



# 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 United in Preventing HIV: A peer education programme with sex workers



Many women engaged in transactional sex in Barahona are the sole providers for their young children.  
Photo: Fran Afonso

In the Dominican Republic, Sex Workers United in Preventing HIV is operated by **Movimiento de Mujeres Unidas (MODEMU)** — “Movement of United Women”. Founded in 1997, MODEMU is the largest national organisation of sex workers in the Dominican Republic and in the Caribbean. It works to promote the rights of sex workers and implement programmes that improve their quality of life.

## CONTEXT

On the southern coast, west of Santo Domingo, Barahona is one of the poorest provinces in the Dominican Republic. A 2008 serological survey found that female sex workers in the province have an HIV prevalence rate of 8.4 percent, much higher than the countrywide rate of 4.8 percent among female sex workers<sup>1</sup>.

Poverty, low levels of education, and domestic violence are all factors that impact women's decisions to enter into sex work in Barahona. Many sex workers have their first child at a young age and the money they earn through sex work is to pay for necessities such as food and shelter. Unlike in other parts of the country, sex work is mostly negotiated in the streets or parks and often takes place in the sex workers' home. Few women engaged in this type of sex work self-identify as sex workers in the same way club- or brothel-based sex workers do, making them harder to identify and reach. Also, since the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, young Haitian sex workers have crossed the border into the Dominican Republic and are working in the streets of the tourist areas of the southwest.

MODEMU sees unprotected sex with "trusted partners" as one of the main risks for sex workers in Barahona. Nationwide, 40 percent of female sex workers report not using condoms with their regular partners. Drug use, especially among younger sex workers, is another major concern for MODEMU and according to a 2008 study, between 20 percent and 50 percent of female sex workers in the country use drugs.

There are also many (male to female) transgender sex workers in Barahona. As in other parts of the Dominican Republic, transgender people experience intense stigma and discrimination at school and in the workplace and they often enter sex work because they have few other opportunities. Transgender sex workers are the targets of extreme violence and abuse from their clients and the police and statistically are one of the highest risk populations for contracting HIV.

In the Dominican Republic, years of rights-based

and empowering programmes by organisations such as MODEMU have seen significant reductions in HIV prevalence among club- or brothel-based sex workers, but other sex workers, including those who do not see themselves as such, have received little attention. Before this project, MODEMU had no programmes reaching sex workers in Barahona.

## PROJECT GOAL

Reduce HIV and STI prevalence among female and transgender sex workers in Barahona.

## PROJECT COMPONENTS

**Peer education** with a focus on HIV and STIs (including congenital syphilis) information, negotiating condom use with regular "trusted partners", and harm reduction tips for sex workers who use drugs.

**Promotion of the female condom** as a strategy to increase condom use by female sex workers with their "trusted partners."

**Community theatre interventions** which bring HIV and STI prevention messages to sex workers and their clients through street theatre.

**Referrals and accompaniment** to a local health clinic (Hospital Jaime Mota) for HIV and other STI testing, pap smears, and HIV care and treatment. A formal agreement was negotiated with a specific hospital to receive referred clients.

## INITIAL RESULTS

- 16 peer educators trained and working in the field
- Over 3,300 sex workers reached through peer education
- Nearly 17,000 female condoms distributed and over 50,000 male condoms
- Increased demand for sexual and reproductive health services at the partnering hospital



Many sex workers in Barahona are transgender. Photo: Fran Afonso

## CHALLENGES

There are no safe spaces or drop-in centres in Barahona and sex workers are almost entirely dependent on peer educators for free condoms, which often run out.

Domestic violence, other forms of gender-based violence, and police abuse are major issues faced by both female and transgender sex workers. Peer educators have spent a lot of time addressing these issues in this project and will require further training to be more effective. Yet, peers cannot be expected to provide professional counselling in the long term and are often unable to refer people for such counselling because local psychosocial support services are scarce.

During this project, Jaqueline Montero, President of MODEMU, a nationally known advocate for sex workers, and the country's first sex worker elected as a Councillor, appeared on television denouncing police violence against sex workers in Barahona. Following this, peer educators reported a decrease

in the number of police round-ups but stressed the need for ongoing police sensitisation.

## THE WAY AHEAD

In 2008 the Dominican Republic spent US\$ 31 million on HIV and AIDS. Only 1.2 percent of that funding reached vulnerable or “most-at-risk” populations and a tiny portion of that reached sex workers<sup>2</sup>. Despite a higher than average HIV prevalence in sex workers in Barahona, the national HIV program has not to date developed prevention programmes there. In poor communities like Barahona where sex work is a means of survival for many Dominican and Haitian women and transgender people, sustained outreach with sexual reproductive health messages is critical to ensuring that the progress made in preventing HIV is not undone. Through this project, CVC/COIN has been able to cover a gap in programming and contribute to implementation of the National HIV and AIDS Strategic Plan.



MODEMU's peer educators are brave women who share their life-experiences and training to empower other sex workers. Photos: Fran Afonso

During this project, female condoms (supplied by PSI) were promoted and well received by sex workers, including as an option for use with “trusted partners”. Yet female condoms are virtually unavailable in pharmacies in the Dominican Republic, and if they are available they are unaffordable. In the future, if female condoms are to be a successful strategy for prevention, the State and international funders will have to increase financing for them.

In the longer term, there is an urgent need for Caribbean governments to invest more in the underlying structural drivers of HIV. In the Dominican Republic, the unemployment rate is one of the highest in the region at nearly 15 percent. More women are killed at the hands of their partners or former partners than in any other country in the region according to a review by the Gender Equality Observatory of Latin American and the Caribbean<sup>3</sup>. This led women's groups across the country to declare a national emergency over femicides in July 2012. All these factors make it very difficult for small projects like this one to have sustained impact. To be successful, it must be scaled up together with greater state investment in social services to help poor and marginalised women and transgender people.

1 COPRESIDA (2009) *1er Encuesta de Vigilancia de Comportamiento con Vinculación Serológica en Poblaciones Vulnerables: Gay, Trans y otros Hombres que tienen Sexo con Hombres (GTH), Trabajadoras Sexuales (TRSX) y Usuarios de Drogas (UD)*, República Dominicana, 2008. Santo Domingo, Consejo Presidencial del SIDA (COPRESIDA).

2 COPRESIDA/ONUSIDA (2010) *Medición del Gasto en SIDA*, República Dominicana

3 Datos procesados por la CEPAL sobre la base de información proporcionada por el Servicio Nacional de la Mujer, a partir de fuentes oficiales nacionales correspondientes (disponible en <http://www.eclac.org/oig/ws/getRegionalIndicator.asp?page=01&language=english>)

**PUBLISHED BY: THE CARIBBEAN VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES COALITION (CVC) AND EL CENTRO DE ORIENTACION E INVESTIGACION INTEGRAL (COIN) — MARCH 2013**

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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](http://www.focusright.org)*