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SUCCESS STORY

Participatory research studies can help key populations recognize that gender-based violence should not be accepted in their lives



“The amount of trauma I went through with the police, [at] school, [in] everything . . . it was a real, everyday experience for a trans-person. This is the first time I ever talked about it.”

— LINKAGES study participant in Trinidad

Gender-based violence and HIV are closely linked in the lives of countless female sex workers, men who have sex with men, and transgender women across the globe. Experiences of gender-based violence reduce the uptake of HIV testing, status disclosure, care, and treatment, and reduce adherence to antiretroviral therapies.^{1,2,3,4,5} A review of available resources for addressing gender-based violence against key populations⁶ recommended that to develop more effective HIV-prevention programs among these key populations, we must understand where, when, and how these groups experience violence; how it affects their lives; and what the potential entry points are to care.



The LINKAGES team in Trinidad (left to right): Emily Evens, LINKAGES, principal investigator; Karin Santi, UNDP, co-investigator; Anna Manriquez, data collector; Eswick Padmore, data collector; Luke Sinnette, Friends for Life, data collector; Brandy Rodriguez, Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago, and Trinidad and Tobago Sex Work Coalition, data collector; Juana Cooke, UNDP, co-Investigator; Sommer Hunte, University of West Indies, Trinidad site coordinator. Photo credit: Emily Evens, FHI 360.

The LINKAGES project, which is funded by USAID and PEPFAR, is collaborating with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to investigate these issues in Latin America and the Caribbean. This multicountry study — in Trinidad, Barbados, El Salvador, and Haiti — is replicating UNDP's highly participatory approach in Asia by having key population members and networks co-lead the investigation. Key populations were involved in the conception and implementation of the project, and they will play a critical role in the collection of the data, and the interpretation and dissemination of the research findings.

“The study has benefited greatly from their expertise,” says Emily Evens, the LINKAGES implementation science lead and the study’s principal investigator. “It’s about working in partnership and learning from and with members of key populations,” she says.

In May, the LINKAGES/UNDP study investigators and a local research partner (the University of the West Indies’ St. Augustine campus) conducted a five-day training of peer educators on the process of collecting data for the study in Trinidad. The peer educators also were involved in designing the scope of the study, its methods, and the development of interview guides for the participant interviews.



Peer data collectors — Luke Sinnette (left) of Friends for Life, and David Soomarie (right) of CARE — reviewed research ethics and data-collection methods during their training session in Trinidad last May. Photo credit: Emily Evens, FHI 360.

As peer data collectors, the team will interview about 30 members of key populations — female sex workers, transwomen, and men who have sex with men. The objective of the interviews is to learn about the violence these individuals experience throughout their lives because of their gender identity or because their behavior does not conform to society’s expectations of acceptable roles for men and women. The study is using PEPFAR’s definition of gender-based violence, which includes physical, emotional, economic, and sexual violence. Furthermore, respondents are given space to define violence and discrimination for themselves through their answers.

The study team hopes to learn where such violence occurs; what the impact of violence is on the survivor; who is perpetrating violence against key populations; how these violent experiences are related to HIV risk behaviors; and, most importantly, how HIV services can respond to the needs of key populations after an experience of violence.

Although data collection is still underway, the engagement of key population members has already had some benefits for the peer interviewers and the study participants. Brandy Rodriguez, a peer data collector, describes the newfound awareness of a transwoman whom she had interviewed for the study: “She was accepting violence as a way of life, but now [she] knows it was violence and discrimination, infringing on [her] rights.”

Rodriguez believes that many key population members are not fully aware of the profound consequences of the violence they experience or how that violence is often rooted in rigid gender norms and inequalities. “[Transwomen] are not looking at the relationships between HIV and violence. What is gender-based violence? Girls need information about this,” she says.

Rodriguez’s role in the LINKAGES study, and the training she received, have also raised her own awareness of the gender-based violence experienced by transwomen. “Transwomen experience bullying and humiliation during school, and violence and discrimination in many other areas. The [training] guide helped me to understand the violence throughout their whole lives ...,” she says.

Raising personal awareness about gender-based violence through deep engagement in the project provides an invaluable benefit for the study’s participants, and it reflects LINKAGES’S commitment to meaningfully engage key populations in every effort.

Increasing participants’ awareness also motivates them to become better advocates for their own causes. “We hope the study’s findings can be used — especially by key population organizations, networks, and their allies — to advocate for better policies and programs that prevent and respond to violence against key populations,” Evens says.

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