

# Women's Empowerment:

## Strategic Impact Inquiry Research Summary

**The Context:** In the regulated context of sex work in Perú, HIV prevention has been fairly successful in the sex worker community. A national peer health educators program laid foundations for basic access to knowledge, services, and rights awareness, as well as the formation of sex workers' organizations. However, street-based sex workers, who are considered outside of the law, are often criminalized, younger and more vulnerable to trafficking and HIV. The diversity of experiences of sex workers, in the larger environment of gender inequality and economic insecurity, requires a closer parsing of broad dynamics of gender and HIV/AIDS.

**The Projects:** As a principle recipient for the Global Fund, and lead agency on monitoring and evaluation of national HIV/AIDS prevention efforts, CARE Perú partnered with the Cayetano Heredia University to learn more about empowerment, sex worker organizations and HIV prevention, from the perspectives of sex workers themselves.

Because GFHATM programming is all carried out through support to partners and national systems, CARE Perú looked at a number of interventions over time in which Global Fund support played a role in supporting the work of sex worker organizations, focusing on three regions: Iquitos, Lima/Callao and Chimbote.

**CARE Perú's Strategic Impact Inquiry (SII):** The specific objectives of CARE Perú's SII were to analyze the perceptions, meanings, aspirations and frustrations sex workers have, emphasizing HIV/AIDS prevention, in regard to:

- Organizations, themselves/lives as sex workers;
- Rights that benefit them, expectations of rights;
- Their relationships with men in general and as a couple in particular; and
- Formal and non-formal networks.

In addition, the study analyzed activities that engaged the sex worker population and contributed to their empowerment in HIV/AIDS prevention.

The [Strategic Impact Inquiry \(SII\)](#) is a three year study that seeks to evaluate CARE's impact on women's empowerment. For CARE Perú's full SII report, please contact: [pqlibrarian@care.org](mailto:pqlibrarian@care.org).

**Methodology:** Cayetano Heredia University led the multi-stakeholder research team:

### RESEARCH DESIGN

- **Research Team:** Project staff, sex worker organization leadership, Cayetano Heredia University
- **Site:** Three distinct areas of Peru (Iquitos, Lima/Callao and Chimbote)
- **Participant Selection:** Convenience sampling used to identify respondents

### DATA COLLECTION

- **Overview:** 765 respondents
- **Survey Research** (765 respondents): Demographics, HIV awareness, decision-making, gender equality, self-efficacy and community
- **Life Stories** (19 respondents): Feelings about sex work
- **Participatory Exercises** (7 activities, 153 people): Notions of empowerment, self-efficacy, law

### DATA ANALYSIS

- **Triangulation:** Data validation across methods, location, people, researchers
- **Discourse Analysis:** Recognize sex worker interpretation of lives, analysis of specific situations and context
- **Reflective Process:** Research team reflection on impact of CARE's work

### Limitations:

- Cannot evaluate any single project.
- Due to limited access, study covered sex workers accessing health services.
- Qualitative component only conducted with women affiliated with sex worker organizations.

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### Women's Own Views on Empowerment:

#### AGENCY

Knowledge about HIV, services and prevention  
 Freedom from fear, ability to protest injustice  
 High self-esteem, acceptance of sex work  
 Ability to enable other sex workers to realize rights  
 Ability to overcome disillusionment and frustration  
 Control over financial resources

#### RELATIONS

Belonging to group to  
 claim rights

#### STRUCTURE

### Women's Empowerment & HIV Risk:

#### Marginalization and Vulnerability

- Unstable relationships, lack of community and the nature of the position leads to vulnerability to HIV in women's lives.
- Young sex workers, without networks or status, are more vulnerable to violence and express lower empowerment.
- Evidence suggests that it is the stigma they face as sex workers, and not the nature of their sexual relations per se, that renders women in sex work vulnerable to rights abuses by state or private social actors.

#### Condom Use and Empowerment

- High condom use strongly correlated with membership in sex workers' organization, attending regular health screenings, and being under 25 years old.
- Despite universally high condom use with clients, most groups of women are unable to negotiate condom use or confront violence with partners because of dynamics around trust, love and familiarity.

#### Group Membership and Health

- Organized sex workers more regularly have medical check-ups.

### Implications:

#### Supporting Groups

- Recognize that sex worker organizations are protecting women's rights, not just sexual health or workers' rights – and ensure they have support in that work.
- Work with peer educators to ensure group inclusivity, avoid exclusion of any sex workers.
- Young sex workers tend to be less involved in groups – explore reasons why, and develop tailored strategies to strengthen their limited social networks/support.

#### Engaging Men and Local Power Holders

- Understand dynamics of power and engage local power-holders (police, pimps, brothel owners, health services) for sex worker rights.

#### Supporting Broad-based Empowerment

- Address issues of violence from clients through sex worker organizations.
- Support sex workers to pursue changes at the structural level, consolidate empowerment.
- Support sex workers' financial empowerment within their own context/reality to ensure savings given the volatility of their lives.

### Impact on Empowerment and HIV Vulnerability:

Agency	Structures	Relations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater sense of solidarity/security among organized sex workers, linked to higher self-esteem (not young)</li> <li>• Independent, resilient, proud to provide for children</li> <li>• Hide profession from those close to them</li> <li>• Feel part of a group, but many women excluded</li> <li>• Acceptance of sex work/recognition of rights as sex workers, though many continue to suffer from police</li> <li>• Control own resources, have knowledge of HIV/rights and security, have medical visits each month</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confront institutional abuse and mistreatment</li> <li>• More opportunities to work apart from sex work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to negotiate with pimp or brothel owners</li> <li>• Group solidarity to fight for rights</li> <li>• Discrimination toward sex workers and their children</li> <li>• Negotiate condom use with clients, not lovers</li> <li>• Violence continues, but can now confront clients on rights</li> </ul>