

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

Sex Workers for CHANGE:

Changing Health Attitudes through Networking, Group support and Empowerment: A project for migrant, Hispanic sex workers



Every year thousands of women from lower-income Caribbean islands brave xenophobic attitudes and difficult working conditions in the sex industry when they migrate to support their families and children at home through sex work. Photo: Jason Tanner

In Trinidad, Sex Workers for CHANGE is operated by The Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago (FPATT). FPATT is a 56 year old not-for-profit organisation which aims to provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights services to all who need them in Trinidad and Tobago. It is a member of the International Planned Parenthood Federation which operates in 170 countries worldwide.

CONTEXT

Thousands of women from lower-income Caribbean islands migrate every year in search of ways to support their families and children and to move out of poverty. Throughout the Caribbean, migrant sex workers are doubly stigmatised in their host countries, due to the work they do and xenophobic attitudes towards economic migrants¹.

In Trinidad, sex workers come to work from all over the Caribbean and beyond. When PANCAP/CVC-COIN² surveyed 60 migrant, female, Hispanic sex workers in 2011, there were equal numbers of Dominicans, Venezuelans and Columbians. Of those surveyed, nearly half had lived in Trinidad from four months to one year, nearly one-fourth had lived there for over a year, and the remainder had migrated within the last three months. Education levels among the women were low; less than 30 percent had completed primary education, and while many had started secondary school only 20 percent had finished.

Knowledge of HIV is poor among Hispanic sex workers in Trinidad. PANCAP/CVC-COIN found that although most of the women knew that HIV is transmitted sexually, three fourths believed HIV could be spread by mosquitoes. 70 percent had not received an HIV talk from any agency in the 6 months prior to the survey. Two thirds did not consistently use condoms with their regular partners. With casual partners, the women were much likelier to use condoms consistently, but a significant number (35 percent) said they did not use condoms all the time. Just under half of the women surveyed had experienced condom breakage. Only 27 percent had ever been taught how to put on a condom correctly. None of the participants in the survey had ever used a female condom.

Access to healthcare is a major problem for Hispanic sex workers in Trinidad. Half of the women surveyed by PANCAP/CVC-COIN indicated it was difficult to access existing health care services (without taking into account the cost). Less than 10 percent knew where to go for an HIV-related service, and half did not have routine primary healthcare check-ups. Nevertheless, half of the women surveyed had

been tested for HIV in the last year. More than two thirds felt uncomfortable in the private clinics or hospitals they visited and said that language was a major barrier to communicating with their doctor.

Fear of being diagnosed with HIV stops many migrant sex workers from testing. According to the Hispanic sex workers in Trinidad, brothel owners share information between establishments about sex workers' STI and HIV status. Only 12 percent feel the centre they tested at respects their confidentiality. Many worry about testing for these reasons. Recently one sex worker committed suicide when she learnt she was HIV positive. In the minds of many sex workers surveyed by PANCAP/CVC-COIN, a positive HIV diagnosis is a death sentence.

Violence is a major concern for many sex workers across the region and puts them at greater risk for HIV. Half of the women surveyed in Trinidad had been abused by their clients and 20 percent had been forced to have sex. 30 percent had been arrested or detained by police. Despite having a large population of sex workers, Trinidad has no national sex worker-led organisations that can advocate for sex workers rights and needs.

PROJECT GOAL

Reduce harm and risk for HIV and STIs in female, migrant, Hispanic sex workers in Port of Spain and Chaguanas.

PROJECT COMPONENTS

Peer education with a focus on basic HIV/STI information.

Mobile clinic provided pap smears, breast exams, urine test for sugar and protein, HIV rapid testing (15 minute results), STI testing, urine and pregnancy tests, and contraceptives for sex workers.

INITIAL RESULTS

- Over 280 sex workers reached with peer education
- 78 sex workers received voluntary counselling and HIV rapid testing
- 83 received sexual and reproductive health services
- Nearly 2,000 condoms distributed

Without Spanish-speaking staff, FPATT also had to find creative ways to train peer educators, and relied on peer educators with a stronger command of English to translate for non-English speaking peers. This impacted how much peer educators were able to learn and resulted in some gaps in their knowledge.

CHALLENGES

FPATT was unable to identify and hire a Spanish-speaking doctor or an HIV counsellor for this project, a problem encountered by many national AIDS programmes in the English-Caribbean that have populations of migrant Spanish-speaking workers. Yet, HIV counselling is an important intervention for helping people to reduce their risk for HIV and STIs. Ensuring sex workers have access to language-appropriate counselling and medical advice is critical.

Providing sexual and reproductive health services to sex workers at their place of work can be an effective way of reaching them with HIV and primary healthcare services. Nevertheless, during this project FPATT had concerns about safeguarding confidentiality for those who access services. While test results were given to clients confidentially, they suspect that brothel owners frequently pressure sex workers to share their results with them and are highly suspicious of women who choose not to. In the future, FPATT hopes to find more neutral spaces to take the mobile clinic, such as the beauty salons used by the women.



Only 27 percent of female, Hispanic sex workers in Trinidad have been taught how to correctly put on a condom.
Photo: Jason Tanner



70 percent of Hispanic sex workers in Trinidad had not received an HIV talk in the 6 months prior to CVC/COIN's studies. Photo: Jason Tanner

THE WAY AHEAD

Trinidad and Tobago spends a greater percentage of its national budget on the HIV response than most other Caribbean countries. For the past ten years it has spent in excess of \$US 15 million per year on its response to HIV and AIDS. Yet, until now only 6 percent of HIV spending has targeted vulnerabilised groups³. In an encouraging shift, Trinidad and Tobago's National Strategic Plan 2013-2018 recognizes that the country has both a generalized epidemic and concentrated epidemic in sex workers and men who have sex with men, and for the first time the largest proportion of funding for prevention is assigned to "key populations" which includes sex workers.

PANCAP/CVC-COIN's 2011 studies show that migrant Hispanic sex workers have little knowledge about HIV and major barriers to accessing healthcare. This creates an urgent need to create tailored, sub-population-specific prevention interventions for migrant sex workers.

FPATT has a long history of providing sexual and reproductive health services to all populations, without discrimination. It is ideally placed and willing to reach sex workers with comprehensive prevention, but needs greater support from the State to retain bi-lingual, healthcare professionals and sustain programmes which educate, empower and provide comprehensive healthcare. This project is the second sex worker-focused project which FPATT has delivered, but each time FPATT's funding ends, it loses the peer educators it has invested in and the trust of the sex worker community. With sustained programming over a longer period of time FPATT has the capacity to significantly scale-up sexual and reproductive health prevention interventions for both national and migrant sex workers. Moreover, in the same way that COIN and Jamaica AIDS Support for Life supported the Dominican Republic's MODEMU (el Movimiento de Mujeres Unidas) and SWAJ (The Sex Worker Association of Jamaica) to build sex-worker organisations in the 1990s and early

2000s respectively, FPATT too has an opportunity to support the development of a sex worker-led movement in Trinidad and Tobago. In the longer term, such rights-based movements will be necessary for empowering sex workers in Trinidad to claim their rights and denounce the structural violence that makes them more vulnerable to HIV.

1 COIN (2008) Trabajo Sexual, Trata de Personas y VIH/SIDA: Estudio Cualitativo sobre la situación de la mujer migrante en países del Caribe, El Centro de Orientación e Investigación Integral (COIN), Santo Domingo.

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

3 Fearon et al, Summary National HIV and AIDS Spending Assessment DRAFT: An Assessment of HIV and AIDS Financing Flows and Expenditure 2002 – 2009 In Trinidad and Tobago.

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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