

# HIV prevention as a right

Reflecting on an experience with women in Brazil

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World AIDS Day demonstration: 'AIDS: a women's concern'

Photo: Joana Santos/SOS Corpo Documentation Centre

Since the early 1990s, SOS Corpo started to follow with concern the growth of the AIDS epidemic in Brazil, mainly among the female population – especially poor and Black women. In 1997, we began to include HIV/AIDS in our work with women's groups in Pernambuco State, located in one of the country's poorest regions – the Northeast. Our approach has always been concerned with helping to improve the quality of life of people living in poor neighborhoods in three sub regions of the state: Metropolitan Recife region (capital), the Atlantic Forest zone (characterized by large landholdings dedicated to the sugarcane monoculture), and the Semiárido region.

In Latin America, 1.8 million people are living with HIV. According to the Health Ministry's figures, 600,000 of them are in Brazil. Today, for every two infected men there is one woman who has contracted the virus; in some urban centers this relation has already been inverted. The number of cases among married housewives aged 20-39 has increased. In most cases, these women were diagnosed only by tests during pregnancy. In Brazil the main mode of HIV transmission has always been sexual. In the 1980s, homosexual men were the hardest hit, but in the 1990s the epidemic profile changed: the infection increased significantly among heterosexuals, reaching poorer areas in the Brazilian interior. Along this route, the epidemic is growing particularly among the Black population.

SOS Corpo's action methodology is guided by the feminist principles of increasing women's autonomy and those of 'popular education' – which involves a participatory methodology, is grounded in the group's existing knowledge, proposes a critical

analysis of the reality, and stimulates the formulation of proposals – thus connecting the educational process with advocacy. This action methodology includes encouragement of women's political participation and has the goal of strengthening women as political subjects. The work plan links short-term actions – producing immediate responses to urgent problems posed by the AIDS epidemic – to long-term actions capable of producing changes aimed at the roots of the problems, but also involving the three levels of intervention (local, national, and international). In this manner, education work and political action are geared to produce reflections where each woman seeks to place herself in history; and where she feels she can change her future. Thus, planned actions are relevant instruments in transforming the lives of women in different communities.

## Knowing one's realities and rights

In 2001 a network was formed, entitled Information and Condom Supply Network (REFIC), involving SOS Corpo and 13 other

grassroots women's organizations that already had worked in popular education in several regions of Pernambuco State. The first step of the network was to enhance this collective's knowledge about their local reality, their perceptions of several aspects: e.g., what were the risks of contracting the virus and forms of prevention; did they know their rights in the wake of the AIDS epidemic; and what were the obstacles and facilities in accessing prevention and assistance services.

Based on this analysis, a set of actions was developed: political and methodological debates on the AIDS epidemic and its impact on women's lives; monthly educational workshops; exchanges of experiences, involving people living with HIV/AIDS; meetings to develop local strategies to tackle the epidemic, including other social movements; meetings with public health agents, professionals and directors; production of educational materials; and public mobilizations. Thematic and political education involving the leaders of women's groups throughout the years has contributed to turn them into popular educators with in-depth knowledge of the body and sexuality, discussing the difficulties of using the condom, the power relations between men and women, raising questions about public and social policies, among other issues. In this perspective, the central axis was a reflection on women's rights, critically understanding the poverty



Feminist educator Vera Guedes from SOS Corpo doing a workshop in Morro da Conceição with a women's group

and discrimination (gender, racial) that affect most women in the country. This was key to strengthen women's links with the struggle for citizenship.

Throughout the educational work and as part of the networking action, an important strategy was the distribution of condoms in outlets located in the communities. At the end of five years (2001-2005), systematic monitoring of service users by REFIC showed substantial change in behaviours, among which the increased demand for

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condoms was the most illustrative. We attribute this achievement to our feminist approach, which emphasizes the understanding of women as subjects of rights, helping them to face authoritarian powers – including in their private lives – which express itself, for example, in the refusal of men to have protected sex. In debates and workshops, this assumption was confirmed by the women present. This is even more relevant if one considers that at the beginning of the work a very large number of women and men had never come into contact with the condom, had no idea of how to use it, or were ashamed of talking about this issue.

### Approaching prevention as a right

Supplying condoms poses to us an important and delicate challenge. Our

educational approach cannot have an imposing character, instead, it should help people to feel safe and self-assured to discuss the condom and choose to use condoms out of their free will. This perspective reinforces people's autonomy and at the same time the notion of shared responsibility, which means to take care of yourself and also of your partner. Monitoring by REFIC in the towns enabled it to identify a greater community involvement in pressuring municipal governments to expand the male and female condom supply in public health services, adding itself to already existing initiatives from the part of groups that constitute REFIC. Gésia Cristina, a female educator of the Jurema Women's Group, a member of REFIC in the municipality of Ouricuri (Semiárid region) explains: *"We give out condoms not only because of our social work, but also to say 'hey, we're giving out condoms to encourage and to educate about their use. But you should go to the health service because they must have them there to distribute. It's your right.' So, there is a whole work of sensitization with the people who seek us out."* This demonstrates that work carried out by organized civil society does not substitute (nor intends to substitute) for governmental responsibility to offer these services. To the contrary, by approaching prevention as a right, the population is stimulated to demand from the government the conditions for this right to become a reality.

