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STORIES FROM THE FIELD

HIV-positive Women in Mexico Step Out of the Shadows

**First-ever registered
NGO for positive
Mexican women
promotes empowerment
and networking**



Women leaders meet with Mexico's First Lady, Margarita Zavala de Calderón, to discuss HIV and women's issues.

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"I believe this project and the organization have given credibility to the collaborative work of women living with HIV in Mexico as well as an opportunity for growth, development, and empowerment. It has also given us an opportunity to build proposals that respond to our needs."

— Linda Arechar, Co-President of *Mexicanas Positivas Frente a la VIDA*

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Mexico's HIV epidemic has traditionally been concentrated among men who have sex with men. Yet, 2007 estimates suggest that one in four HIV-positive people in Mexico are women (57,000 out of 200,000 people). All too often, however, the needs of women living with HIV have been overshadowed. The USAID | Health Policy Initiative, Task Order 1, is working to address this gap through two key activities: (1) the formation of a registered, national NGO for women living with HIV; and (2) empowerment and networking training for HIV-positive women.

In June 2007, 11 women from nine states came together to launch *Mexicanas Positivas Frente a la VIDA* ("Positive Mexican Women Facing Life"). The organization is the country's first legally registered NGO of HIV-positive women. While many small, self-help groups exist for people living with HIV (PLHIV), registration is essential for strengthening the group's organizational capacity. As a result of its legal status, *Mexicanas Positivas Frente a la VIDA* can receive funds and expand its nationwide advocacy efforts. The Health Policy Initiative provided technical and financial assistance to help form and register the NGO, as well as carry out initial strategic planning exercises.

In January 2008, the project conducted a training-of-trainers workshop for the founding members on "Empowerment and Networking for Women Living with HIV." The workshop strengthened the women's capacity to serve as trainers in gender issues, facilitation and communication, stigma and discrimination reduction, and community mobilization. Next, the Health Policy Initiative supported the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW) in Mexico, along with ICW Latina and *Mexicanas Positivas Frente a la VIDA*, to organize and successfully mobilize funding for six regional training workshops on empowerment and networking, reaching a total of 112 women. The Health Policy Initiative provided technical and logistic support and initial financial assistance for the trainings. Other key partners and donors included the Ford Foundation, Centro Nacional para la Prevención y el Control del VIH/SIDA (CENSIDA in Spanish), UNFPA, and UNIFEM.

HIV-positive women successfully lobbied the Secretary of Health to support HIV prevention programs for women, and they were invited to participate in various committees organized by CENSIDA to ensure that women's voices are included in national policy dialogue. On the international level, *Mexicanas Positivas Frente a la VIDA* and ICW Mexico were active players in the XVII International AIDS Conference, held in Mexico City in August 2008.

In addition, women involved in the training series participated in a high-level meeting that occurred prior to the conference, the Fifth Meeting Coalition of First Ladies and Women Leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean. The forum provided an opportunity for HIV-positive women to meet and share their views with First Ladies from across the region, including Margarita Zavala de Calderón of Mexico. Members of the coalition and HIV-positive women will continue to work together to ensure that women and girls are part of the response to HIV in the region, as promised in the coalition's "Pronouncement on Women and AIDS" delivered on August 2, 2008. Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS, says of the coalition, "...I'm particularly pleased that this coalition brings together two kinds of leaders: women leaders in the AIDS response (including women living with HIV) and women leaders in the political arena. Your coalition has become a rallying point for women across the region to make their voices heard..."

Over the past year, ICW Mexico and *Mexicanas Positivas Frente a la VIDA* have emerged as strong advocates for women living with HIV. They have engaged in effective policy advocacy at national and international levels; and they have built the capacity of women at state and district levels where many of the service delivery and discrimination issues confronted by positive women exist. Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director of UNFPA, concurred with Piot about the importance of women's roles during her speech at the First Ladies meeting. She said, "Women's participation in decisionmaking is crucial to a more effective response to HIV and AIDS. Women living with HIV in particular must be involved in establishing prevention policies."