the hands of their clients.

Rejection and gossip at health services are major reasons that transgender sex workers fail to access healthcare. While many test regularly for HIV, their wider primary healthcare needs are often neglected because they rarely find physicians who take an interest in providing them with friendly and judgement free services. Over one third fails to go for routine check-ups and those who do go report constant discrimination from healthcare professionals. As a consequence, some transgendered women use unsafe practices such as self-injecting silicone or hormones as part of their feminisation process.

According to PANCAP/CVC-COIN's studies, transgender sex workers have an average of 10 sex partners a month, and some as many as 49. Most also have a stable or "trusted" partner, and as is the case for most people where strong feelings and love are involved, condom use is less consistent with regular partners. While most transgender sex workers know where to buy condoms and the importance of using them as part of their work, most have trouble negotiating condom use with sometimes violent partners or clients.

For most transgender sex workers, sex work generates their only income. Competition for work comes from their fellow transgender colleagues and biological female sex workers. PANCAP/CVC-COIN studies show that most do not trust their colleagues and fighting and violence is very common. This has made mobilising transgender sex workers especially difficult, even for transgender-led groups. Competition and fighting can also undermine prevention efforts as sex workers who engage in sex for survival often agree to unprotected sex as a way to undercut their colleagues.

PROJECT GOAL

Reduce harm and risk for HIV and STIs in transgender women sex workers in Santiago and Santo Domingo.

PROJECT COMPONENTS

Participation in CVC/COIN's Sexual Health training for peer educators reaching sex workers and gay, transgender and men who have sex with men

Peer education with a focus on empowerment, human rights education, and building solidarity and trust between transgender sex workers

Mobile clinic provided basic primary healthcare and STI, HIV testing

Referral to a clinic with a transgender health programme which includes primary care, hormone therapy, and transitioning counselling

Participants in CVC/COIN's training with media professionals

INITIAL RESULTS

- 8 peer educators trained and working in the field
- Nearly 1300 sex workers reached through peer education
- Increased demand for mobile health services
- Empowerment and advocacy skills building workshops

- Increased engagement with the media resulting in 12 television interviews
- Increased solidarity and support between transgender sex workers

CHALLENGES

In the course of their project, COTRAVETD found they were reaching many migrant, Haitian, transgender sex workers, and were shocked to see the levels of poverty and abuse experienced by their Haitian peers. They found their Haitian colleagues were triply marginalised due to their ethnic origin and nationality, gender identity and the stigma associated with their work. Without any trained Creole-speaking transgender peers the organisation was unable to provide interventions for the Haitian transgender sex workers.

COTRAVETD found that the mobile clinic was well received by clients for its ease of access and friendly services. Covering costs of a sustained mobile outreach programme is a challenge for small, short-term projects like this one.



CONTRAVETD's peer educators are committed transgender sex workers with skills to share with their colleagues.

Photo: Fran Afonso

THE WAY AHEAD

Perhaps no other population in the Caribbean is subject to as much discrimination and violence as transgender sex workers. Yet, like other sex workers in the region, transgender sex workers are finding ways to resist and mobilise. In November 2012, The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) heard representatives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) organisations across Latin America denounce state indifference to violence, police abuse and a culture of impunity. COTRAVETD's President, Nairovi Castillo, presented in the hearing and along with other organisations called for better mechanisms to prevent institutionalised violence towards LGBT people and better training of authorities on the rights of transgender people. Without these social and structural changes, HIV prevention programmes with transgender populations will continue to have limited impact.

At the same time, empowerment and educational programmes such as COTRAVETD's can go a long way to increasing transgender sex workers' access to healthcare and HIV prevention services.

COTRAVETD's solidarity-building work with transgender sex workers has been critical to reducing competition and fighting between sex workers, which can undermine empowerment and prevention efforts. The technical support from COIN built unprecedented capacity in COTRAVETD and helped position it to engage more with the media and

other stakeholders, including those that facilitated the hearing at the IACHR. These are important steps for increasing the visibility of Caribbean transgender people in spaces of decision-making and power.

Meanwhile, CVC/COIN-funded projects across the region are finding ways to reach migrant sex workers, whether female Dominican sex workers in Trinidad, or Haitian sex workers in the Dominican Republic. Based on its experiences in this project, COTRAVETD plans to tailor its outreach services to better reach Haitian transgender sex workers. In the longer term, greater regional collaboration is needed between Caribbean authorities to address the needs of migrant sex workers, not as a border control issue, but a human rights and public health issue.

1 Baral, S., Poteat, T., Stromdahl, S., Wirtz, A., Guadamuz, T., Beyrer, C (2013), *Worldwide burden of HIV in transgender women: a systematic review and meta-analysis*, *The Lancet Infect Diseases* 2013;13: 214–22, John Hopkins School of Public Health

2 Baral et al (2013)

3 PANCAP/CVC-COIN (2012) *Baseline Study on Commercial Sex Workers in Trinidad, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic*, PANCAP/CVC-COIN, Dominican Republic

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This series describes projects and programmes given technical and financial support by the CVC/COIN Vulnerabilised Groups Project, a sub-recipient of a Pan Caribbean Partnership against HIV and AIDS (PANCAP) grant provided by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Each report aims to highlight the contribution of Caribbean civil society organisations in responding to HIV and AIDS in vulnerable populations and presents promising programmes for scale-up by Caribbean states. For more information about CVC/COIN's Vulnerabilised Groups Project visit www.focusright.org