REFIC has also encouraged women to invest in organized political action and the fight for the right to public health. One strategy was to seek to bring these groups closer to existing social movements: stimulating their presence at the Pernambuco Women's Forum, the AIDS Network in the state, as well as a dialogue and alliance with human rights organizations. At the same time, the women's organizations started to demand concrete measures from Municipal and State Health Councils, articulating their concerns with council members and discussing issues around HIV prevention at their meetings. In addition, some of the leaders of women's groups have become

health council members themselves, symbolizing recognition of the legitimacy of their struggle.

### A rights-based approach

Our experience revealed some methodological and political challenges regarding the AIDS epidemic, among them the understanding that the epidemic is a problem that goes beyond health. It is an epidemic subordinated to an economic development model that turns lives into merchandise, deepening power inequalities in the relations between women and men,

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and reinforcing race and social-class prejudices. In order to face such a complex situation, it was key to develop working methodologies that helped women to understand how this development model affected their daily lives; as well as to comprehend other societal factors, such as the machismo present in their personal and love relations, that also influences the way of structuring services and delivering them to women; the lack of information on their social rights and legal mechanisms, including legal support, that are important when seeking access to rights whenever the government fails to ensure them. In the words of Cicera Ferreira, who is living with HIV and is an educator at the União Sugar Mill: *"Right to live, right to work. We think we don't have many rights. We just think: 'someone who has AIDS, has no rights'. But we have all the same rights as everybody else."*

One of our achievements is that we showed that the response to HIV and AIDS can be led by different social movements. Social movements that did not prioritize the response to AIDS in their actions started to discuss the issue and participated in debates and other joint actions, especially

concerning the application of public policies and access to AIDS medication. Collective organizing around these issues can drive forward struggles for the defense of other social rights, such as housing, food, education, and transportation rights, and end up involving other people. In this context, the process started by REFIC extended the visibility of organized action of women against AIDS in each municipality and in the state, expanded the visibility of the struggle against AIDS in the communities, strengthening and legitimizing the women's groups that took part, which became a point of reference. An example of this is the fact that REFIC women became a qualified source of information on HIV and AIDS on community radios. Community radios are important grassroots vehicles to

disseminate information and mobilize the community, especially in the rural areas, where schooling level is low and great distances make it difficult to have access to information.

SOS Corpo believes that the actions developed by REFIC drove forward the reflection on rights at the public policy level, as well as in private and daily lives, helping to strengthen women in the face of the AIDS epidemic as subjects capable of transforming their lives. REFIC stopped its networking activities in 2005. However, the groups remain active and in contact. Today, AIDS poses new challenges that demand an improvement of the gained experience and collective building of future strategies is already on track. ■

*Translated from Portuguese by Jones de Freitas and edited by Phil Courneyeur*

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## Resources

### Comprehensive approaches to HIV prevention



#### Promoting more gender-equitable norms and behaviors among young men as an HIV/AIDS prevention strategy

*Horizons Final Report*

J. Pulerwitz, G. Barker, M. Segundo & M.

Nascimento, Population Council, 2006 (44 p.)

This report, produced by the Horizons Project and Instituto Promundo in Brazil, examines how gender-equitable behaviour among young men can affect rates of HIV and STIs. The study involved young men aged 14 to 25 in the favelas (low-income communities) of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Two interventions aimed to improve young men's attitudes towards gender norms: interactive group education sessions, and community-wide social-marketing campaigns promoting condom use and gender-equity messages. At the beginning of the study, HIV and STI risk factors such as STI symptoms, condom use and number of sexual partners, were high amongst the participants, and support for inequitable gender norms was associated with more risk. The two interventions appeared to be successful in promoting more equitable norms, and led to significant reductions in HIV and STI risk.

<http://www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/horizons/brgendernorms.pdf>

#### Life skills-based education for HIV prevention: A critical analysis

*Policy & Research: Issue 3*

T. Boler & P. Aggleton, UK working group on education & HIV/AIDS, 2005 (15 p.)



The report brings together critical thinking from the fields of public health and education to understand some of the challenges in using life skills education for HIV prevention. Difficulties such as adapting participatory approaches to the classroom, cultural clashes, and a lack of pedagogy are explored. Further, potential ways to overcome some of these obstacles are discussed.

[http://www.actionaid.org/wps/content\\_document.asp?doc\\_id=359](http://www.actionaid.org/wps/content_document.asp?doc_id=359)



#### From services to rights: A review of ActionAid International's participatory practice

ActionAid International, 2005 (60 p.)

In 2005, ActionAid International carried out a mapping of participatory practice. *From services to rights* outlines how and why ActionAid is working on participation and what is the organizational impact of using participatory approaches.

[http://www.actionaid.org/wps/content\\_document.asp?doc\\_id=389](http://www.actionaid.org/wps/content_document.asp?doc_id=389)